

CHAPTER FIVE

Albert Memmi

ZIONISM AS NATIONAL LIBERATION

A JEW. AN ARAB. AN AFRICAN. A nationalist. An internationalist. A secularist. A socialist. An anti-colonialist. A Zionist. Few people combine the identities, both inherited and chosen, of Albert Memmi. He not only proudly owned these seemingly disparate affinities but insisted that, though their relationships to each other might sometimes be thorny, they were never inherently antagonistic. His life's aim was to integrate them.

Memmi's writings, which span more than six decades, grapple in bold and original ways with the entangled questions of Jewish identity, social justice, anti-colonialism, and Zionism. Most striking was his ability to reject the either/or polarities of Arab *or* Jew, socialism *or* Zionism, national liberation *or* internationalism. This capacity grew, I believe, out of psychological and moral intuitions as much as political insight. Memmi confronted the catastrophic nature of Jewish history, yet he never retreated into Maxime Rodinson's fantasy of assimilation. He was a militant anti-colonialist, yet he decried the failures of the Third World's post-independence regimes. He was a devoted leftist, yet he sharply reproached the Left's recurring failure to understand the nature of Jewish oppression and the Zionist movement. And far more than Hannah Arendt, Isaac Deutscher, or Rodinson, Memmi understood the urgent necessity and innate dignity of the twentieth century's national-independence movements. Yet he was more astute in recognizing their limitations and dangers.

Throughout all this—throughout a long life of activism, teaching, and engaged writing—Memmi's Zionism remained a proud part of his allegiances, even after Israel became a detested outcast on the left. Memmi turned Rodinson's anti-Zionism on its head. Whereas Rodinson believed that socialist solidarity negated Zionism, Memmi argued that Zionism, as the national liberation movement of an oppressed people, *demand*ed the Left's support.

Much of Memmi's work was devoted to exploring the subjective aspects of oppression; in addition to being a political essayist, he was a novelist and poet. He never underestimated the importance of psychology and culture. In a 1996 interview, he said that while Marx was right to stress objective class relations, economic oppression was only the beginning of the human story: "There are always things in the cultural domain that can't be accounted for in strictly economic terms. People don't buy tickets to go to the movies because they have the money but because they need to dream."¹

Memmi was interested in people, especially oppressed people (the colonized, the proletariat, the poor, immigrants, Jews, blacks, women, himself) as they were: stunted, conflicted, sometimes profoundly misguided—and as they might become. He was an Enlightenment humanist to his core. He wrote in one of his early works, "Either one accepts all the suffering or one rejects it all."²

Rather than lean on "scientific" Marxism, Albert Memmi used his life experiences and emotional struggles to lay the foundation of the political ideas he developed. Paradoxically, though, his views on Jewish oppression and the solutions to it were based on material reality more than those of committed Marxists like Rodinson and Deutscher. Memmi's early years were an education in exclusion; one critic described his journey "from the Jewish ghetto of his childhood to the bourgeois Jewish school where he learned he was poor, to the French lycée where he learned he was a 'native,' to the Sorbonne where he learned he was a Jew."³ And yet, though schooled in "otherness," Memmi became the most inclusive of men.

He was born in 1920 to a Jewish family in Tunisia, which was then under French rule. Memmi's mother was an illiterate Berber Jew; his father, a Jew of Italian-Tunisian stock, was a harness-maker, "somewhat pious," Memmi remembered; "as were all those men of his trade."⁴ The

Memmis were poor and lived just outside Tunis's Jewish ghetto. Like Deutscher, Memmi rebelled against religious tradition, became an atheist, and had deeply mixed feelings about the Jewish world of his childhood. That world would come to an abrupt end after two thousand years of existence, due not to the Shoah but to Tunisian independence.

Like Rodinson and Deutscher, young Albert was intellectually gifted. He attended a yeshiva, an Alliance Israélite school, and a French lycée; his languages were Judeo-Arabic, Hebrew, and French. In Memmi's view, there was nothing picturesque about the ghetto: It was a place of "physiological poverty, undernourishment, syphilis, tuberculosis, mental illness . . . an every-day, all-day historical catastrophe."⁵ Poverty led a preadolescent Albert to an early, perverse form of class consciousness. "As young Zionists we were so furiously angry at the rich German Jews that we received the announcement of their early tragedies [under the Nazis] rather coldly and, I must confess, almost with satisfaction."⁶

But the ghetto was also a world of solidity and belonging—the very antithesis of rootless cosmopolitanism. Memmi would recall the comfort of its "collective presence," which embodied "a kind of common soul." It was Jewish culture, not the Jewish religion, that he treasured; in fact, he castigated Judaism as "the least comfortable religion there is . . . narrow, mistrustful, fiercely opposed to any innovation." Yet this did not translate into scorn for his religious forebears or for observant Jews; unlike Rodinson, Memmi believed that "one always feels a close kinship with one's own people, even if they repel you."⁷

Though Memmi often described the Jewish condition as one of almost unrelieved estrangement and torment, he was surprised when, arriving in Paris after World War II, he discovered that Jewish-French intellectuals had little sense of a positive Jewish past; this alienation struck him as "utterly ridiculous." In contrast, he considered himself "heir to a powerful tradition and culture"—although, as a free thinker, "that has not prevented me . . . from rebelling frequently against the supremacy of the Tribe, from mocking the words of the ancients." His sense of the relationship between a secular Jewish identity and the Jewish religious past was more dialectical than Deutscher's. For Memmi, secularism incorporated rather than precluded strong ties to Jewish tradition. "In debating against the written and the oral word, I nevertheless am nourished by it," he wrote. "Though I can make fun of details, at heart I

do not find it ridiculous to belong to the 'People of the Book.' ”⁸ Staunch atheism and a grounded Jewish identity were not at war. Unlike Rodinson and Deutscher, Albert Memmi did not aspire to become a non-Jewish Jew.

