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# Albert Memmi in the Era of Decolonization

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*Paradoxically, it's harder to be a writer in the postcolonial period than during colonization.*

– Albert Memmi

This statement may be one of the most important insights that Albert Memmi produces in his 2004 book, *Portrait du décolonisé: arabo-musulman et de quelques autres*. The work was published in a 2006 English edition as *Decolonization and the Decolonized*, and its title echoes Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized* that has served as an introduction to the psychology and mutual dependence of the colonial era for countless students.<sup>1</sup> While *The Colonizer and the Colonized* is still assigned, studied, and generally revered, *Decolonization and the Decolonized* fell with a thud on the postcolonial political landscape and seems destined for obscurity. What can the different fortunes of these books reveal about the ever fraught relationship between power, perspective and social criticism in the era of decolonization?

One of the most electrifying elements of *The Colonizer and the Colonized* was its ability to present the pathos of the colonial experience from both positions. While anti-imperialism had been a long-standing political movement, Memmi's book paused to dissect the colonial relationship, it did not solely aim to end it. Anti-imperialist leaders had long decried the injustices of colonialism, presenting themselves as misunderstood, powerful and equal human beings. Memmi's book offered what seemed at the time to be a breathtakingly honest portrait of the insecurities, dependencies and humiliations of the colonial relationship.<sup>2</sup> The intention and result was to catalyze opposition to colonization. Memmi's "theatrical method of presenting the colonizer and the colonized as if they were characters on a stage" was intended to reveal how both groups participate in and then become disfigured in a diabolic world.<sup>3</sup> Never though, is there a question of with whom Memmi's loyalties are placed. Not part of either group, but

“sandwiched between French master and Muslim majority” as a Jew, Memmi leverages his intimate knowledge of segregation within colonial Tunisia to subvert the colonial power structure.<sup>4</sup>

How far our analyses of colonialism and postcolonialism have come since 1955! In *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Memmi was the consummate outsider, able to present startling truths that changed his readers’ perceptions of their own actions and beliefs. Today, it is difficult to know upon what grounds to stand to critique postcolonial power relations, thanks to the seminal contributions of Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak. Factual analyses can be dismissed as paradigmatic of an imperialist, normative gaze; historical studies can be accused of fetishizing the colonial experience; nonindigenous scholars are vulnerable to being labeled misinformed interlopers; indigenous scholars cannot be taken as representative of a nation, identity or position. Since there is no safe ground to stand on, it might seem that all positions are somewhat equal in their disadvantages. But this is not the case, as Memmi’s *Decolonization and the Decolonized* can demonstrate. Postcolonial analyses must remain committed to subverting power relations no matter how complex or simple their epistemological stance may be. The ability to draw a clear dividing line between power and powerlessness remains elusive; nonetheless, the spirit of the critic must be to question the assumptions on *both sides* of that line. A closer analysis of Memmi’s books will help to demonstrate the significance of this point.

Memmi begins his introduction to *Decolonization and the Decolonized* with the statement, “Rarely have I had so little desire to write a book” (ix). Yet he argues that a companion volume to *The Colonized and the Colonized* was desperately needed. What has become of the formerly colonizing/colonized people? Why does the world still seem to vibrate according to the beat of the colonial era? He points out, “During the first years of independence, attentive and well-meaning observers grew concerned about the persistent poverty of formerly colonized peoples. Fifty years later nothing really seems to have changed, except for the worse” (x). How can we make sense of this odd era when formal colonization has ended and yet the inequalities between the former colonizer/colonized persist? More importantly, what kind of criticism can contribute to changing these inequalities?

What drove Memmi to overcome his stated reluctance to write the book was his belief that the standard narrative told about the postcolonial era is wrong. In short, Memmi believes the failures of decolonization tend to be blamed upon the former colonizer. While of course colonial legacies exist, he insists, “Colonization has committed enough crimes of its own; it would be pointless to attribute to it those it did not commit” (22). Many people are familiar with such arguments: colonization implanted economic structures that continue to create poverty; neocolonialism in the guise of global capital continues to pillage resources; the brutalities of colonial rule developed a

misshapen postcolonial state and system of authority; or most commonly, the ethnic conflicts that riddle postcolonial regimes are the result of poorly drawn borders by colonial powers. Interestingly, Memmi does not simply reject these perspectives. He points out for example, “The presidents of the new republics generally mimic what is most arbitrary about the colonial power,” acknowledging a continuing legacy of colonialism (60).

