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Itay Lotem, *The Memory of Colonialism in Britain and France: The Sins of Silence* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021). Bibliography, index, and notes. \$74.32 U.S.(hb). ISBN 978-3030637187.

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What does it mean for a nation to confront its colonial past? How does a community “come to terms” with its history of racism? In *The Memory of Colonialism in Britain and France: The Sins of Silence*, Itay Lotem engages the most grippingly relevant questions of our time in the context of these two former colonial powers. In this meticulously researched volume, Lotem proves to be the savviest of guides to the history of the present, offering the reader an exhaustive (but never exhausting) tour of French and British debates about the memory of empire as they have played out in the decades since decolonization. With a focus on the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries and the use of oral history interviews with a wide-ranging set of “memory agents,” Lotem breaks important ground for scholars and students of memory, empire, decolonization, and racism in Europe.

At first glance, it might appear that Lotem is giving us two books in one. France and Britain are presented in two separate sections, each featuring five chapters. While each part follows a similar trajectory, the author is clear about the lack of overlap. Indeed, the introduction states up front that the histories of colonial memory in France and Britain “do not lend themselves to any one-to-one comparison” (p. 19). Public discourses about the memory of colonialism developed separately in the two countries, on different timelines, with “few or no points of contact” (p. 17). But this, Lotem contends, is precisely the argument the book aims to make. The purpose of the comparison, he explains, is to render more visible the palpable but often slippery silences surrounding the public memory of colonialism and colonial racism. Only by considering the paths not taken can we begin to fill in the gaps. While the two stories are presented separately, *The Memory of Colonialism in Britain and France* offers the reader much more than the sum of its parts. The two segments, moreover, are united by a compelling shared argument: that “‘remembering empire’ is often more about how activists, historians, and opinion-makers perceive “memory”—and with it the tools they have to employ it—rather than the actual history they commemorate” (p. 17).

In both the French and British sections, the story begins with silence, followed by subsequent efforts to break it. “Silence,” Lotem explains, does not mean that “colonial history fell into a black hole after decolonisation,” but rather that historical actors “deliberately chose to avoid the

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colonial past and its legacies when articulating national narratives” (pp. 26-27). The focus of the book is thus on a shared, public silence.

In France, this public silence (or perceived public silence) spanned the period beginning with the decolonization moment in the 1960s and lasted through the 1980s. As Lotem argues in chapter one, even the arrival of the Front National on the political scene and the growing tensions surrounding migration from France’s former colonies failed to spark a sustained public engagement with the memory of empire. Journalists, politicians, and activists on both the right and the left avoided framing the issue of immigration in terms of colonial legacies. Both the far-right and the anti-racist left focused instead on cultivating a sense of their own novelty in the present, rather than trying to contextualize their contemporary circumstances within the broader landscape of France’s colonial past. Chapter two turns to a more specific silence: the official silence surrounding the Algerian War of Independence. This chapter highlights the intellectual trajectory of historian Benjamin Stora, who called for a state acknowledgement of the war that would foster collective introspection and allow French society to engage with past crimes committed in Algeria in the service of promoting social cohesion in the present.

While Lotem acknowledges that, in the French context, the silence surrounding the memory of colonialism was, in fact, far from all-encompassing, it is important to understand what activists, scholars, journalists, and politicians in the 1990s and 2000s felt they were reacting against. Chapter three explores the calls to “break the silence” that emerged in the 1990s as activists and scholars (like Stora) articulated a *devoir de mémoire*, the French counterpart to Germany’s *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. As they built on the earlier work of Jewish activists who had fought for recognition of the French state’s role in perpetrating the Holocaust, postcolonial memory activists mobilized this concept of a “duty to remember” in ways that were sometimes contradictory. Minority groups called on the state to recognize and memorialize the specificity of their stories, while simultaneously appealing to the republic as “the ultimate arbiter of a ‘roman national,’” thereby reinforcing “the tradition of viewing the ‘one and indivisible’ nation as the centre of all things with national cohesion as its primary goal” (p. 92). This mobilization focused on key moments and histories: the 17 October 1961 massacre, the history of slavery, and Pied-Noir history. For many memory activists, 2005 constituted a critical turning point, when the memory of colonialism seemed to have finally captured popular and state attention in hitherto unseen ways. In the context of suburban riots and an extended debate about the 2005 “law on colonialism,” memory activism had gained a significant foothold in the public sphere.

