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Albert Memmi: The Conflict of Legacies

Patrick Crowley

The necessity of self-renewal is as obvious as the ambiguity involved. While the colonized's revolt is a clear attitude in itself, its contents may be muddled; for it is the result of an unclear situation—the colonial situation.

Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (2003 [1957]: 180)

Introduction

Since the publication of his first novel, *The Pillar of Salt* (2001 [1953]), Albert Memmi has offered textual portraits that bring the discomfiting perspective of his *vécu* [lived experience] to bear upon discourses, practices and legacies of domination. In particular, and not surprisingly, Memmi's name often appears alongside those of critics of colonization such as Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon and Jean-Paul Sartre. Jean-Marc Moura provides a typical example of this when he writes that the work of Memmi, Césaire and Fanon constitute 'les essais de combat' [the essays of struggle] (1999: 57) of Francophone anti-colonial writing. In terms of intellectual legacy, Robert Young argues that since 'Sartre, Fanon and Memmi, postcolonial criticism has constructed two antithetical groups, the colonizer and colonized [...], a false Manichean division that threatens to reproduce the static, essentialist categories it seeks to undo' (1995: 5). Yet even as Memmi's work is acknowledged it is more often than not either largely unread or summarily read. For though Memmi's work offers a trenchant critique of colonialism, far from constructing a simple binary opposition between colonizer and colonized, it has consistently brought attention to the cultural imbrications that result from the colonial situation.

Memmi has sought to interrogate issues of domination and difference through his critiques of colonial society, his anatomy of racism and his treatment of issues such as displacement and alienation, nationalism and freedom, cultural assimilation and its limits. His work gestures towards reconciliation (at the very least self-reconciliation) and social justice but it also points to, and is symptomatic of, the impossibility of complete assimilation and the difficulties of acculturation. Though much of Memmi's work has commented on the erasure of cultural differences within Western humanist claims, more recently he has argued that immigrant communities in France need to integrate even at the cost of difference. In all of this, Memmi's work bears witness to ambivalence: his early work analyses its manifestations within colonial society but his critique, then and since, betrays its own ambivalence.

Portraits and self-portraits

Memmi's literary work and psycho-sociological essays draw upon autobiographical experience and work it into ideal types or portraits. Given his emphasis on the *vécu*, commentators on his work tend to focus on its autobiographical dimension (Dugas, 2001; Strike, 2003). Memmi encourages such readings both within his texts and in his use of paratextual commentaries such as prefaces and postscripts. Indeed, any extensive treatment of Memmi's work involves, or results in, a familiarity with the context of Memmi's life. Or rather that part of it that he chooses to refract within essays and fictional forms. It is the *vécu* of his childhood and early adulthood that form the principal matter of his explorations. Memmi was born in 1920 and lived, initially, on the edge of the Jewish quarter (the *hara*) in French colonial Tunis. His father was an artisan, a saddler, and his mother, who was illiterate, spoke only Judeo-Arabic, a dialect of Arabic spoken within the Jewish community. Memmi's early education began in a traditional Jewish school (a

kouttab) and continued in the Alliance Israelite school that combined Jewish studies and elements of the French curriculum. He received a scholarship from a benefactor to attend the Lycée Carnot before taking up university studies in Algiers that were interrupted by the Second World War. During the war he was interned by the German army and sent to a work-camp for Tunisian Jews. After the war he went to Paris to continue his studies at the Sorbonne where he took classes in philosophy. In 1951 Memmi married and he and his French wife returned to Tunis where he taught philosophy and literature. In 1952 Memmi helped found the Centre de Psychopédagogie de Tunis (Tunis Centre for Psychopedagogy) and his work there played a role in his understanding of the psychic effects of oppression. Memmi supported the cause of Tunisian nationalism but he left Tunisia to return to France in 1956 after the country received full independence and affirmed a distinctly Arabic-Muslim identity. In France he held a number of academic positions, teaching in third-level institutes such as the École des Hautes Études Commerciales and the École Pratique des Hautes Études, before being appointed to the University of Paris X as Professor of Sociology in 1970 (Dugas, 1984: 14–18). Since then Memmi has continued to write sociological essays and literary works that draw upon his store of experience, always already culturally mediated, which he examines with the kind of rational scruple he admired in the French *philosophes*.