But Memmi believes that all too frequently the corrupt rulers of postcolonial regimes use narratives of colonial legacies as diversions or excuses for their own ill intentions. He doesn’t want to discard the inquiry into colonial residues as much as supplement them:

Without underestimating the role of its relations with its global partners, or the rise to power of the American empire, which took over where the colonizers left off, it would be more useful to inquire into the internal causes of this stagnation. (65)

Early in the text, Memmi presents the term “dolorism” to try and encapsulate the position of the decolonized: “Dolorism is a natural tendency to exaggerate one’s pains and attribute them to another” (19). Anticolonialism was supposed to be about recovering agency by destroying the social roles created by colonialism, but Memmi is infuriated by the resurrection of irresponsibility on the part of “the decolonized” and their leaders. The decolonized continues to think of himself as powerless, thereby averting responsibility for the present and future. (The decolonized is always a him and not a her, but more on that below.) He argues that perceptions of the world and its inequalities that emphasize the continued legacy of colonialism perpetuate dependence, helplessness, lethargy, and ultimately violence.

He decided to write *Decolonization and the Decolonized* because he thinks that as long as the sources of postcolonial difficulties are misapprehended, they will not be overcome. There are two main preoccupations in *Decolonization and the Decolonized*: corruption and fundamentalism. He fingers corruption in postcolonial regimes rather than the legacies of the colonizers as the primary source of continued poverty and political oppression. By emphasizing the greed, complicity and incompetence of postcolonial rulers, Memmi locates himself in the tradition of social critics who point out the complicity of leaders in the decimation of their own people.

Memmi provides an interesting alternative to arguments that see Islamic fundamentalism as a response to neoimperialism and globalization. Fundamentalism is presented as a corollary to corruption in postcolonial regimes. Corruption stifles economic development and kills political freedom. Tyrannical leaders disregard the lives of their own citizens, and soon the decolonized has little security, no prospects, and low self-regard.

Is there a choice between tyranny and permanent disorder? What can be done in the face of an apparently incurable illness, other than to resign oneself to it or flee? Faced with a dead-end future, the decolonized dream of escape. (68)

The decolonized escape into fundamentalism and the dream of a past integrity and purity, which is then expressed as fury. Or they decide to immigrate, often to the country of the former colonizer whose language and culture is most familiar. These two interlocking stories present the cast of characters that populate *Decolonization and the Decolonized*: the tyrant, the former colonizer, and then variations of the decolonized who appears as the immigrant, the fundamentalist and the terrorist.

Memmi sets out in this book to make his readers uncomfortable, one of the more noble goals of political philosophy. The critical responses to the text demonstrate that he certainly succeeded. But why have people disliked this book so much? Memmi suggests that the difficult, even stony, reception his book has received is due to the fact that it presents a truth that we are not ready to accept. However, I think the answer lies in his statement that it is much more difficult to be a writer in an era of decolonization than an age of colonialism. In short, Memmi's recent work helps us to understand why a contemporary companion volume to *The Colonizer and the Colonized* cannot be written. The tools and perspectives that helped achieve a new understanding of colonial power relations do not illuminate postcolonial power relations.

## Critical Response

In the Afterword to *Decolonization and the Decolonized*, Memmi makes his own observations about its reception in France and elsewhere. First he notes the lack of response from the group he characterizes as the ex-colonized: "...among my readers the ex-colonized and their descendants were apparently not scandalized, not even surprised by my project. On the contrary, it was as if they were expecting it." Media aimed at France's immigrant communities have given the argument a "generous and courteous" reading (145). On the other hand, the media of the former colonizer have, in his view, silenced the book. While they noted its publication, little has been made of its substance, and no critical response to the Memmi's arguments about decolonization has occurred. He asserts, "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" (148). Memmi believes he has delivered the difficult truth, which no one wants to confront.

On the face of it, this rationalization makes little sense. Why would the "ex-colonized" be willing to take his criticism of their inability to integrate in

French society, the decline of their home countries, and the failure of the decolonization process with little comment? And wouldn't the former colonizers be more than happy to shift blame onto the shoulders of corrupt leaders and immigrants, away from questions about neocolonialism and the long-term difficulties resulting from the colonial era?

