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Memmi on Racism and (Post-Holocaust) Judeophobia

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Albert Memmi was one of our most astute thinkers on the topic of racism. This is in part because of his own lived experience.¹ At a moment of profound self-realization, the semi-autobiographical protagonist of his breakthrough novel *La Statue de sel* (*The Pillar of Salt*, 1953) famously proclaims that he was “a native in a colonial country, a Jew in an anti-Semitic universe, an African in a world dominated by Europe.”² The quote condenses Memmi’s racialized life and reflects his attunement to what I will call *racial entanglement*. Memmi was one of its great theorists and as such he offers much to our understandings of (post-Holocaust) Judeophobia, colonial and postcolonial racism, and their mutual reverberations. This article outlines the development of his approach to racism over the course of his oeuvre, highlighting his groundbreaking reflections on privilege, intersectionality, and his conceptual innovation now so prescient in the age of Black Lives Matter.

As the great Memmi scholar Guy Dugas itemizes in *Écrivain de la déchirure*, Memmi’s first sketch of racism was developed in his 1957 classic, *Portrait du colonisé précédé du Portrait du colonisateur* (*The Colonizer and the Colonized*), where he seeded a provisional definition as part of his analysis that racism was the sum and substance of colonialism: “[R]acism,” Memmi wrote, “is the substantive expression, to the accuser’s benefit, of a real or imaginary trait of the accused.”³ He would refine, expand, and elaborate on this definition in “An Attempt at a Definition” published in *Le Nef* in 1964: “Racism is the generalized and final assigning of values to real or imaginary differences, to the accuser’s benefit and at his victim’s expense, in order to

¹ For a brief biographical portrait of Memmi, see Jonathan Judaken, “The Heresies of Albert Memmi,” *Tablet* (June 23, 2020): <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/albert-memmi-obituary>. For a longer overview of Memmi’s life and work with scholarly references to his commentators, see Jonathan Judaken, “Introduction,” in *The Albert Memmi Reader*, eds. Jonathan Judaken and Michael Lejman (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2020).

² Albert Memmi, *The Pillar of Salt*, trans. Edouard Roditi (New York: Beacon Press, 1955 [orig. 1953]), 96.

³ Guy Dugas outlines the development of Memmi’s thinking in *Écrivain de la déchirure* (Sherbrooke: Éditions Naaman, 1984), 47. Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, trans. Howard Greenfeld (New York: Beacon Press, 1991 [orig. 1957]), 81.

justify the former's own privileges or aggression."⁴ He would expound on each term in this definition in his *Le Nef* article.

Ultimately, he argued that racism has two key components: first, it is about the articulation of absolute and irreconcilable differences, conveyed as a binary between Self and Other, Us vs. Them. These can be expressed in a religious, biological, cultural, civilizational, or political idiom, depending upon circumstances. This first step toward racism goes through three stages: it begins with the ascription of real or imagined dissimilarities; the social significance of these differences is then imprinted with value judgements that attribute superiority and inferiority about social groups; and finally, these are generalized, naturalized, and essentialized. The second key component of racism occurs when these ineluctable differences are asserted to justify privileges or aggression against the group that is Othered. Legitimizing social domination is consequently the source of racism, which is a political tool animated by fear and self-interest.

Memmi's definition is an important starting point in addressing racism since as Ibram X. Kendi maintains in *How To Be an Antiracist*, definitions "anchor us in principles." They are an important point of departure because racists like Donald Trump or those who insist upon a colorblind society (as is the case in republican France), often claim that they are "not racist."⁵ Definitions enable us to label and describe racist ideas, discourses, practices, and systems as such.

Colonization was precisely such a racist system, as Memmi maintained in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. Jews, too, are a colonized group, he would argue in his trilogy *Portrait d'un Juif* (*Portrait of a Jew*, 1962), *La Libération du Juif* (*The Liberation of the Jew*, 1966), and in *Juifs et Arabes* (*Jews and Arabs*, 1974). He would expand his analysis of stigmatized subjects in *L'Homme dominé* (*Dominated Man*, 1968) with portraits of African Americans and immigrants in France, whom he called "the new slaves." Jews, Arabs, Blacks (and in the American context we might add Native Americans, Hispanics, and Asians)--these are all what Fanon termed phobogenic objects: they are Others about whom dominant groups have fear or anxiety. This anxiety is stoked through what Memmi dubbed "the mythical portrait" of the racialized group. These portraits are woven out of anecdotes, archetypes, cultural codes, and narratives spun to create "the mark of the plural": the depiction of a generalized negative image of a stigmatized group where individuals "drown in an anonymous collective."⁶ This is done to justify oppression or aggression or to legitimate privilege.