His first novel, *The Pillar of Salt* (2001 [1953]), is semi-autobiographical and has attracted much attention within France for exploring the perspective of an acculturated *indigène* [native]. The narrator of this *bildungsroman*, Alexandre Mordekhai Benillouche, offers an insight into the experience of living and growing up in the Jewish *hara*, of being drawn to French thought and values within a colonial context. This intellectual identification with French culture brings the youth into conflict with his father's traditional Judeo-Arabic values and the novel is

marked by a sense of disenchantment. The protagonist leaves for Argentina yet throughout the novel acknowledges the impossibility of fleeing himself: 'In the long run, I would always be forced to return to Alexandre Mordekhai Benillouche, a native in a colonial country, a Jew in an anti-Semitic universe, an African in a world dominated by Europe' (Memmi, 2001: 95–6). This passage comes at the end of a lengthy consideration of the protagonist's attempt to negotiate between different cultures from a position of apparent weakness. Memmi's Jewish upbringing in Tunisia has largely determined his sense of difference and his unsettled notion of identity, torn as he was between traditions (Jewish and Arabic) and modernity, between identifying with the colonizer or with the colonized. The result is an entanglement of cultures rather than a clear binary opposition that demands the exclusion of one over the other. As he writes in his 1965 preface to *The Colonizer and the Colonized*: 'I was a sort of half-breed of colonization, understanding everyone because I belonged completely to no one' (2003 [1965]: 12). The tensions inherent in such an identity were confirmed when he returned to Tunisia with his French wife in the 1950s and the difficulties of a mixed marriage inform his second novel *Strangers* (1960 [1955]).

Memmi's capacity for rational critique is brought to the fore in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. Its forensic analysis of the colonial situation remains pertinent, fresh and acute today. Memmi offers portraits of the colonized and colonizer and analyzes their relationship as one based on maintaining the illegitimately acquired economic privilege of the colonizer. Memmi demonstrates the contradictions of colonial practice and thought and delineates the ways in which the structure of colonization ties colonizer and colonized together even as it deforms both parties.

The function of Memmi's portraits is to provide a rational critique of the mythological portraits of the colonized, the racial stereotypes that emerged from the colonial situation. In this way his work emphasizes the role of cultural analysis in undermining colonial ideology (see Gearhart, 1998). Memmi's portraits steer a course between assessing the economic conditions of colonization and the psychological impact on the individual. Memmi draws on the notion of interiorization in his depiction of the psychic effects of colonization on both colonizer and colonized. Interiorization is important to what he calls the 'Nero Complex': the colonizer's sense of guilt and anxiety that results from having usurped the rights of others. It leads the colonizer to perform acts that seek, in vain, to justify or reinforce the illegitimate. The colonizer needs to salve his conscience by praising the *œuvre coloniale* [colonial endeavours] and denigrating the colonial subject but the latter's gaze is a constant reminder of the colonizer's illegitimacy and cannot be eradicated; it is only kept at a distance. Turning his attention to the colonized, Memmi argues that there is no hope of integration into colonial society, for assimilation is perceived by the colonizer as imitation: 'the shrewder the ape, the better he imitates, and the more the colonizer becomes irritated' (2003: 168). Ultimately, the colonizer requires difference in order to sustain the logic of colonial domination. Cultural assimilation cannot succeed and the cost, for the colonized who attempts this, is guilt and self-alienation.

Memmi's analysis makes it clear that the contradictions of colonial society can only be resolved through revolt and the collapse of colonialism. Change, argues Memmi, will not be brought about by left-wing colonizers who reject colonization because their choice is 'not between good and evil, but between evil and uneasiness' (2003: 87). For Memmi, the socialist activist in the colony cannot reconcile the need for struggle with the means of struggle: terrorism and the galvanizing discourses of nationalism and religion. Memmi espouses the nationalist

struggle but sees it as a stepping stone along the path to a deeper cultural transformation. Sartre, in his introduction to *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, optimistically highlighted how colonial repression could be transformed into anti-colonial revolt: 'A people's misfortune will become its courage; it will make, of its endless rejection by colonialism, the absolute rejection of colonization' (2003: 25). Memmi's position is more nuanced. His attention to the psychological dimensions of colonization convinced him of the impossibility of a clean break with the past and of the dangers inherent in identitarian approaches to liberation that emphasized nationalism and religion once independence had been achieved. He looks beyond the end of colonization: 'The liquidation of colonization is nothing but a prelude to complete liberation, to self-recovery' (2003: 195). Indeed, Memmi makes it clear that the negative legacy of colonization would have an afterlife beyond the demise of empire.