Perhaps Memmi's audience is different from who he imagines it to be. One can imagine policy makers, such as lawmakers who voted to outlaw wearing burqas and niqabs in France finding satisfaction in his arguments. He might have been imagining influencing that elusive "public opinion" or even leaders who would decide upon debt forgiveness and development initiatives. However, his natural audience is academics and leftists familiar with the critique of colonial power and the colonial era, and the book particularly disappoints those readers.

A reminder of the primary lessons of *The Colonizer and the Colonized* will help establish why the *Decolonization and the Decolonized* would find a poor reception with the same audience. Memmi presents a structural analysis of power relations, encouraging us to look beyond the morals, beliefs and proclivities of the individuals involved to see larger systematic effects of the global world order. Even if one was a colonizer who wanted to uplift and educate, one's participation in the system made one a colonizer. One cannot separate colonizers into the good (missionaries starting schools) and bad (diamond mine owners who enslaved children). Nor can one point to colonial subjects who were complicit and those who were not. Individual agency is to some extent beside the point. Second, Memmi points out that even though the colonial order is based upon a binary opposition between the colonizer and the colonized that is reinforced through educational, spatial, racial and national segregation, the two roles are inextricably connected. The colonial order produces both the colonized and the colonizer. Taking the argument of *The Colonizer and the Colonized* seriously means that one regards the notion of individual agency with suspicion and sees power and identity as relational. In other words, the analysis of power contained in Memmi's earlier work would naturally make one wary of the distinct categories and assumptions contained in Memmi's work about "the decolonized."

Many of the reviews start with an endorsement of his earlier work, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, and then proceed to excoriate his recent work. To be precise, the critical responses to *Decolonization and the Decolonized* level three interrelated charges against the book, questioning its method, the author's relationship to his subject, and finally the ethical relationship between the book and the world it attempts to describe. It seems to me that these are the issues that are at the core of social criticism and always have been. Revisiting these issues in relation to Memmi's latest work can thus help us to consider how the work of criticism can assist decolonization today.

## Method

Memmi's representation of characters in the world's political drama is the strongest resemblance between *Decolonization and the Decolonized* and *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. The figures that animate these two works-- "the colonized", "the colonizer", "the decolonized" and "the immigrant"--have no individual personalities, instead their actions and thoughts become allegorical, as they represent a social and political position above all. Just as Bertolt Brecht sought to encourage identification and investment through allegorical figures, Memmi develops generalized characters so his readers can identify themselves, their neighbors, their family members, and even their enemies in the roles. One of the primary messages of *The Colonizer and the Colonized* was that colonialism robs people of their particularity and constrains their actions and self-perceptions to such an extent that human beings become reduced to playing roles in scripts. Hence, the emphasis on positionality as opposed to individual agency is appropriate for the subject. In *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Memmi argues that "colonial relations do not stem from individual goodwill or actions; they exist before the colonizer's arrival or his birth, and whether he accepts or rejects them matters little" (38). However, today this same generality can grate upon the reader; we understand the social construction of identity, and criticism is instead supposed to create spaces outside of such readily available roles.

In fact, recent readers have started to object to Memmi's characters in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. Most notably, Earthscan issued a new edition of this work in 2003 with an unusually critical introduction by Nadine Gordimer. Gordimer railed against Memmi's dismissal of anti-colonial Europeans, pointing to her own experience in South Africa as evidence that alliances do matter in overturning a colonial regime and helping to establish a postcolonial one.

Michael Neocosmos's review of *Decolonization* asserts that the portraits in *The Colonizer and the Colonized* were illuminating, but now they are simply stereotypes. Neocosmos observes:

The problem with portraits is that they search for an essence; once discovered that 'essence' is presumed to represent the whole of the phenomenon. But essences can also collapse into a stereotype, providing simplistic answers, if not also vulgar prejudices.<sup>5</sup>

Neocosmos says these portraits become a stereotype because they exist without specificity and any historical context. This claim could also be applied to *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, but Neocosmos curiously avoids doing so. Instead, it seems the real source of his discomfort is that Memmi no longer approaches his characters with the same grace and sympathy and identification:

[W]hereas in the first work Memmi was writing from the point of view of one who had experienced the colonial situation from within, he now clearly writes from the perspective of a European commenting from afar. It is as if the diaspora experience has led to such a process of acculturation that the author has lost the capacity to think through the lenses that made his initial book such a success.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, because Memmi is now an outsider, he cannot use the same method. If this is the case, it is the critic's position vis a vis his subject, more than his method of exposition, that matters.