There are two key features that make *The Colonizer and the Colonized* one of the great treatises on privilege, the central category of Memmi's analysis of colonization. First, is how expansively Memmi conceived the term: it has economic, legal, social, normative, symbolic, and psychological ramifications. It determines who is hired and fired, who governs the system of labor, and who benefits from that labor. But it also shapes the law, administrative structures, and

⁴ Albert Memmi, "An Attempt at a Definition," in *Racism*, trans. Steve Martinot (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 169-182, citation 169. Cited parenthetically hereafter.

⁵ Ibram X. Kendi, *How To Be An Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019), 17, 8-10.

⁶ Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, 85. Cited parenthetically hereafter.

culture. In short, colonization was always about more than just profit and usurpation, insists Memmi.⁷ It also defined the rules and norms of colonial life, ultimately cohering as social status. So, privilege functions in many ways.

But second (and part of what differentiates Memmi's analysis from intersectional theories, at least as they are often deployed in identity politics) is that privilege is never absolute or static or ontologically rigid. It is always relative to "the pyramid of petty tyrants," as Memmi calls it, whereby "each one, being socially oppressed by one more powerful than he, always finds a less powerful one on whom to lean, and becomes a tyrant in his turn" (p. 17). Some of the colonized are always accorded certain privileges relative to others; this is what makes the machinery of subjugation run.

Memmi explicitly signaled the different status between Jews and Arabs and other non-French Europeans in Tunisia as he developed this idea. In a policy of divide and conquer, advantages adhered to different ethnic groups within the colonial system. "Italians in Tunisia have always envied the French for their legal and administrative privileges," Memmi recalls, even as "they are nevertheless in a better situation than the colonized" (p. 15) since they are protected by international laws and they almost all speak French. Jews, on the other hand, distinguished themselves through immersion in institutions like the Alliance israélite universelle that trained them in the language, mores, and values of French culture, preparing them for assimilation. As a subject population primed for legal integration and citizenship, akin to their Jewish brethren across the border in Algeria, their standing was different from the indigenous Muslim population. This idea of the relativity of privilege is key to Memmi's understanding of racial hierarchies and how they function differently in different racial formations. Memmi's insights are easily translated: Jews in the United States, for example, acquired citizenship and the benefits of whiteness upon landing on American shores that gave them privileges that differed from Asians, Hispanics, Muslims, and certainly from Blacks or Native Americans, even if they continued to suffer from prejudice or discrimination.

Cognizant of Jewish privilege in French colonized North Africa, Memmi was simultaneously insistent upon anti-Jewish hostility in both France and the Maghreb. Jews live in "a structurally hostile universe," he claimed, just as women live in a situation of entrenched inferiority as the putative second sex. He remarks on the irritation expressed by many non-Jews when they are reminded of the massacres, deportations, and plundering that Jews have historically suffered at the hands of non-Jews, as if these should just be considered bygone of a bygone era. Writing as part of the generation still living in the shadow of the Holocaust and as a Jew interned in a labor camp in Tunisia during the Nazi occupation, Memmi was a maximalist in his views on anti-Semitism. "I believe firmly that anti-Semitism is profoundly widespread and real," he wrote; "I

⁷ It was on this point that Sartre was critical of Memmi's analysis in his review of *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, later affixed as the Introduction or Preface to all subsequent editions, famously noting that "he sees a situation where I see a system." (Sartre, Introduction, xxv). A close reading of Memmi's text, however, shows that he understood privilege as the central factor running through the *system* of colonial racial subordination.

fear we must start with this generalization, for it is among the half-truths of the nation in which I live.”⁸