The Colonizer and the Colonized had an important impact beyond Tunisia. Published during the Algerian War of Independence (1954-62), Memmi's text was amongst the first to present the French reader with the viewpoint of the colonized. It also attracted attention beyond North Africa. Quebecois writers, such as Gaston Miron and Hubert Aquin, drew from Memmi's analysis of culture and colonialism to advance Quebecois claims for independence. Randall contends that 'most critics would situate the postcolonial moment in French Canada during the period of the Quiet Revolution (1960-70), when young intellectuals in Quebec discovered and circulated the writings of Albert Memmi' (2003, 77). However, in a lecture given at the Université de Montréal in 1967, Memmi avoided using the word colonialism and emphasized instead the issue of domination with regard to relations between Canada's Anglophone majority and the Francophone settler minority. (See Chapter ? by Mary Jean Green for discussion of this incident from the Quebec perspective.)

During this period Memmi pursued his literary path by once more returning to the dilemmas of his youth. *The Scorpion or the Imaginary Confession* (1971 [1969]) departs from the linear forms of his earlier novels. The narrator, Marcel, is a Tunisian eye specialist who is trying to sort out the mix of literary papers belonging to his brother, Emile/Imilio, who has disappeared. The novel is made up of sections of the narrator's brother's novel, diary entries and the fragments of an unfinished chronicle. The narrator's commentaries add a further layer of complication to the novel's interweaving of generic forms: 'Come on Narcissus, let's get back to our puzzle: where does this passage belong? With the Journal, or the Novel?' (Memmi, 1971: 9). Memmi's play with generic boundaries is experimental but the contents and themes are familiar: conflict between father and son, the attractions and deceptions of European thought, the richness of Oriental cultures and the disappointment of a decolonized Tunisia that offers little space for the Tunisian Jew. *The Scorpion* dramatizes the attempt to overcome domination—here associated with a violent and traditional father—and dramatizes too the trauma of modernity's passage beyond metropolitan France and the traces of that passage. Like much of Memmi's fiction *The Scorpion* is saturated with autobiographical allusions. The work contains a number of photographs of Tunis and one of a Roman medal that bears the name 'Memmi'. The narrator, here and elsewhere in Memmi's fictions, makes reference to this medal and pursues possible genealogies and histories of the name. Yet even as the content draws us towards the referent of the author, the text pursues its liberty within generic play and obvious fictions. And though Memmi's own history, real and imaginary, remains intratextually present in his later, more conventional novels *Le Désert* (1977) and *Le Pharaon* (1988), here again, Memmi refuses to allow the autobiographical to be the only ground for interpretations of his work.¹

¹ *Le Désert* is the story of Jubaïr Ouali El-Mammi, a distant, if fictional, ancestor of the author who travels across North Africa at the beginning of the fifteenth century in search of his kingdom only to find his real kingdom lies

The Mark of Difference

Memmi's novels are also almost always about the mediation of difference. The narrator of *The Scorpion*, for example, offers the initial brushstrokes of a portrait of Uncle Makloul who seeks wisdom within the 'Cabala, from the Mishna, from the Sages, but always linking everything together perfectly' (1971: 47). Indeed the question of interpretation and adjudication between different forms of knowledge is often brought to the fore. The narrator wonders 'How can these degrees [of truth] and these differences be expressed in a common language? [...] Always the need to have a key' (1971: 51). The novel can be read as a further attempt by Memmi to grapple with the experience of negotiating between differences and of affirming one's own. At one point we read 'Cultivate your difference if you can, it's all you have left... Ah, if you only can!' (1971: 201).