The social and political position of Tunisian Jews was complex. “We were not even citizens,” Memmi recalled. “But, after all, very few people were.” Physically and culturally, poor Jews were close to their Muslim neighbors. But Jewish Tunisians were a tiny minority, and in many ways a powerless one. “Even the most underprivileged” Arab, Memmi wrote, “feels in a position to despise and insult the Jew.”⁹ With shame, Memmi remembered “the extraordinarily fearful timidity of our community in Tunis. We were taught to be nice to everyone—the French who were in power, the Arabs who were in the majority”; with no citizenship or real political power of their own, Jews were “emasculated, castrated.”¹⁰ Almost inevitably, the Jewish community looked to the French for protection—though not always successfully, as they would discover at great cost during the Vichy period. Tunisian Jews were colonizers and colonized, advantaged and disadvantaged. Memmi described himself as “a sort of half-breed of colonization, understanding everyone because I belonged completely to no one.”¹¹

Memmi was a preteen Zionist at a time when the movement seemed at best a utopian adventure and at worst a dangerous fantasy. His education in Zionist youth organizations included “tossing grenades” and learning “the doctrines and precepts of revolutionary action. . . . On Sundays, we would set out for the country, pretending to be Israeli pioneers. We didn’t even forget to imitate the internal bickering of the distant, young national movement.” His adolescence corresponded to a particularly hopeful time in world politics, and he remembered the year 1936 with special affection: “The entire world seemed to invite me to a marvelous wedding celebration.” Though fascism was on the rise, the Popular Front had won the French elections, and in Tunisia there were “joyous open-air meetings” in which “we rubbed elbows with Arab peddlars, Sicilian bricklayers and French railroad workers, one and all dazzled by these new feelings of brotherhood. In Spain, however, the war was beginning, never to end. Yet . . . we cried out joyously: ‘No pasarán!’ ”¹² It was a perilous moment, but a confident one. That “they shall not pass” was a certainty.

In this atmosphere, a distinct Jewish identity seemed self-absorbed, cumbersome, and embarrassing. “I no longer wanted to be that invalid called a Jew, mostly because I wanted to be a man; and because I wanted

to join with all men to reconquer the humanity which was denied me.”¹³ Memmi became an ardent Francophile, in love with French culture and republican principles. “After all, it was they who had invented the remedies after the ills: equality after domination, socialism after exploitation.” Zionism ceased to matter: “I thought no more about Palestine. . . . ‘The Jewish problem’ had been diluted with the honey of that universal embrace.” Memmi’s anti-nationalism was part of a more general rejection of all presumably bourgeois attitudes and institutions, common to young leftists of his time (and ours). Already, he could detect the death “of religions, families and nations. We had nothing but anger, scorn and irony for the die-hards of history who clung to those residues.”¹⁴ Energetic hope and energetic contempt braided together.

In 1939, Memmi graduated from his French lycée in Tunis, winning the country’s top philosophy prize. He enrolled at the University of Algiers, but his time there was brief. With the outbreak of war, he was expelled from Algeria and sent back to Tunisia, which was then occupied by the Nazis and the Vichy French. Memmi was sent to a forced labor camp for Jews, from which he escaped; some of his fellow prisoners were deported to the death camps. After the war he finished his degree in Algiers, then moved to Paris for further study in philosophy at the Sorbonne. But here, too, as a Jew and North African, he found that he belonged to “them,” not “us.”

As with Deutscher, the war and the genocide dented Memmi’s faith in Western humanism. “The Europe we admired, respected and loved assumed strange faces: even France, democratic and fraternal, borrowed the face of Vichy.” And dented his faith, too, in a universal brotherhood into which Jews would be seamlessly integrated: “I had learned the harsh lesson that *my* destiny [as a Jew] did not necessarily coincide with the destiny of Europe.”¹⁵ But his basic convictions remained. Surely a new world, a world of dignity for all, would emerge from the ashes. In 1949, the Tunisian independence movement drew him back home.

Tunisia *was* home, and Memmi viewed the fight for its independence as his own. “How could I, who applauded so wildly the struggle for freedom of other peoples, have refused to help the Tunisians in whose midst I had lived since birth and who, in so many ways, were my own people? . . . Thus, having ceased to be a universalist, I gradually became . . . a Tunisian nationalist.”¹⁶ Memmi was a founding editor of the prominent pro-independence magazine *Jeune Afrique*, whose cultural pages he

edited for several years. He wrote that he fought for Arab independence “with my pen, and sometimes physically.”¹⁷

Alas, Memmi’s love for Tunisia was unrequited. The new state established Islam as the official religion, Arabized the education system, and quickly made it known that, as Memmi put it, “it preferred to do without” its Jews.¹⁸ Despite the Jews’ millennia-long presence in the country—“we were there before Christianity and long before Islam,” he protested—they were not viewed as genuine Tunisians.¹⁹ Following independence, a series of anti-Jewish decrees made it virtually impossible for poor Jews to make a living. Memmi’s hopes for a secular, multicultural republic of equal citizens were dashed. This rejection by his brothers felt deeply personal; it was not just a political wrong turn but an intimate, humiliating wound. An exodus of Tunisian Jews, most to Israel, some to France, ensued; an even larger group would leave after 1967.

The exclusionary measures stunned Memmi. “The ground we had thought to be so solid, was swept from under our feet,” he recalled. “We made the cruel discovery that . . . socially and historically we were nothing.”²⁰ But the impact on Left intellectuals and the poorer Jewish masses was quite different. In a trenchant 1962 essay called “Am I a Traitor?,” Memmi traced the surprising dialectic of Jewish participation in Tunisian independence. It was a *love* of France—of republicanism, secularism, political and civic freedoms—that prompted Jewish-Tunisian intellectuals to fight it. “By pushing their attachment to French ethical values to the limit . . . they became the adversaries of French colonization,” Memmi explained. “An excess of loyalty to France—to a certain image of France, the finest image,” transformed these young intellectuals into anti-colonial revolutionaries.²¹ Yet this very fealty to French ideals led them to misperceive the true nature of the independence movement. They assumed that a free Tunisia would model itself on a free France, and they therefore overlooked the liberation movement’s Islamic, Arab-nationalist, and culturally conservative aspects.

A chasm opened between the intellectuals and the people of the ghetto. It is not that the ghetto Jews—the poor, the pious, the unschooled—opposed Tunisian independence. On the contrary: “Inside the ghetto, it was not denied that the Moslems were justified in fighting for an end to Moslem misery.” But the uneducated shopkeepers and housewives saw what the intellectuals could not: that the end of French rule would not

result in an inclusive republic; that their Muslim neighbors regarded them as alien; that Jews would be endangered rather than liberated by the new government. In short, ordinary Tunisian Jews understood the injustice of French rule yet feared its end. “And—why not say it?—the ghetto was right. The intellectuals were self-deceived, blinded by their ethical aspirations.”²² This was a formative experience for Memmi; he would henceforth place himself between vanguardism and populism. Intellectuals might hold positions in advance of the majority, especially on questions like women’s rights, but they could not be deaf to the wisdom of the people they presumed to lead.