After 2005, colonial memory in France served as both a “republican critique” (chapter four) and as a “marker of political affiliation” (chapter five). Groups like Indigènes de la République and the Conseil représentatif des associations noires connected contemporary French racism to France’s long colonial history and brought the concept of “race” into the forefront of French anti-racism work. Likewise, the post-2005 moment saw political figures engaging colonial history in new ways, on both the left and on the right.

In Britain, the story followed a markedly different trajectory. Chapter six traces the origins of the “de-prioritisation” of empire in Britain following a slower, and more uneven decolonization process. In contrast to France, where the Algerian War of Independence constituted a traumatic and decisive break, the collapse of Britain’s empire was more gradual, more piecemeal. The role of race in debates about migration also contrasted sharply with the French example. Unlike in France, where the official rhetoric of “colour-blindness” had set the stage for an immigration

debate that was framed—at least on the surface—in terms of economics rather than race, in the British case immigration debates focused explicitly on skin color from the outset. Yet despite mounting tension surrounding immigration coupled with ongoing flickers of national crisis (The Falklands War, Brexit), few spaces or platforms emerged that could facilitate a prolonged engagement with the history and memory of empire. The very short life of the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum—open for only six years—speaks volumes to this lack of sustained engagement. Chapter seven turns to another form of colonial silence: Britain’s much-contested concept of “convivial multiculturalism,” which arose alongside the emergence of British anti-racism.

In the final three chapters of the book, Lotem turns his attention to the various ways that colonial silence has been broken in Britain. These include (among others): new projects to recognize and memorialize the history of enslavement (chapter eight); the rise of Black history and the emergence of a new generation of Black public intellectuals (chapter nine); and twenty-first century efforts to reevaluate British imperial history on both sides of the political spectrum (chapter ten). Much in the same way that public debate about the Algerian War of Independence in France paved the way for a broader engagement with colonial memory, so too did the memorialization of slavery in Britain open the door for other kinds of public discourse connected to Britain’s imperial past. Much of the early memorialization of the history of enslavement (particularly in the 1990s) focused on its abolition, while developments in the first decade of the twenty-first century opened a space for a different kind of politicization, one that would foreground Black resistance, agency, and collective memory. This mobilization built on decades of Pan-African activism and centered on the importance of contrition and compensation. In the 2010s, a new generation of scholars, journalists, and performing artists—including, most notably, Reni Eddo-Lodge, Akala, David Olusoga, and Afua Hirsch—brought Britain’s colonial past to the forefront of the fight against racism, breaking a decades-long silence where “colonial history was related to the academe or to the margins of Black history” (p. 335).

There are few subjects of historical inquiry as elusive as silence. Lotem should be commended both for embracing such a challenging topic and for his thorough and conscientious research, which includes bringing the story right up to the events unfolding on the eve of the book’s publication. *The Memory of Colonialism in Britain and France* is, unquestionably, a must-read for scholars of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Europe. It is also an indispensable companion to today’s front-page news. Indeed, the book offers a wealth of information for the non-specialist reader who is simply looking to understand how we got here: a moment in history when the Black Lives Matter movement has spread across the globe, when the dismantling of statues seems to foretell the dawn of more just political, social, and economic systems, and when the possibilities for contrition, recompense, and restitution feel almost within reach. While individual movements are linked, unquestionably, to similar movements unfolding in other parts of the world, we must also remember that these protests, these statues, and these reforms exist within specific local contexts that have shaped their contours in powerful ways. For all of the emphasis in recent years on globalization and the permeability of borders—especially in the context of decolonization history—*The Memory of Colonialism* makes an important statement about the limits of transnational history and the ongoing resonance of local and national contexts.

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