Hardcore anti-Semites are only the extreme versions of a culture institutionally organized around Jewish marginalization and anti-Jewish racism, claimed Memmi. As W.E.B. du Bois suggested about Blacks in a white world, Jewish difference is always a problem in a world defined by non-Jews.⁹ As Steve Martinot points out, Memmi’s “was the Mediterranean version of...Duboisian double consciousness.”¹⁰ Just as anti-Black racism is a white problem, as Richard Wright insisted, anti-Semitism is a gentile problem. On this point, Memmi was congruent with Sartre’s analysis in *Réflexions sur la question juive (Anti-Semite and Jew, 1946)*. Judeophobia shapes how Jews are seen by others and in turn how they come to see themselves. So begins the existential self-interrogation that Memmi undertakes in *Portrait of a Jew*.

Apropos of Judeophobia in the Muslim world after Israeli statehood in 1948, Memmi excoriated the myth of a utopian, peaceful coexistence between Jews and Arabs before the advent of Zionism. While Jews shared the cultural habits of their Arab neighbors--their customs, music, and cooking, and generally enjoyed cordial relations in their quotidian interactions--the rapport was always fragile and uneasy. Jews were ever wary of when hostility or violence might erupt. In *Pillar of Salt*, in the chapter titled, “The Others,” Memmi describes how the family barricaded themselves in their home to stay safe during an anti-Jewish riot and discusses at length his protagonist’s nagging vulnerability in the face of the anti-Jewish hostility he encountered at school.

Writing after the 1973 Yom Kippur war in his essay, “What Is an Arab Jew?,” Memmi was at his most emphatic: if one set aside the Holocaust, he indicated, “*the sum total of the Jewish victims of the Christian world is probably no greater than the total number of victims of the successive pogroms, both big and small, perpetrated in the Moslem countries.*”¹¹ As a result of claims such as these, in his classic study *Under Crescent and Cross*, Mark Cohen argued that Memmi contributed to “the neo-lachrymous conception of Jewish-Arab history,” a view that claims that Islam was perpetually hostile to Jews and inherently anti-Semitic, which the historical record belies, as does Memmi’s broader oeuvre.¹²

Rather than a transhistorical, unnuanced, and cyclopean view of anti-Jewish hostility, in works like *Dominated Man*, Memmi had begun to reflect on the entanglements between modes of oppression as he attempted to build a general theory of domination, linking anti-Black racism, colonialism, and the Jewish experience with the condition of the proletariat, women, domestic

⁸ Albert Memmi, *Portrait of a Jew*, trans. Elisabeth Abbot (New York: Orion Press, 1962), 47.

⁹ Lewis R. Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 75.

¹⁰ Steve Martinot, “Introduction,” in Albert Memmi, *Racism*, trans. Steve Martinot (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000 [orig. 1982]), xvi.

¹¹ Albert Memmi, “What is An Arab Jew?,” in *Jews and Arabs*, trans. Eleanor Levieux (Chicago: J. Philip O’Hara, 1975 [orig. 1974]), 27.

¹² Mark Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 10-11.

servants, and immigrants. Along with reprinting his attempted definition of racism in *Le Nef*, in *Dominated Man* he included a chapter titled “Racism and Oppression,” which itemized his conclusions to a book he had penned along with P.H. Maucorps and J.F. Held in 1965, *Les Français et le racisme*.¹³

He was now at the phase of digesting precepts in his understanding of racism that were prophetic in their anticipation of contemporary theorizing: (1) “*Everyone, or nearly everyone, is an unconscious racist, or a semi-conscious one, or even a conscious one,*” he maintained. Axiomatic was thus a comprehension of what we would now term implicit or unconscious bias. (2) “*Racism is one of the most widespread attitudes in the world,*” he continued. As Memmi explained in *Le Racisme: description, définition, traitement* (*Racism*, 1982), it is common because beneath the veneer of civility humans are predatory, territorial beasts who are driven by their instincts, one of which is to assert superiority over others. Racism is consequently natural, while the appreciation of differences is something that has to be taught and learned. (3) Racism emerges not only out of a drive for supremacy, but also as a reaction to “*fear [and anxiety] aroused by differentness.*” (4) Memmi also underlined feelings of guilt as one of the dynamic forces in the racist mechanism, whereby the victim is blamed for the crimes of the racist. (5) Racism is not only hardwired into our psychological DNA, however; racism “*is a psycho-social fact, because racism is an institutionalized fact.*” In elaborating upon systemic or structural forms of racism, Memmi noted the second-class status of the colonized and of Black Americans, but also the marginalized status of Jews. (6) The oppressed are not immune to racist discourse, he claimed, because “*Everyone looks for an inferior rank compared to which he appears relatively lofty and grand.*” (7) The choice of stigmatized subjects is also never random, since racism is the justification for oppression and the oppressed are therefore the chosen objects: “*For this reason the foreigner is choice prey for the racist... Which explains the obvious, intimate relationship between racism and xenophobia,*” he noted.