The Tunisian experience also taught Memmi the necessity of asserting a distinct Jewish position within an internationalist one. The mistakes of the Jewish-Tunisian intellectuals, he argued, stemmed from their insistence that they were *only* Tunisian, and from their confidence that their Muslim countrymen viewed them as such. Neither belief proved true. “The destiny of the Jew too often carries with it a hard nucleus that cannot be minimized,” Memmi reflected. “No historic duty toward other men should prevent our paying particular attention to our special difficulties.” Internationalism was a primary value, but not at the price of Jewish sacrifice or Jewish suicide. “Beyond the solidarity with all men, there exists a more humble and often less comfortable duty: to come to grips directly with their special destiny as Jews, without worrying too much about being called a traitor by anyone.”²³ Tunisia taught Memmi that Jewish identity could not be simply wished away—and that the wish itself was hazardous.

Upon independence, Tunisian Jews were in effect quickly transformed into pariahs. Unlike Arendt, Memmi did not revel in this role. “There may be some pride in that solitude and distance,” he wrote. “But I believe that the price for them is too high. Illegitimacy sharpens the mind, to be sure, but it is a very uncomfortable condition.” Still, he never regretted his participation in the Tunisian cause; no leftist, he argued, could fail to see the justice of the anti-colonial movements. And he was even somewhat forgiving of the rejection. Emerging states, Memmi observed, tend by their nature to be exclusive as they attempt to create a national identity, though this often bodes ill for the Jews. “It is in the very way in which new nations were born that differences became clear. . . . It is in the way that Tunisia became a nation like other nations that we [Jews] became, as we were everywhere else, a civic and national negativity.”²⁴

By the time Tunisia became independent in 1956, Memmi had concluded that he could not make a life there despite his championing of its freedom. He moved to Paris, where he remained for the rest of his life as a professor, novelist, and political writer. Soon after arriving in the capital, he visited an older Jewish writer and expressed his confusions about how to be a Jew, a Tunisian, and a French citizen. After listening to Memmi's anxieties, the older writer replied, " 'Well, keep it all; be everything at once.' " ²⁵ Keeping it all became Memmi's project.

In 1953, while working as a high school philosophy teacher in Tunis, Memmi published his first book, *The Pillar of Salt*. Albert Camus wrote the preface, and the novel won the prestigious Fénéon and Carthage prizes. Set in French-ruled Tunis and highly autobiographical, it is the bildungsroman of a poor, eager Jewish philosophy student named Alexandre Mordekhai Benillouche. The novel is a captivating mixture of tenderness and contempt, lyricism and harshness. It is also sensuously evocative. We can almost taste the piece of chocolate (a very small piece, because he is poor) that Alexandre stuffs into his bread; we can almost smell the clean ocean air of Tunis's beach. Alexandre's family is loving, his community protective, and his early years happy and safe. His is "a world of sweetness, all harmony and perfume." ²⁶ Of course it cannot last.

On the basis of his superior intellect, Alexandre is offered an elite French education, all expenses paid by wealthier members of the Jewish community. Here is where his possibilities and his troubles begin. Education opens up his world in wondrous ways: He falls in love with Racine, Rousseau, and Robespierre. Education also separates him from his family and the ghetto. But rejecting his old world does not mean that the new one welcomes him, and Alexandre finds himself in an anguished no-man's-land. Lashing out, he is filled with angry scorn for everyone and (almost) everything: his backward family, pious Jews, medieval Judaic traditions—and, equally, the callousness of the bourgeoisie, the snobbishness of his rich classmates, the hypocrisy of the French, the anti-Semitism of the Arabs. The poor disgust him, but so do the moneymakers; he dislikes his gentile classmates, but his fellow Jewish students are perhaps even worse.

Most of all, Alexandre detests himself. He is not strong enough or brave enough; his manners are awkward, his clothes are shabby, his

French accent is bad, his family is mortifying. What makes this novel so unusual is that Memmi paints his alter ego in the most unpleasant light; one critic wrote that the book's "remarkable depth of self-analysis" is "sometimes so cruel that it has been compared to a surgical operation."²⁷ In contrast to many autobiographical novels, *The Pillar of Salt* reads as a stinging self-indictment. (At one point Alexandre describes himself as a "mediocre imbecile.")²⁸ It is Alexandre's primitive, uneducated family, whom he grows to despise with the exacting cruelty of the young, which evokes our empathy. In a particularly wrenching scene, his weary, overworked father weeps when he realizes that his brazenly secular son will not bury him with Jewish rites when he dies.

And yet Alexandre wins our affections too. We are touched by his yearnings, his woefulness, and his precocious moral seriousness. Alexandre is determined to create a life that will be solely, uniquely his own. But how can he do this, and where does he belong? "I'm African, not European," Alexander broods, "a native in a colonial country, a Jew in an anti-Semitic universe, an African in a world dominated by Europe. . . . How is it possible to harmonize so many discords?"²⁹ This sense of torment escalates until he reaches a breaking point.

In a crucial chapter, Alexandre is sent to an internment camp for Jews during the Nazi/Vichy occupation. (He volunteers to go there, out of solidarity with others.) Most of the camp's inmates are poor—the rich and middle classes could buy their freedom—and Alexandre hopes to help them sustain morale in the face of brutality. But he quickly discovers an unbridgeable gap between himself and the others. "I could neither break through the massive suspiciousness caused by their suffering, nor get them to accept me. . . . I came to realize how far my studies and my high-school education had removed me from any possible communion with my own people." I believe that this grim experience—even if somewhat fictionalized—had a profound effect on Memmi's later ideas about the need for progressive intellectuals to school themselves in humility. In one of the novel's most devastating lines, Alexandre admits his feelings for his fellow inmates: "I wanted to love them, and I fear I managed only to be sorry for them."³⁰

Four years before Frantz Fanon wrote *The Wretched of the Earth*, Memmi explored the psychic toll that colonialism exacted in his landmark 1957

book, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. Jean-Paul Sartre wrote the introduction, as he would for Fanon, and Memmi dedicated the American edition “to the American Negro, also colonized.” Memmi’s book had a strong impact on the anti-colonial liberation movements and was praised by the likes of Léopold Senghor, Senegal’s first president, and Négritude theorist Alioune Diop. But Memmi’s work was and remains overshadowed by Fanon’s, especially in the West, for a number of reasons. These include Fanon’s premature death, his non-white identity, his rejection of so-called Western values, his exaltation of violence, and the romance of the Algerian Revolution. In my view, Memmi’s is the deeper book, for it resists Fanon’s Manichean outlook and the easy panacea of violence. Memmi was not a pacifist. But he knew that the creation of freer societies would depend on the creation of freer people, and that such people could not be birthed, much less nurtured, by the AK-47.