This issue of difference is as important to Memmi's work as his critique of oppression (whether colonial, racist or anti-Semitic) and it offers an insight into the evolution of his thought. In *Le Nomade immobile*, published some thirty years after *The Scorpion*, Memmi recalls what he had written in *Portrait of a Jew*: 'Être, c'est être différent' [To be is to be different] (2000: 165). Memmi subsequently offered his own hermeneutic key. At a conference at Cologne in 1991 he commented that 'La clé de toute mon œuvre c'est l'humanisme. Il faut respecter la vie comme elle est et les hommes comme ils sont' [The key to my entire work is humanism. One must respect life as it is and men as they are] (quoted in Strike, 2003: 137). Much of Memmi's work appears to advocate a humanism that engages with, and foregrounds, difference rather than effaces it. In challenging an abstract universalism Memmi reminds us that humanism is a project

within. *Le Pharaon* is set in Tunis in the years preceding independence.

grounded in its own specific tradition despite its attempts to erase the force of traditions beyond itself.

In this respect, Memmi's views on Fanon's relationship to the particularities of his Martiniquan *vécu* are illuminating and have attracted the attention of postcolonial critics such as Ania Loomba. Loomba favourably cites Memmi's view that Fanon's radical universalist humanism and identification with the Algerian cause was a function of his cultural alienation, in short his rejection of Martiniquan culture and his failure to assimilate into French society (Loomba, 1998: 147). Memmi, in his reading of Fanon's life, privileges the life over the work and critiques what he describes as Fanon's false universalism and abstract humanism on the grounds that they 'reposent sur une négligence de toutes les spécificités, de toutes les particularités sociales intermédiaires' [rely upon a neglect of all specificities, of all intermediate social particularities]. Memmi sees no way round particularity: 'Car, enfin, l'homme universel et la culture universelle sont faits d'hommes particuliers et de cultures particulières' [For, in the end, universal man and universal culture are made of particular men and particular cultures] (1971: 269). Memmi's position on Fanon is unequivocal: any aspiration towards the universal (and humanism) must first involve an acceptance of the particularities of one's *vécu*. Memmi insists on the importance of coming to terms with a *vécu* informed by cultural differences that cannot always be reconciled. He rejects Fanon's belief in violence, seeing it as a refusal to mediate with the past and as a misguided hope in revolution. Instead Memmi works with what is at hand; for him there is neither tabula rasa nor utopian horizon but a rational consideration of the state of things as they are. Memmi refuses to translate his version of a colonial *vécu* into a justification for a practice of rupture and radical transformation. One cannot escape the

particularity of one's past just as one cannot escape the circumscribed mark that links him to what he calls 'the Orient'.

The protagonist of *The Pillar of Salt* remarks 'Can I ever forget the Orient? It is deeply rooted in my flesh and blood, and I need but touch my own body to feel how I have been marked for all time by it. As though it was all a mere matter of cultures and of elective affinities!' (2001: 169).² The critical importance of this affiliation to Memmi's thought cannot be understated; his Jewish heritage was central to his upbringing and the Arab-Israeli wars of 1948-49, 1956, 1967 and 1973-74 informed his work and led him to adopt a clear position on the question of Israel. In his *Portrait of a Jew* (1962 [1962]) and *The Liberation of the Jew* (1966 [1966]), Memmi returns to his Jewish legacy through the heuristic device of the portrait and makes the case for a Jewish state. In portraying the Jew, Memmi emphasizes unhappiness and humiliation: 'Only the territorial solution, a free people on a free territory—a nation—is an adequate solution to the fundamental and specific deficiencies in the Jewish condition' (1966: 294). Memmi's position on Israel chimes with his early espousal of Arab nationalism and his rejection of what he would see as the utopian, internationalist vision of Marxism. It should be added that Memmi's unambiguous Zionism has always insisted on the need for Israel to attend to the rights of Palestinians and, further, he has written that 'sooner or later the *national dimension* of the Palestinians will have to be taken into consideration' (1975 [1974]: 139). Memmi's recurring theme is that of justice and the need to counter practices of domination, yet, though he raises the issue of a Palestinian 'national dimension', there is no deep engagement with the issues involved, such as territorial limits and the return of Palestinian refugees. For Memmi, the nation allows the

² As he makes clear in the autobiographical work *Le Nomade immobile*, Memmi remains deeply conflicted on the issue of circumcision. He rails against his father's insistence upon the ritual yet visits the same upon his own son (2000: 27–39). Recent articles by Laurence R. Schehr (2003) and Jarrod Hayes (2007) draw attention to Memmi's treatment of circumcision and its function within his writing.

former subject of colonization to rebuild and consolidate an identity deformed by a colonial situation that fostered racism.