As Kwame Anthony Appiah points out, the links and entanglements between modes of racism addressed by Memmi were so general that “they covered too wide a range of cases” (Appiah, “Forward” in *Racism*, p. viii). Critics claimed that Memmi could not distinguish hyper-nationalism, ethnocentrism, and xenophobia from racism given the definitional starting point of his analysis. To respond to this retort, Memmi narrowed his definition of racism in “What is Racism?,” his contribution to *L’Encyclopaedia Universalis* (1972): “*racism is a generalizing definition and valuation of biological differences,*” he now wrote, “*whether real or imaginary, to the advantage of the one defining and deploying them, and to the detriment of the one subjected to that act of definition, to the end of justifying (social or physical) hostility and assault*” (“What is Racism?” in *Racism*, pg. 184, emphasis added). The power of anchoring claims about difference in biology is that it constitutes the ultimate form of naturalizing a set of social relations. Biology ostensibly embodies our whole being, circumscribing our natural limits. It engulfs individuals within a family and ethnic heritage shared by a collective group in ways that prevent escape from the past and hold into the future, so it is unaffected by time.

¹³ A. Memmi, P.H. Maucorps and J.F. Held, *Les Français et le racisme* (Paris: Éditions Payot, 1965).

Along with a revised and delimited definition in “What is Racism?,” Memmi also sketched a genealogy of racism, indicating how anti-Black racism, colonial racism, and anti-Semitism were all entangled. He does so by referencing the lineage of key figures in the western tradition who justified slavery and colonialism from Aristotle’s conception of the “natural inferiority” of barbarians in his *Politics* to Joseph Arthur de Gobineau’s notion that race is destiny in *An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*. He talks about how Judeophobia emerged in the ancient world, was amplified by Christian anti-Judaism, and how it was racialized and politicized following Jewish emancipation, spurred by economic competition and rivalry. He discusses how it was used to justify Nazism and later helped to consolidate an Arab identity following the creation of the State of Israel. However, Memmi also maintained that the “body of concepts” developed in the course of the history of racism he drafted would be stylized differently within different national contexts (p. 186).

Accordingly, while he sketches connections within this genealogy of racism, Memmi emphasizes that it is “necessary to describe each different racist situation in its specificity” (p. 194). He explains that racism is invariably built upon a mythical portrait of the Other: whether the colonized, the Jew, the Arab, or the foreigner, but that these stereotypes differed to justify different types of oppression. As he explained in *Portrait of the Jew* and *The Liberation of the Jew*, for example, images of the Jew are grounded in the Christian theological depiction of the Jew as evil. On the other hand, the mythical portrait of the Black is grounded in slavery, depicting the Black body as a beast of burden. The differences between anti-Black and anti-Jewish racism emerge out of these different histories. One was established in religious competition as Christendom sought “to separate itself cleanly from its initial roots,” while the other was grounded in the exploitation of Black labor. But the drift in Memmi’s analysis was toward the parallels and overlaps in racism.