Whereas Fanon viewed the colonized and the colonizer as “different species,” Memmi viewed them as human beings, albeit of vastly unequal power; the two were trapped in a suffocating embrace. Memmi seeks to understand colonization as an objectively racist system and as a subjectively damaging experience; much of the book concentrates on the psychic impossibilities that colonialism creates. “It is not enough for the colonized to be a slave, he must also accept this role. The bond between colonizer and colonized is thus destructive and creative,” he wrote. “One is disfigured into an oppressor, . . . [a] treacherous being, worrying only about his privileges. . . . The other, into an oppressed creature, whose development is broken and who compromises by his defeat.”³¹ The colonized is not only acted upon, but colludes in his oppression.

It was this psychic mutilation—the colonized’s humiliation, self-hatred, and disavowal of self—that was so brutalizing. (There is an echo here of Deutscher, writing of the Jews’ “stigmata of shame” that Zionism meant to eradicate.) What made the colonized’s situation even more wrenching was that, in an effort to reject the colonialist’s denigration, the oppressed created counter-myths of their own grandeur, potency, and unquestionable moral worth. These might provide temporary satisfaction, but they will be deeply destructive to the colonized’s future development. “Not only does he accept his wrinkles and his wounds, but he will consider them praiseworthy,” Memmi observed. “Suddenly, exactly to the reverse of the colonialist accusation, the colonized, his culture, his

country, everything that belongs to him, everything he represents, become perfectly positive elements." A fatal cultural retrogression is born: "Everything is good, everything must be retained among his customs and traditions."³² Thus an injurious cycle begins; in an attempt to create a more dignified society, the colonized maims his aptitude for critical self-assessment precisely at the moment when he needs it most. Zionists were hardly exempt from this syndrome; Memmi would later charge that "illusions were born of the accusations of others and through self-rejection, just as myths were created to counter the accusations."³³

Memmi's analysis of the historic position of the colonized subject closely parallels Arendt's description of Jewish worldlessness. "The most serious blow suffered by the colonized is being removed from history," he wrote. "He is out of the game. He is in no way a subject of history. . . . He has forgotten how to participate actively in history and no longer even asks to do so."³⁴ Memmi viewed the Third World's independence movements, as Arendt viewed Zionism, as the entering-into-history of the world's castoffs.

The Colonized and the Colonizer was written only one year after Tunisia gained its independence. Yet Memmi already intuited, far more incisively than Rodinson, the crippling position in which the left-wing, Western anti-colonialist would find himself, or put himself, for the next half century. For moral and political reasons, the Left would of course support the independence movements. Yet such movements would frequently repudiate many of the Left's bedrock principles, which Memmi identified as "political democracy and freedom, economic democracy and justice, rejection of racist xenophobia and universality." And so the European leftist and "leftist colonizer" (people such as himself and Albert Camus) "discovers that there is no connection between the liberation of the colonized and the application of a left-wing program. *And that, in fact, he is perhaps aiding the birth of a social order in which there is no room for a leftist as such.*"³⁵ Memmi would become a particularly keen observer of the Left's confused responses to this dilemma.

Memmi was also prescient about the prominent place that terrorism would occupy in these future struggles, though he could not foresee the extent of the barbarism to come. It is a very bad sign of the times in which we live that the terrorism of the postwar anti-colonial movements seems almost quaint compared to today's beheadings, suicide bombings, mass

rapes, and deliberate targeting of humanitarian workers, doctors, journalists, intellectuals, secularists, teachers, students, and ordinary civilians of every stripe, especially women and girls. Memmi assumed he was writing within a leftist tradition that “condemns terrorism and political assassination”; he termed such actions “incomprehensible, shocking and politically absurd. For example, the death of children and persons outside the struggle.”³⁶ But that tradition was weakening even as he wrote.

The anti-terrorist tradition that Memmi called home has been crippled if not decimated in the past half century; a crucial question for the Left is whether it can be revived. Memmi was particularly revolted by suicide bombings, which came to the fore in the Palestinian movement in the 1990s and have since globally metastasized, and which even now are sometimes falsely rationalized as “primarily a response to foreign occupation,” as a 2007 essay in the *London Review of Books* claimed.³⁷ (Most victims of suicide bombings are unarmed Muslim civilians, often killed in mosques or marketplaces.) Murder-suicide was not just an ugly tactic but something much worse: a “reversal of the gradual humanization of human societies,” Memmi wrote.³⁸ As a civilizational regression, it is a threat not only to its victims but to all people everywhere.

Memmi did not believe that the psychic disfigurements of colonialism could be solved through psychoanalysis on the part of the colonized or goodwill on the part of the colonizer. Colonialist oppression and its handmaid, racism, were structural problems that required structural eradication. “There is no way out other than a complete end to colonization,” he wrote toward the end of *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. “The refusal of the colonized cannot be anything but absolute, that is, not only revolt, but a revolution.” This was the only road to achieving the goal, the true revolutionary goal, of becoming “a whole and free man.”³⁹ But he always insisted that resistance and terrorism are not the same.

Memmi viewed the Jewish condition as simultaneously *sui generis* and part of the more general problem of oppressed peoples; he explored this tension in a series of books that followed *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. The betrayal of French and Tunisian Jews under Vichy, quickly followed by the post-independence rejection of Tunisian Jews, had an enormous impact on his ideas about a collective Jewish destiny. “History is made

without us," he observed. "Vichy promptly gave up its Jews and in Tunisia we were the first to be handed over. Don't tell me they also gave up the Communists and Freemasons! A man is a Communist of his own choice: it is a free action." No longer could he accept, or not accept, a Jewish identity; no longer could he separate his future from that of the Jewish people. "To be a Jew is . . . not a choice," he wrote in 1962. "It is, first of all, a fate."⁴⁰

Now living in France, Memmi was especially caustic about the assimilationist stance of many French Jews; echoing Arendt, he called assimilation "a solitary comedy" in which only the hapless Jews believed. He addressed, in particular, the tragic delusions of people like Maxime Rodinson's murdered parents. "In the concentration camps, in front of the crematory furnaces, the Franco-Israelites repeated, like Saint Paul: 'I am French. I am a French citizen!' With this firm constancy they would finally win. They would baffle their executioners, and finally gain the esteem of their fellow citizens." When this failed to transpire, Memmi wrote, the victims would reply, "But we were wrongly burned! By a misunderstanding!"⁴¹ Memmi's tone here verges on uncharacteristic derision, as if the victims' self-deceptions angered him almost as much as the perpetrators' crimes.