## The Critic

Memmi presented his status as a Tunisian Jew as a benefit in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. Separated from other Tunisians, he was not fully encapsulated by the position of either colonizer or colonized, even though he grew up in a society structured by that binary. In his Preface to the text, he admits that he was able to write the role of both colonizer and colonized from his personal experience as a Tunisian Jew: "Here is a confession I have never made before: I know the position of the colonizer from the inside almost as well as I know the colonized" (xiii). His position as "other" within a colonial society gave him unique psychological access to both of the roles that he outlined, but also gave him sympathy for the plight of those unable to control the terms of their identity. He points out that Jews were "one small notch above the Moslem on the pyramid which is the basis of all colonial societies" (xiv). In wanting to oppose the position of the colonized, he chose to relinquish the small advantages afforded him by the colonizer. Even though Memmi identifies with the characters he describes in this book, he is not one of them. This is because he views himself as an unusual product of the same world.

Though his Jewish identity helped him to write *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, it has become a source of tension between Memmi and his anticolonial readers in the years since. As Lisa Lieberman points out, "Critics of Zionism have been applying the lessons of *The Colonizer and the Colonized* to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since the 1970's, although Memmi has always resisted this analogy."<sup>7</sup> Memmi has supported the state of Israel and its actions consistently, leading to a general skepticism about his progressive credentials.

More importantly, both Lisa Lieberman and Joan Cocks bring up the possibility that Memmi's political commitments might be distorting his self-recognition and hence his critical insight. Lisa Lieberman laments Memmi's loss of honesty and its impact upon his philosophy in her review:

Memmi's willingness to turn himself inside out, if need be, in order to illuminate some larger social dilemma, be it colonialism, racism, sexism, or anti-Semitism, is not in evidence in this book. Had he been able to engage in the same unflinchingly honest self-analysis as he exhibited in his earlier works, *Decolonization and the Decolonized* might have provided its readers with insights no less stunning.<sup>8</sup>

If the critic is not clear about where she stands in her world, how can she even begin to recognize her own potentially distorting assumptions and beliefs?

Joan Cocks's work on Memmi also suggests why he might have so little sympathy for the decolonized. Turning to *The Colonizer and the Colonized* she identifies Memmi with his own description of the "Nero Complex": the psychology of someone who has usurped power and who seeks legitimacy for his new privilege.

The Nero figure seeks absolution by rewriting history, extinguishing memories, glorifying his own merits, harping on the faults of the group he usurps and physically crushing that group to prevent it from demanding recognition of its humanity from him. But the more he oppresses, the more illegitimate he becomes in his own eyes and the more he hates his victim for turning him into a tyrant.<sup>9</sup>

This is a more nuanced description of why oppression begets more oppression. Of course, Memmi is not exactly a tyrant oppressing the decolonized, but there are two points worth making here. Could it be that Memmi is angry at the decolonized for casting moral aspersions on his relative privilege as a professor in a French university? He does not want to play the role of the oppressor, but if he is part of this global framework, what else could he be given their relative disadvantage? Perhaps he is angry that their continued struggles point to his position as insider in the geopolitical framework. Second, why didn't Memmi consider the Nero Complex in his exploration of the corruption of many postcolonial rulers? Why assume that the colonial past has no impact upon their psychology and actions?

Memmi adopts the position of outsider in *Decolonization and the Decolonized*. This is somewhat surprising since Memmi is a Tunisian who has resettled in France. Since one of the characters is the immigrant who leaves his native country searching for freedom in the country of his former colonizer, one might expect him to sympathize with this position. But echoing the strategy of *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Memmi does not occupy any of the characters that he describes. On the one hand, you can say that this is absolutely the correct position for Memmi to take. Given the

arguments advanced by Gyatri Spivak in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, for instance, it would be very dangerous for a sociology professor who has been living in Paris for forty years to presume to speak on behalf of the average immigrant in France. Equally preposterous would be his speaking as a Tunisian. It is far better that he speaks as an outside observer. On the other hand, a close reading of the book would lead one to conclude that the position of outside observer is not exactly neutral (could it ever be?).