The aim of Memmi's sociological essay *Racism* (2000 [1982]) is to define racism and to debunk its assertions by examining it as both a psychological and historical phenomenon. Memmi notes the role racism plays in underpinning objective conditions of exclusionary practices, and reads it as symptomatic of subjective forms of hate and domination that are characteristic of a more general drive—which he terms 'heterophobia'—to dominate others based on differences (both real and imaginary). Memmi recognizes the importance of difference to self-affirmation but continues: 'to be is to be different, yes, but to be different is to be other. Therefore, everyone is different and everyone is other. In short, all self-affirmation must be by definition relative. Whatever its importance in one's voyage of recovery, difference cannot be considered an end in and of itself' (2000: 51). The thrust of Memmi's argument is that anti-racism should dispute the instrumentalization of difference for racist ends rather than affirming it through identitarian politics. Memmi's point that 'everyone is different and everyone is other', subordinates difference to a broader humanist project. Indeed, it indicates the extent to which Memmi's view on humanism's effacement of difference in the interests of the universal requires careful reading. If, as we read earlier, Memmi claims that the key to his work is a humanism that respects 'men' for what they are then clearly the universal claim of the principle of respect is, in Memmi's view, greater than the assertion of identity that demands respect or refuses to grant it to others.

In *Le Nomade immobile* Memmi reasserts his view of the individual as being grounded in 'des attaches particulières' [particular attachments] (2000: 165) but goes on to declare that in a society organized more reasonably—if not one more rational, tolerant and secular—each

individual ‘pourra conserver le droit de pratiquer sa religion s’il y tient, chacun sera libre d’entretenir sa culture, mais tous devront renoncer à ce qui pourrait entraver notre commune et universelle solidarité’ [will be able to retain the right to practice his religion if he so wishes, each individual will be free to maintain his culture, but everyone will have to renounce whatever impedes our common and universal solidarity] (2000: 166). Memmi’s emphasis on humanism, secularism and rationalist thought throughout *Le Nomade immobile* serves only to bring to the fore a position informed by an unproblematic version of Enlightenment thought. It is not surprising that this accretion of the thought of the *philosophes* brings Memmi’s later work into conflict with postcolonial perspectives.

The Absence of Leverage

Memmi’s writing is realist to the extent that he sees it as providing a mirror, however clouded or cracked, of the world. In the preface to *The Colonizer and the Colonized* he writes that ‘these two portraits are faithful to their models’; together, he writes, they constitute ‘my mirror’, an image he offers to both colonizer and colonized (2003: 13). Memmi seeks to re-present the *vécu* of his world through his portraits. As such Memmi’s *vécu* has primacy over the possible domination of any one theoretical position (such as Marxism or Freudianism) that might deform, in his view, his analysis of the colonial *vécu* (2003: 9). Against a single theory, the colonial *vécu* is considered in the light of philosophical positions indebted to the universalist presumption that we have a shared experiential core. This position is rational. However, though he refuses the base of a single determination of human behaviour, Memmi reads experience from a humanist perspective grounded in a version of French Enlightenment thought that is never adequately evaluated.

Over time Memmi's insistence upon reasoned positions derived from reflecting on everyday experience has resulted in illuminating critiques of discourses of oppression. *Decolonization and the Decolonized* (2006 [2004]), however, exhibits a collapse of reasoned reflection, and the views expressed by Memmi in this volume reflect the kind of doxa that he has long sought to challenge. In short, where *The Colonizer and the Colonized* is an incisive critique of racial and colonial stereotypes, Memmi's sequel, *Decolonization and the Decolonized*, is replete with jaded doxa and shaped by contemporary stereotypes of Arab nations and of African and North African immigrants in France.