Portrait of a Jew, Memmi's first Jewish-themed book, was published in 1962. The portrait he paints is not flattering; to be Jewish is to own "a fate of oppression and an alienated culture." What was the nature of that oppressive alienation? Insecurity, anxiety, and anguish, all due to the Jew's precarious status as the perennial outsider. As for Jewish history, it had been "an endless succession of disasters, flights, pogroms, emigrations, humiliations, injustices. . . . Jewish history is but one long contemplation of Jewish misfortune."⁴² (He would later write that tragedy had been inscribed on the Jewish people and could not be easily excised.) Pariahdom had not turned Jews into creative, courageous intellectuals, artists, and revolutionaries, à la Arendt; instead it had bred a flock of timorous, maladjusted neurotics. Memmi even quoted Clara Malraux, André's Jewish wife, who compared being Jewish to having syphilis.

The remarkably resourceful nature of anti-Semitism baffled Memmi. Hatred of Jews thrived happily in the First World, the Communist bloc, and the Third World. It was common to vastly different economic systems, religions, and cultures. It was embraced by magnates and proletarians, whites and blacks, believers and secularists, Right and Left;

Memmi described it as “a living thing of multiple heads that speaks with a thousand grimacing faces.” Its past was long and its future seemed assured. Perhaps worst of all, it defied rational interpretation. “Today, confronted with that din of explanations, that economic, political, psycho-analytical, historical turmoil, I feel exhausted, depressed,” he admitted. “No explanation of this hostility . . . can ever exhaust the subject, can ever reassure me.”⁴³ Memmi never descended into mystical ideas about congenital anti-Semitism, but he refused to reduce such enmity to a mere by-product of capitalism. In any case, whatever the causes, he believed that anti-Semitism deformed the life of every Jew.

In *Portrait of a Jew*, Memmi parts company with a kind of generic universalism and introduces a theme he would subsequently develop: the reality, and necessity, of national identity. “A man is not just a piece of abstract humanity,” he argued. People live their lives within particular nations; there is nothing reactionary about this. “True justice, true tolerance, universal brotherhood do not demand negation of differences between men, but a recognition and perhaps an appreciation of them.” Jews in particular had paid a high price for abstract universalism, which suppressed their particular history and particular needs. Now it was time to acknowledge a truth that was existential and political at once: “I am convinced that difference is the condition requisite to all dignity and to all liberation. . . . To be is to be different.”⁴⁴ By denying these realities, socialist intellectuals separated themselves from the very people in whose name they struggled. After all, most people—revolutionaries like Trotsky and Luxemburg notwithstanding—want to live within a national community. They do not regard this as an illness in need of cure or a sin in need of expiation.

Memmi was not, however, an exponent of what we now call identity politics. On the contrary, he would criticize the politics of differentiation as they morphed into a kind of narcissistic self-preoccupation. He hoped that the assertion of cultural and national differences would serve as the basis for a sturdy internationalism rather than as an end in itself.

In subsequent books, Memmi’s depictions of the ways in which oppression had disfigured Jewish culture grew more harsh; anti-Semites could have a field day with some of his writings. He believed that a positive Jewish identity existed; in this, he parted ways with the Sartre of *Anti-Semite and Jew*, though the two men were philosophically close. (*The Pillar*

of *Salt's* Alexandre is the echt existentialist antihero.) But Memmi echoed the self-critique of those Zionists—Koestler was a prime example—who saw the Diaspora as the breeding ground for a collective personality disorder. And he voiced the same sense of humiliation about Jewish history as Arendt. In his 1966 book *The Liberation of the Jew*, Memmi excoriated “the ghetto culture of oppressed and broken people” and Diaspora Jewry’s “cultural asphyxiation.” The Jewish people were “socially and historically sick”; Jews inhabited the earth as “the living dead.”⁴⁵

The concept of a chosen people, Memmi argued, was profoundly *anti-Zionist*. Rather than serving as the basis for a Jewish state, chosenness was the reaction of an oppressed people to the triple deformity of no country, no army, and no political power. He assailed the peculiar Jewish pathology that equates suffering with superiority. “A painful need to understand consumes the Jew: why this cruel fate? Why is he thrown into this terrible history . . . ? The Election explains it all. . . . It reassures and flatters him, it demands and attracts. It is at the same time the glory and the duty of the Jew.”⁴⁶ Each catastrophe became proof of moral worth.

To compensate for their misery, the Jews, like the Third World revolutionaries he had analyzed in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, basked in the myth of glorious traditions, a noble past, and an unequalled cultural legacy. “Culture was our last trump card. . . . It enabled us to smile condescendingly on our executioners.”⁴⁷ Here, again, is the self-defeating dialectic of the subordinated: The more degraded he is, the more grandiose his sense of self.

With the end of oppression—which for Memmi meant the achievement of political sovereignty—Jews would be able to dispense with the “fabulous fairy tale” of chosenness.⁴⁸ The ancient burden and ancient curse would be vanquished: Free at last! Memmi reversed the terms of religious Zionism. Israel was the endpoint, not the realization, of chosenness.

In *The Liberation of the Jew*, Memmi presents himself as an unwavering Left Zionist. He views Zionism as neither more nor less than the national liberation movement of the Jewish people. Jewish oppression and anti-Semitism can be defeated only by changing the objective predicament—dependence, dispersion, minority status, and statelessness—of the Jews. The task of liberation is not only to reject the abjection and grandiosity of the Jewish psyche but to destroy the Jewish *condition*. Rodinson and Deutscher would have

agreed on the necessity of this project though not, obviously, on Memmi's solution. Rodinson looked to radical assimilation, and Deutscher to Communist revolution, to transform the Jew.

Memmi looked to Israel. "It was high time we became adult; in other words, non-dependent, neither in fear nor in hope"; the era of partial solutions and "the remedies of slaves" was past. Political independence was the only way to address the composite oppression—psychic and economic, social and political—of the Jews: "Only this collective autonomy will give us at last the daring and the taste for liberty which alone are foundations of dignity." Like Arendt, Memmi believed that individual solutions had come to naught. So too had the collective solutions of "money, science, honors, universality." None of these mattered, for "without liberty all these things will give forth the tenacious odor of death."⁴⁹ As with the colonized, so with the Jews: Nothing short of revolution would do.