He does use the word “we” occasionally. Tellingly, Memmi’s “we” is not those who are involved in decolonization, instead “we” has become universal. Towards the end of the book, he includes one passage of extended reflection on what “we” should do. He elaborates:

By ‘we’ I mean all the inhabitants of the planet, for this question affects all of us, former oppressors, formerly oppressed, and even those who believe they remain outside history. (128)

Memmi argues that travel, technology and economy have made all inhabitants of the planet newly interdependent, and therefore the condition of all peoples must concern us. This is a form of universal humanism, but what is remarkable is his notion that this kind of interdependence is new, brought to us by globalization, not colonialism. His “we” is produced, as we become part of the global market, the unified world of Thomas Friedman, not the interpenetration of consciousness described by Frantz Fanon. Memmi also uses the word “we” in the text when he parrots the shocked view of the “average” news consumer. Memmi’s “we” is universal, but the positions he is dissecting in the book are particular. He argues that “we” are impacted by “their” plight. His encouragement that “we” should care is what most signals that he still sees the decolonized as standing outside of generalized humanity.

All of this is to say that Memmi’s position as a critic is precarious, but indeed, so is virtually everyone else’s. And this may be one of the reasons it is difficult to find a very robust genre of social criticism today that is aimed at solving global inequalities, corruption, and political violence. There are many excellent books that expose and describe these phenomena, rousing our indignation, that end with some suggestions for political and personal action. But, writers that seek to alter our consciousness and create affiliations where none existed previously are few.

## Text/World

The last issue here is the relationship between the text and the world. One of the other repeated criticisms of Memmi’s *Decolonization* is that it simply gets the world wrong. For instance, Françoise Verges claims that Memmi “ignores” global economics (a charge that is not entirely true), but she is correct that “he does not see central aspects of current brutality” in its

economic forms.<sup>10</sup> Multiple reviews point out that he paints too broad of strokes, assuming that the situations of the decolonized in places as disparate as Paraguay, Sierra Leone and Vietnam can be captured by a single ideal type. Joana Pinto asks, “Can we talk about all these countries and all these ethnic groups from a remote point of view, so far away that we reach the point where we see there no longer is any difference at all?”<sup>11</sup> Yet another critic says his characterizations of rulers as tyrants ignore the democratic processes that are in place, and his description of the lack of responsibility taken by the decolonized ignores the movements for social change that are occurring around the globe.<sup>12</sup>

If Memmi’s generalizations about the colonized helped to fuel a world wide anticolonial struggle, why are they insufficient for a similarly pervasive postcolonial political landscape? Seeing colonialism as a system which needed to be dismantled in order to make choice available was a catalyzing vision in the 1950’s and 1960’s. Megan Vaughan argued in 2006, “*The Coloniser and the Colonized* is a book of its time” implying that it is not a book of *our* times.<sup>13</sup> Memmi was pleading for an inclusive humanism in the 1950’s that would overturn the explicitly racist structure of global politics. Today, with a formally inclusive international framework that presumably has embraced human rights, universal humanism is the song of the conquerers. Opposing current inequalities means adopting an alternative language.

Edward Said’s essay “Traveling Theory” broached this issue in 1983, when he observed that theory is created out of a specific historical juncture, and that often, when theories reappear in other contexts, they lack the force or insight that they initially had.<sup>14</sup> In a later re-evaluation of this argument, Said decided that the withering of a theory through travel was not inevitable. He offered a reading of Fanon’s adoption of Hegelian dialectics and Lukács’ theory of reification to demonstrate that theory can also become reinvigorated by traveling in time and/or space.<sup>15</sup> He concluded that a theory could become either more or less powerful when it appears in a different context. This is relevant because Memmi’s understands *Decolonization and the Decolonized* as an update of his earlier work and uses the same theoretical paradigm, transported across half a century. Because many patterns of inequality persist, he assumed that the same paradigm holds.