Memmi drew this whole arc of insights into a single, powerful monograph in *Racism*, his summa on the subject. He expounded on the set of maxims he had articulated in “Racism and Oppression,” and he elaborated his genealogy of the history of anti-Semitism alongside colonial racisms. But the newest feature of his treatise was the expanded vocabulary he proposed to discuss the entanglement of racisms. He coined a new term expressly for the purpose, *heterophobia*, to “designate the many configurations of fear, hate, and aggressiveness that directed against an other, attempt to justify themselves through different psychological, cultural, social, or metaphysical means, of which racism in its biological sense is only one instance” (p. 118). Memmi also maintained that speaking of anti-Semitism is imprecise, and that Judeophobia, which more clearly signified both fear and hostility toward Jews, was a more appropriate term. “The same can be said for *Negrophobia* and *Arabophobia*,” he claimed (p. 119). He maintained that xenophobia was a useful term for referring to the “exclusion and denigration of foreigners” but that *ethnophobia* was a better word for talking about “the exclusion of a group as a whole” (p. 120). What is important about this lexicon is that it allows us to readily name linkages between forms of stigmatization and the targeting of groups in ways that conceptually anti-Semitism and racism foreclose.

This palette of terms -- heterophobia, ethnophobia, xenophobia, Arabophobia or Islamophobia, Negrophobia and Judeophobia -- have two distinct advantages over constructs like anti-Semitism

or racism. First, they make clear that all racisms are entangled and therefore not so unique or different as to be exceptional. The appreciation of racial entanglement does not preclude attention to the distinct histories of different groups or national contexts. But it does lessen the tendency toward competitive victimhood. Victimization, like privilege, is relative and relational, shifting within social formations, suggests Memmi. Second, his conceptual vocabulary makes clear that ultimately heterophobia comes out of a complex of emotions based on fear or anxiety, often coupled to resentment. Its core function among others is “anxiety alleviation and ideological distraction” (p. 194).

Finally, Memmi was an anti-racist trailblazer. He not only defined, described, and diagnosed heterophobia, but sought to treat it. He proposed a three-pronged anti-racist agenda that corresponded to the three levels at which he analyzed racism. First, he maintained, we must acknowledge racism; denial or silence is compliance. We must become conscious of racism, not only in others, but also in ourselves. In short, we must become the change we want to see in the anti-racist world. To do so, we must examine our own unconscious or implicit bias. We must check our privilege, reflecting assiduously on where we fit within the racialized systems of which we are part. We must interrogate our own narratives, making sure we do not become blinded by the danger of a single story. And we must also bolster “the exercise of empathy...to understand the suffering of the other, his humiliation, his pain at being insulted or struck” (p. 147). The anti-racist ethos consequently rests upon humility and compassion.

Second, at the social level, anti-racism requires continual and ongoing pedagogical approaches, sensitive to how racism morphs and changes. This pedagogy must be paradoxical or counter-cultural, since it demands unlearning deeply engrained social patterns. This begins with teaching children to enjoy differences, rather than fear them. But it is also about learning more history, developing a critical vocabulary, learning more about the social facts of racially inflected inequalities, immersing yourself in conversations with people who do not share your background, skin color, or religion, and ultimately concretizing in your family, your friends, and your colleagues your respect and appreciation for difference. As such, anti-racism entails cultural relativism. It is important to note that this has nothing to do with ethical or epistemological relativism, since anti-racism is a moral imperative based upon a firm grasp of the reality-principle and of truth. But it demands recognizing that one culture is not superior to another and it insists that one’s own viewpoint is not the default for what is right or universal, nor the standard of judgement for norms.

Third, Memmi understood that ultimately racism is political. Our approach cannot be limited to a focus on individuals or intersubjective dyads; it must aim at dismantling systems. We cannot be content to fight against prejudice or bias, we must focus on institutions and structures, to “*struggle against all oppression*” and “*combat all forms of domination*” (p. 154 and p. 157). This is likely never-ending work. Memmi consequently suggests that anti-racist measures can serve as a moral metric for our collective social health. Our commitment to anti-racism helps to measure our broader commitment to “justice or injustice, equality or oppression, or, in a word, one’s very humanity” (p. 161). As he eloquently notes in a passage that beautifully summarizes his viewpoint,

Racism illustrates, in sum, the inevitable negativity of the condition of the dominated; that is, it illuminates in a certain sense the entire human condition. The anti-racist struggle, difficult though it is, and always in question, is nevertheless one of the prologues to the ultimate passage from animality to humanity. *In that sense, we cannot fail to rise to the racist challenge* (p. 164).

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