Memmi envisioned Israel as the center of Jewish identity around which the Diaspora would reorient itself—a proposition that was anathema to many French Jews. (One can imagine Rodinson's alarm.) "The national solution . . . is the only definitive solution," Memmi insisted. "Israel is not a supplementary contribution, a possible insurance in case of difficulties in the Diaspora; it must be the frame of reference for the Diaspora which must in [the] future *redefine* itself in relation to it." Crucially, though, he distinguished unequivocal support from uncritical support. Israel's treatment of its Arab citizens, its prejudice against Sephardic Jewish immigrants, the influence of the rabbis, and, after 1967, the Occupation: All were subject to his critique. "The actions taken by its [Israel's] governments have often shocked me," he asserted. "I have never denied myself the right to question them or denounce them." None of this, however, prompted him to doubt the need for a Jewish state. Here, too, Memmi's experience as an anti-colonial North African was key. "I only criticize what exists and ought to function better; I never question the existence [of Israel] itself; just as no scandal, no error can make us doubt the necessity of decolonization."⁵⁰

It was statehood, not the mystique of a "promised land," that interested Memmi. (As a secularist he would have asked: "Promised by whom?") He argued that the destruction of Israel would be a greater tragedy than the Shoah precisely because Israel represented the will to survive and a conscious act of regeneration. He concludes *The Liberation*

of the Jew on a note of high expectation and deep anxiety: "Israel is henceforth your concern. It is . . . our only real card, and our last historical chance. All the rest is diversion."⁵¹ Koestler believed that Diaspora Jews could, indeed must, sever themselves from Israel; Memmi found that inconceivable.

Albert Memmi was passionately committed to the Left and one of its frankest critics.

Memmi's adherence to socialism was entwined with his identity as a Jew. In fact, he believed that every Jew, whether in the Diaspora or Israel, *had* to be of the Left; as a persecuted people, Jews required a radically transformed world. "I continued, I continue, to think that socialism is the only honorable, probably the only effective, road open to humanity," he wrote in 1966. "We [Jews] were, in a way, condemned to the Left."⁵² Even after the Left's rancor toward Israel became widespread, Memmi affirmed this attachment. Socialists, he wrote in 1975, "are my people, their ethics are mine, and I hope to build with them a world for all; it is among them that you will find the greatest number of Jewish intellectuals, and that is fine."⁵³

But there was a problem, and it was large: The Left had betrayed the Jewish people time and again. These betrayals were so extensive and recurrent that, Memmi concluded, they were intrinsic to Left politics rather than random aberrations. In a grotesque version of the repetition compulsion, the Jewish plight of marginality, exclusion, and rejection had been reproduced within the very movement in which so many Jews had placed their hopes and for which they had sacrificed, fought, and died.

For Communists like Rodinson, Jewish identity was a selfish side-show and Jewish nationalism inherently retrograde. Jewish leftists were expected to fight for others; they were the movement's designated altruists. Memmi had seen how selflessness was the Jewish revolutionary's ticket of admittance to the socialist fraternity, and this angered him. Caustically, he wrote, "On no condition can anyone suspect him for a moment of thinking of himself or his people. He fights unconditionally for all humanity: a trait which everyone uses and abuses; perfectly abstract, in reality laughable and touching." Jews on the left had often gratefully assented to these conditions, despite their evident folly: "Was there a more foolish or artificial policy (more non-Marxist in the final

analysis) than to ask someone to fight only against an injustice of which he is not a victim?"⁵⁴

Memmi argued that this (self-)mutilation was inherent in the Marxist analysis of the Jewish question: "*The failure of the European Left, with regard to the Jewish problem, was no accident.*" There is a long line of Jewish Marxists (including Marx) who believed that the Jewish people's existence would and should cease; in traditional Marxism, "a Jew's only duty was to disappear. From what other people could one ask such saintliness?" Memmi asked. "Why such historical masochism?"⁵⁵ The Left's general antipathy to national aspirations took a singular, extreme form in the case of the Jews. A socialist might, for instance, oppose Polish nationalism, or at least Polish chauvinism. But he would not deny the existence of the Polish people or look forward to its erasure. That would be a fascist position. Yet in the case of the Jews, self-negation and brotherhood were considered synonymous.

Jewish leftists were thus transformed into what Memmi derided as the movement's "cuckolds . . . accomplices in our own destruction"; fatally naive, the Jewish socialist persisted in "seeing as friends people who would watch him being tortured with indifference." Yet there was no place outside the Left that Memmi could go. "I will not abandon socialism," he insisted.⁵⁶ But he also insisted that the socialist movement no longer deny the reality of Jewish oppression or the need for Jewish self-determination.

The Left's hostility toward the "bourgeois deviation" of nationalist aspirations became a crisis as the postwar anti-colonial movements gathered steam. In analyzing this phenomenon, Memmi focused first on France, where the predicament had multiple, intersecting causes. To begin, there was the failure of North African revolutionaries to fight for socialism and democratic freedoms and their acquiescence in religious orthodoxy and oppressive social traditions. Then, across the sea, there was the French working class's conspicuous lack of solidarity with, or actual hostility to, the anti-colonial movements. None of this comported with Marxist doctrine. And though consciously anti-colonial, French intellectuals betrayed a kind of colonialist arrogance. They expected that their politics, worldview, and modern social vision would be shared by their Third World brothers. Surely, they thought, only the shackles of imperialism

had sustained practices such as religious obscurantism and the debasement of women.

One reaction to this crisis was the Communist Party's somewhat belated insistence that anti-colonialism *was* socialism (or at least soon would be). It followed that leftists should support the independence movements, no questions asked. Memmi decried this strategy, which was dictated by the Soviet Union and adopted by the French Communists, as a "mania . . . for dubbing any political mutation that they find useful 'socialist and revolutionary.'" Sooner or later, reality would assert itself: "One cannot live forever in a dream world of scholasticism or tactics, and often the real world takes its revenge—when the new leaders send the Communists to prison."⁵⁷

He condemned the opposite reaction too: resentment of the colonized and their movements. "So these colonized people turn out to be greedy, aggressive, blood-thirsty fanatics," he wrote in an essay called "The Colonial Problem and the Left." "Well then, we will be as nationalistic as they are; and since they are making war on us, we will reply in kind." Memmi criticized this stance even as he understood it. "It is a reactionary attitude, to be sure, but . . . the claims it makes are ethical; they are those of a secular humanist bewildered by events, of a universalist who feels himself cheated and who, in a certain sense, has been."⁵⁸

The French Left was truly in a pickle. If it championed the national liberation movements, it lost support among the French working class and sacrificed some of its basic principles. If, conversely, it pandered to French nativism, it renounced a different set of principles and, moreover, "*commits a fruitless suicide,*" for "*the right can always outbid the left on this score.*"⁵⁹ And so a split, or perhaps a dual if contradictory strategy, emerged: indulging the independence movements and simultaneously ignoring what was actually happening within them.