The relationship of theory and the world is at stake here. If change is what is desired, for the theorist the issue is what will allow her to generate that change. One needs to look at the world to determine what kinds of theories might be revolutionary in a given context. In the era of colonization, we needed theories to help break through the accepted “facts” of the colonial encounter that were generated by the colonizing force. These theories also illuminated the interaction between self-conceptions and social contexts. For instance, the actions of colonialism were accompanied by

theories of civilizational advance. Anticolonial theorists could challenge imperialism based on its own rhetoric and the self-conception of the colonizers. Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* questioned the very existence of English civilization; Aimé Césaire simply asked, "Colonization and civilization?"<sup>16</sup> Just as the Césaires used surrealism in their critiques of colonialism to enable their audiences to see the world anew, so anticolonial theory was intended to provide a new interpretation of the fact of European superiority.<sup>17</sup>

But is this same analysis going to affect change in the postcolonial era? A pressing question is whether anticolonial analysis requires that we still take the positions of colonizer and colonized as given, or if we should be trying to transcend them. The issue is both theoretical and historical. Has the world changed enough that these categories are no longer salient? Does using them start to prevent change by dragging the analytical lenses of the past into the present and hence the future? Being able to see through the claims of colonialism does not necessarily end it. There are no satisfactory answers to these questions yet, only a great deal of thought provoking work still to be done.<sup>18</sup> But this is precisely the set of rocks that shipwrecks Memmi's project in *Decolonization and the Decolonized*. He is bitterly disappointed that the dichotomy of former colonizer and formerly colonized seems to resonate and that dependence and inequality have not been overcome. Yet he uses the same theoretical paradigm as he developed fifty years ago by assuming essentialized positions for his characters and presenting them as opposing protagonists in a continuing drama. But what if, as we have suggested, the theory that once illuminated the relations of coloniality now obfuscates the relations of decolonization?

## Power and Agency in an Era of Decolonization

The division between the ex-participants in the system of colonialism and the universal "we" is problematic from a postcolonial perspective on power as well. There is no country on the earth that has not been impacted by the colonial practices of the last three centuries. Systems of knowledge, global trade, cultural presentation, law and language are just a few areas of inquiry that have been explored in relation to colonial history. There is no "outside" of the international system of domination. Everyone would be able to see himself or herself as a participant in a colonial world if only they know how to look critically.

Admittedly, this insight provides much difficulty for the social critic. If the entire world today is properly understood as postcolonial, how can one possibly make sense of it? If the ideological and systemic structures of domination encompass everything we can see, how can we ever really gain the necessary perspective to understand their operations? This is why Said's linkage of Lukacs' notion of reification and colonialism is worth further consideration. Has this understanding of postcolonialism become yet another form of universalism, imposing a framework that obfuscates the

differences of history and character? This is why monographic works that detail particular colonial encounters, histories, and figures are greeted with much less trepidation than the kind of general analyses offered by earlier anti-imperialist writers such as Césaire, Fanon and Memmi. Now the task is to see colonialism everywhere, but only in its particularities.

As in analyses of all hegemonic systems, the problem of agency also becomes paramount. Memmi's earlier work on colonialism made the issue of individual agency less important. However, capturing agency has always been the central goal of movements of decolonization.<sup>19</sup> The predominant model of agency is largely individualistic, and is exactly the conceptualization of freedom that postcolonial theorists have tried to put into question. Perhaps postcolonial theory in some way runs at odds with the political aspirations of decolonization.

Memmi's *Decolonization and the Decolonized* repeatedly demonstrates this troubled relationship with agency. He continues to see individual perceptions and behaviors as constrained by the environment, yet he also wants to urge individual responsibility.

Any totalization is a mistake and unjust, but there are objective conditions that force themselves upon nearly all members of a group. Even though they deny it or are not fully conscious of it, they are aware of it in their thoughts and in their actions. (91)

While it might be argued that bringing awareness to the objective conditions would allow one to respond differently, Memmi dismisses this possibility. "[T]he decolonized, especially an immigrant, has no choice other than to live out the conflicts that arise from immersion in another culture" (106). How then, are the decolonized supposed to act differently? Memmi joins an excellent company of critics who also try to find territory between hegemony and individual agency, yet he does too little to acknowledge the difficulty in *Decolonization and the Decolonized*.

Similarly, it is unclear whether what Memmi calls "the Arab world" is an international force in its own right or simply subject to some sort of Hegelian *telos*. Sometimes it seems there is no point in resisting European and American dominance as the tide of history: "The Arab world has still not found or has not wanted to consider, the transformations that would enable it to adapt to the modern world, which it cannot help but absorb" (65). At other points, he laments the dynamics put into place by terrorism, which produce "a highly damaging representation of Arab-Muslim society." "Rather than relieving its suffering, it maintains it within a vicious circle; uncontrolled violence arouses worldwide hostility, and this hostility increases suffering." (66) Memmi urges the decolonized to "seize freedom", but what this means to him is accepting capitalist economic development, secularism, and the existing international juridical-legal order.