This confusion of thought and cliché could be a result of his questionable methodology. A characteristic of Memmi's sociological essays has been a lack of engagement with other thinkers in the field of sociology and a habit of making vague references to anonymous interlocutors rather than citing names and works. The methodology of his co-authored work, *Les Français et le racisme*, also raises questions even if the results are laudatory. It was based on two hundred questionnaires returned by members of the 'Mouvement contre le racisme, l'antisémitisme et pour le paix' [Movement against Racism, Anti-Semitism and for Peace], the very group that commissioned the work. And, though the touchstone of Memmi's work has been the *vécu*, he consistently neglects detailed analyses of specific historical and social contexts. As such Memmi's *vécu* appears to be Memmi's opinion, his version of a familiar doxa.

The methodological weaknesses of Memmi's approach (the lack of real engagement with a corpus of critical work in the field and poor use of empirical data) and his evolving views on difference may explain his suspect portraits of the immigrant Other in *Decolonization and the Decolonized*. He raises, for example, the concern that clandestine immigration denies 'the concept of territory and national borders' and contributes to the 'decline of an already threatened

Christian civilization' (2006: 80). Though Memmi voices these fears he does not advocate a reactionary response. Instead, he maintains the importance of what he sees as those Enlightenment values whose origins coincide with the emergence of the nation-state. However, Memmi's treatment of these issues trades in, and reinforces, racial stereotypes. He writes that 'the son of the immigrant is a kind of zombie, lacking any profound attachment to the land in which he was born' (2006: 119) and that 'because of their color young blacks in France experience additional complexity; they are unstable, agitated, dissatisfied with themselves and the entire world' (2006: 116). In the end, it is Memmi's work, amongst others, that can be used to critique Memmi. In *Decolonization and the Decolonized* Memmi writes that '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' (2006: 19). In *The Colonizer and the Colonized* Memmi had already critiqued such mythical portraits that drew from and reinforced racial stereotypes: 'Another sign of the colonized's depersonalization is what one might call the mark of the plural. The colonized is never characterized in an individual manner; he is entitled only to drown in an anonymous collectivity ("They are this." "They are all the same.")' (2003: 129). Memmi's writing on decolonization in Arab countries and recent immigration into France, commits the same errors that he once so cogently critiqued.

Memmi's work deserves its place within the postcolonial pantheon because of the continuing freshness of its early critiques and the overall evolution of an œuvre that offers an insight into the struggle, not always successful, to negotiate difference. His work is marked by a continuous return to the cultural dissonances of his childhood and the attempt to reconcile them within humanism. However, Memmi's portrait of the decolonized in *Decolonization and the Decolonized* offers a case-study in the way the colonial myths we seek to eradicate can return to

haunt thought through ‘the little strains of daily life’ once so acutely observed by a younger Memmi (2003: 69). Analysis is not always a prelude to cure or liberation. Memmi himself constantly points to the limits of analysis, to the ‘muddled’ contents of the colonial situation (2003: 180) and to the atavistic knots that remain within us and that withstand the sharpest blades of reasoned thought. His work complicates colonial and postcolonial relations, and demonstrates the need for a humble vigilance in the exercise of a form of reason that draws too heavily on experience.

Further Reading

ROUMANI, Judith. 1987: *Albert Memmi*. Philadelphia: Celfan Edition Monographs.

A very brief, scholarly and considered introduction. Written in English, it covers Memmi’s biography and his bibliographic output up to 1986. It offers little critique but expertly brings Memmi’s strengths to the fore.

DUGAS, Guy. 2001: *Albert Memmi: du malheur d’être juif au bonheur sépharade*. Paris: Nadir, Collection ‘Repères’.

This monograph emphasizes biography and inscribes Memmi within a Jewish identity. Dugas notes the role of fiction, the importance of which has grown with time, and the gradual dissolution of the *je* in favour of a more general and collective *nous*.

STRIKE, Joëlle. 2003: *Albert Memmi: autobiographie and autographie*. Paris: L’Harmattan.

Argues that Memmi writes his life to make sense of it but also to continue the work of constructing an identity. A faithful reading of Memmi's work from the perspective of autobiographical theories that take the autobiographical referent largely for granted.

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