It quickly became clear that this solution didn't solve much. In choosing to overlook developments in the Third World that it found unsavory, the European Left abandoned "both the universal and the international front," Memmi charged. "For, in the long run, no true internationalist can say: this does not concern me." The other extreme—the populist stance—was predicated on the view that the colonized are always deserving of unwavering support. This too proved destructive, for it "leads to the toleration of every kind of excess—terrorism, xenophobia, social reaction." And far from

aiding the colonized, uncritical encouragement “fostered in him every kind of mental and spiritual disorder, and . . . added to the perplexity of those few victims of colonization who had retained a relatively sharp and morally sound political sense.”⁶⁰ Seeking a kind of solidarity on the cheap, the Left had essentially abandoned the Third World’s true progressives and true democrats, who were not necessarily dominant within their liberation movements or at the helm of their new governments.

Memmi wrote “The Colonial Problem and the Left” in 1958. He was charting, perhaps more than he knew, the future trajectory of a large and influential portion of the Left in Western Europe and the U.S. In subsequent decades, many leftists would adopt a bipolar attitude—with all the unhealthiness that implies—to the formerly colonized world and the question of nationalism. They would often take a demotic stance: Think, for instance, of Rodinson and Deutscher praising the presumably revolutionary nature of the Arab dictatorships. But in doing so, a problem instantly emerged. Those regimes were rabidly nationalist, and yet the Left had staked itself, for the past one hundred years, on *anti*-nationalism as a rudimentary principle. Here, I believe, is where Israel became so calamitously useful. The Jewish state enabled the Left to sustain a blistering critique of nationalism, albeit only in the case of one small country, while simultaneously kowtowing to the anti-imperialist and stridently nationalist rhetoric of the Third World.

This explains a glaring if often unnoticed contradiction of Left politics in the postwar period, but especially from the 1960s on. Leftists, and especially New Leftists, were enthralled by Cuban, Vietnamese, Mozambican, Chinese, Algerian, and Palestinian nationalism. But they loathed Zionism as a thing apart. This approach would come to fruition in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, when much of the Western Left hailed some of the world’s most horrifically repressive—and racist—regimes as harbingers of justice and freedom. As Simcha Flapan, a member of Israel’s far-Left Mapam Party, would charge: “The socialist world approved the ‘Holy War’ of the Arabs against Israel in the disguise of a struggle against imperialism. . . . Having agreed to the devaluation of its own ideals, [it] was ready to enter into an alliance with reactionary and chauvinist appeals to genocide.”⁶¹

A decade before this debacle, Memmi saw that such convoluted strategies would spell disaster by harming colonialism’s victims and weakening

the Left. Memmi called for a radical reorientation of the socialist movement. On one hand, it must recognize the validity of national liberation movements, including Zionism. Rather than regarding nationalism as something “stuck in their throats like a bone they are always longing to cough up,” leftists should support national independence as “genuine and constructive. To reject it is mere abstract intellectualization: the negation of what is real.” On the other, support of the unsupportable—of those who repudiated humane, democratic, and egalitarian principles—must cease. “If we accept nationalism without argument and without reflection, we are again disqualifying ourselves. We must judge it and make up our minds about its errors.”⁶² Critical acumen was required in all instances; no blank checks would be written.

An important test of the Left’s capacity for judgment, Memmi wrote, would be its rejection of terrorism against civilians. Another test was the defense of secularism, which he regarded as a nonnegotiable principle, though he knew that many liberation movements—including sectors of the Zionist movement—did not. By secularism he did not mean imposed atheism or the banning of religious practices. Nor did he share Rodinson’s and Deutscher’s contempt for religion and the religious (though Alexandre, his young alter ego in *Pillar of Salt*, certainly did). On the contrary, Memmi wrote, it is “destructive, and perhaps unworthy . . . to be ashamed of one’s people, to despise their tradition, their culture, and their institutions.”⁶³ But he adamantly believed that a secular public sphere was the only guarantor of free thought and that cultural and religious practices must be subject to the secular rule of law. Once again, he was neither vanguardist nor populist.

More specifically, secularism was indispensable for the psychological and political emancipation of the contemporary Jew: “The tyranny of Moses must be overcome for the modern Jew to be liberated.”⁶⁴ Memmi expected Zionism to negate Judaism. “The Jew must be liberated from oppression, and Jewish culture must be liberated from religion,” he wrote in 1966. “This double liberation can be found in the same course of action—the fight for Israel.”⁶⁵ Many Zionists shared this view. Some still do. A half century later, however, there is a bitter cast to Memmi’s hopes and expectations, given the immense growth and political power of the Orthodox in Israel today.

If Memmi’s belief in a secular Israel failed to materialize (or, rather, to last), so did many of his hopes for the anti-colonial movements.

Revolutionary rhetoric notwithstanding, the underdeveloped world failed to sign on to the Left's project, or at least to the one that Memmi valued. "For the moment," he wrote in 2004, "the third world has chosen nationalism rather than socialism, religion rather than Enlightenment philosophy."⁶⁶

"To my Jewish brothers / To my Arab brothers / so that we can all / be free men at last." So reads Memmi's dedication to his 1975 essay collection, *Jews and Arabs*. But the book's stance is not one of cozy fraternity. Writing in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War, Memmi began by reasserting his identity as "an Arab Jew and a left-wing Zionist." And though he affirms the brotherhood of Arabs and Jews, he announces that Jews have "the most serious of accounts to settle" with their brothers.⁶⁷ These included the treatment of Jews when they lived in the Arab countries, Arab refusal to accept Israel, and, most controversially, acceptance of the joint Arab-Jewish population transfer that had transpired since 1948. This transfer was, Memmi asserted, an accomplished fact and the only practical basis for peace. He would build a sustained argument against the Palestinian demand for the right of return.