How Memmi deploys gender in this argument suggests he too may be subject to social forces of which he is not fully aware. In order to emphasize this form of freedom as salutary rather than hegemonic, he points to the need to emancipate the women who have been suffering under the insecurities of the decolonized. As I mentioned earlier, the decolonized is always referred to as a “he”, allowing Memmi to repeatedly imply that women have not yet been decolonized. But now, women in former colonial countries are subject to new tyrants, new humiliations passed on by the fundamentalists and immigrant patriarchs who wish to segregate their wives and daughters in order to express their resentment of the dominant culture. Memmi calls the Hijab “a portable ghetto” (88). By gendering “the decolonized” as male, he is able to make him both victim and victimizer, an obstacle to be overcome in the interest of the freedom of those even more dispossessed. Obviously, the resonance with colonial exhortations to free women around the world is evident. But more subtly, you can see how gendering the decolonized allows him to negotiate the difficulties of agency and social forces. If the decolonized is male, then he must have the power of self-determination at some level.

## Conclusion

In July 2007 Nicolas Sarkozy gave a speech at the University of Dakar that addressed the legacy of colonialism and Africa’s future. There was a curious resonance between some of Sarkozy’s speech and Memmi’s book. Like Memmi and his “decolonized”, Sarkozy urged the African to full-fledged agency, to make his own history.

The tragedy of Africa is that the African has not fully entered into history. The African peasant, who for thousands of years has lived according to the seasons, whose life ideal was to be in harmony with nature, only knew the eternal renewal of time, rhythmized by the endless repetition of the same gestures and the same words.

In this imaginary world where everything starts over and over again there is no place for human adventure or for the idea of progress. In this universe where nature commands all, man escapes from the anguish of history that torments modern man, but he rests immobile in the centre of a static order where everything seems to have been written beforehand. This man (the traditional African) never launched himself towards the future. The idea never came to him to get out of this repetition and to invent his own destiny. The problem of Africa, and allow a friend of Africa to say it, is to be found here. Africa’s challenge is to enter to a greater extent into history. To

take from it the energy, the force, the desire, the willingness to listen and to espouse its own history.<sup>20</sup>

How can we interpret the resonance between Sarkozy's speech and Memmi's book? Sarkozy's speech, as Achille Mbembe has pointed out, takes directly from the French colonial script. "In all his 'candor' and 'sincerity', Nicholas Sarkozy openly revealed what, until now, went unspoken; that is in both form and content, the intellectual framework underlying France's policy to Africa literally dates back to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century."<sup>21</sup> Memmi, while he may have adopted many of the normative positions of his adopted France, would certainly not position himself as the colonizer, either.

Sarkozy's speech and Memmi's work have a number of illustrative similarities: first the assumption of a notion of universal progress, a trajectory of history that Africa still has not entered. Second, the position of an outsider who serves to diagnose what ails the continent. While many postcolonial theorists would rightly point to both the assumption of universal progress and the totalizing of subjectivity as problematic, there is another issue that deserves recognition as well.

History matters above all. Both Memmi and Sarkozy acknowledge the past of colonialism but they do not position themselves in relation to that past. Instead, they take up the position of outsider, which then leads to a terrible and unforgivable flaw. They do not examine and acknowledge the relationship between their own era and what has happened before. Both of them believe in ideologies of progress, assuming that the proper course of history means that the past and all of its mistakes are transcended, erased or replaced by the flowering of the present. Given this viewpoint, Memmi and Sarkozy do not exhibit a clear understanding that the world they currently live in has been impacted by colonialism; in short, they are not-- nor could they ever be--outsiders.

Second, both of them claim that the decolonized has yet to act, yet to take up the mantle of agency. This erases the national liberation movements and their importance. It cannot be denied that power inequalities persist, that postcolonial freedom still seems a distant horizon and that the world has not changed enough. While this may be true, one cannot exhort more action by denying actions that have already occurred. It is one thing to say that decolonization is as yet incomplete but quite another to say that Africa stands outside history. The latter statement tries to obliterate political events that changed the world, ending the era of formal colonialism and leading us towards this admittedly confused state.

It may be tempting to erase some of the ambiguities of domination, repression, triumph and rage that constitute the postcolonial political landscape. Erasing these ambiguities only orients us backwards in time, as

demonstrated by Sarkozy's speech in Senegal. But, postcolonial criticism needs to be as messy as the world it dissects.

In the end, the fact that Sarkozy and Memmi are telling similar stories shows that Memmi started from the wrong presupposition. Remember that he overcame his reluctance to write the book because he thought that the world was telling the wrong story about decolonization. But to say that decolonization has not been achieved is not the same as to say that it has not been started. Decolonization will not be simple, and it will not be achieved outside of the relational dynamics of power and powerlessness that Memmi attempted to describe in *Decolonization*. Whether Memmi has become "French" is irrelevant; what matters is that he is speaking the same truth as those in power.

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<sup>1</sup> Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized* was translated by Howard Greenfield (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), but it was originally published under the title *Portrait du Colonisé precede du Portrait du Colonisateur* (Correa: Editions Buchet/Chastel, 1957). *Decolonization and the Decolonized*, trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). References to both works are subsequently provided in the text. Also, I would like to thank Kevin Bundy, Joan Cocks, John Zarobell and the reviewers for the journal for their comments on this essay.

<sup>2</sup> For more discussion of anti-imperialist movements, see Margaret Kohn and Keally McBride, *Political Theories of Decolonization: Postcolonialism and the Problem of Foundations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Vijay Prasad, *The Darker Nations: A Peoples History of the Third World* (New York: The New Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Joan Cocks, "Jewish Nationalism and the Question of Palestine," *Interventions* 8, no. 1 (2006): 29.

<sup>4</sup> Cocks, "Jewish Nationalism," 29.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Neocosmos, "Decolonization and the Decolonized (review)," *African Studies Review* 50, no. 3 (Dec. 2007): 189-190.

<sup>6</sup> Neocosmos, "Decolonization and the Decolonized," 189.

- <sup>7</sup> Lisa Lieberman, "Albert Memmi's About-Face," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 46, no. 3 (Summer 2007): 506.
- <sup>8</sup> Lieberman, "Albert Memmi's About-Face," 508.
- <sup>9</sup> Cocks, "Jewish Nationalism," 33.
- <sup>10</sup> Françoise Vergès, "Decolonization and the Decolonized (review)," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 8, no. 3 (Winter 2007).
- <sup>11</sup> Joana Plaza Pinto, "Book Review Albert Memmi: Decolonization and the Decolonized," *Discourse & Society* 19, no. 4 (July 2008): 559.
- <sup>12</sup> See Richard Rathbone, "Assertion Rather than Evidence," *Journal of African History* 48 (2007): 152-153.
- <sup>13</sup> Megan Vaughan, "Liminal," *The London Review of Books* 28, no. 6 (March 2006): 15-16.
- <sup>14</sup> Edward Said, "Traveling Theory" in *The World, the Text and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 226-247.
- <sup>15</sup> Edward Said, "Traveling Theory Reconsidered" in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 436-452.
- <sup>16</sup> See "Hind Swaraj" in *The Penguin Gandhi Reader*, ed. Rudrangshu Mukherjee (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 1-66. And Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 32.
- <sup>17</sup> For a more complete discussion of surrealism and anti-colonial thought and many of the other themes in this article, see Margaret Kohn and Keally McBride, "Postcolonial Political Theory and the Problem of Foundations" in *Political Theories of Decolonization*.
- <sup>18</sup> One well-known discussion on these themes is Anne McClintock's "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term 'Postcolonialism'" *Social Text* 31/32 (1992): 84-98. See also Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) and Dipesh Chakrabarty,

*Provincializing Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) for discussions of the relationship of anticolonial theorizing to history and political change.

<sup>19</sup> For more discussion of the problem of self-determination, see Kohn and McBride, “Self-Determination Reconsidered: Revolutions of Decolonization and Postcolonial Citizenship” in *Political Theories of Decolonization*.

<sup>20</sup> The English translation of this speech can be found at:  
[http://www.africaresource.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=437:the-unofficial-english-translation-of-sarkozys-speech&catid=36:essays-a-discussions&Itemid=346](http://www.africaresource.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=437:the-unofficial-english-translation-of-sarkozys-speech&catid=36:essays-a-discussions&Itemid=346)

<sup>21</sup> Achille Mbembe, “Nicholas Sarkozy’s Africa,” trans. Melissa Thackway. August 8, 2007. Accessed on 10/4/2011 at <http://www.africaresource.com>.