Memmi's depiction of intercommunal relations in the Arab world is bluntly negative. "No member of any minority lived in peace and dignity in a predominantly Arab country!" Muslims were undoubtedly colonized, but so were Jews: "dominated, humiliated, threatened, and periodically massacred." Memmi poses an uncomfortable question: "And by whom? Isn't it time our answer was heeded: by the Moslem Arabs?" He lambastes the treatment of Jews in Arab countries after 1948. "Must we accept the hangings [of Jews] in Baghdad, the prisons and the fires in Cairo, the looting and economic strangling in the Maghreb, and, at the very least, exodus?" Perhaps addressing Rodinson—the two knew of each other's work—Memmi angrily explains that Zionism was the result, not the cause, of such depredations. To argue otherwise is "historically absurd: it is not Zionism that has caused Arab anti-Semitism, but the other way around. . . . Israel is a rejoinder to the oppression."⁶⁸ He reminds the reader that he and his young Tunisian friends became Zionists in the early 1930s in reaction to what they perceived as an implacably hostile Arab world, not in response to Hitler.

"*Jewish Arabs*": This, Memmi says, is what he and his fellows wanted to be. "And if we have given up the idea, it is because for centuries the

Moslem Arabs have scornfully, cruelly, and systematically prevented us from carrying it out.” He scoffs at Muammar Qaddafi’s suggestion that Sephardic Israelis “go back home.” Home to what? Memmi points out the glaringly obvious: “No more Jewish communities are to be found in any Arab country, nor can you find a single Arab Jew who is willing to return to his native country.”⁶⁹ The State of Israel is the retort to homelessness. Home for Israelis is Israel.

It was in Paris that Memmi first encountered what he called the “fable” of Arab-Jewish harmony, which was cherished by French leftists. (Rodinson was particularly wedded to this concept.) At first Memmi considered it harmlessly silly. But the myth became dangerous after the 1967 war, “when it became a *political* argument” to delegitimize the necessity for a Jewish state and to suggest that the creation of Israel had destroyed an Edenic Middle East. Memmi admits that some Maghrebi Jews, nostalgically homesick as immigrants tend to be, upheld the myth of happy coexistence: “Uprooted people . . . embellish the past.” Some native-born Israelis, too, adhered to the fiction in the hope that, if an era of Arab-Jewish amity had recently existed, it could reappear in the future too. “Otherwise the whole undertaking [of Israel] would seem hopeless!”⁷⁰ But sentimentality is a precarious basis for politics, and rose-tinted glasses had never served the Jewish people well.

Memmi upholds four principles throughout *Jews and Arabs*: First, the Arab peoples’ right to independence and national development. Second, the Jewish people’s right to the same. Third, that the crux of the Israeli-Arab conflict is Arab irredentism. (He was writing before Israeli irredentism, in the form of the settler movement, became so powerful.) Fourth, that the only solution to the conflict is a national one: sovereignty for both Israelis and Palestinians.

Despite the treatment of Jews in Arab countries, pre- and post-1948, Memmi never faltered in his allegiance to the independence movements of the formerly colonized world. He praises Tunisia’s Habib Bourguiba, Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah, and Senegal’s Léopold Senghor. He insists on treating Arabs as political equals rather than damaged victims. “I am not a ‘friend’ of the Arabs,” he explains. “I have a fairly accurate knowledge of the humiliations they want to erase, the fears they want to exorcise, the hopes that may be stirring in them. . . . I refuse to take an attitude toward them which, at bottom, is paternalistic . . . a mixture of old colonialist

scorn and newfound benevolence.” Memmi’s Zionism affirms rather than negates Arab aspirations. “A Zionist who is aware of the nature of his own cause cannot fail to understand and approve of the Arab peoples’ social and national ambitions, even though he may regret coming into conflict with them,” he insists. But a relationship between equals entails parallel responsibilities: “Conversely, he is entitled to demand of the Arab peoples, clearly and openly, that they recognize his own demands for liberty and the reconstruction of his nation.”⁷¹ Internationalism means nothing without mutuality.

The Arab refusal to recognize Israel had been defended by Rodinson and Deutscher. In Memmi’s view, it rested on bad history, bad politics, and bad faith. He forcefully addresses Rodinson’s claim that the Middle East in general, and Palestine in particular, are intrinsically Arab-Muslim lands to which the Jews are illegitimate interlopers. “We constantly hear of ‘Arab lands’ and ‘Zionist enclave.’ But by what mystical geography are we not at home there too, we who descend from the same indigenous populations since the first human settlements were made? Why should only the converts to Islam be the sole proprietors of our common soil?” Israel, Memmi notes, rests on “a scrap of the immense common territory which belongs to us too, though it is called Arab.”⁷²

Yet the question of legitimacy was, ultimately, not one of statistics or “ridiculous arithmetic.” For Memmi, a Jewish state in part of Palestine was a fact. And it was a fact that was not only justified but *required*. Israel was self-defense; Israel was cultural rejuvenation; Israel was political maturity; Israel was survival. Yet here, too, Memmi charted an independent course. Unlike Jabotinsky and his followers on the Zionist right, Memmi refused to celebrate nationalism; unlike Fanon and his acolytes on the left, he refused to celebrate violence. “I am not an enthusiast of the nation-as-response. I hate violence, and not just other people’s violence, my own people’s too! . . . Only you cannot, unless you are a hypocrite, ask any being, whether singular or collective, to refuse to defend itself if it is threatened.”⁷³ National chauvinism must be rejected, but passivity was no longer an option.

Memmi also forthrightly addresses the key indictment of Israel’s legitimacy: the Palestinian refugees. He found a multifaceted situation rather than a simple tale of oppressors and victims. Approximately 700,000 Arabs left Palestine in 1948 because they were forced to do so, or chose to do so, or were terrorized into doing so; in the years 1948 to 1964, an equal

number of Jews left their native Arab countries because they were forced to do so, or chose to do so, or were terrorized into doing so. (The 1967 war produced another flood on each side.) Memmi articulates a truth that to this day is generally taboo: "Let's dare to say: a de facto exchange of populations has come about." Two civilian populations experienced a *nakba*—a parallel ethnic expulsion. And while the Palestinian situation was "tragic," it was neither unsolvable nor a world-historic catastrophe. "When you come right down to it, the Palestinian Arabs' misfortune is having been moved about thirty miles. . . . We [Oriental Jews] have been moved thousands of miles away, after having also lost everything." In any case, Memmi insists, neither of these exchanges could or would be reversed, despite the Arab refusal to accept the finality of the first or to acknowledge the reality of the second. Israel would not welcome back the Palestinians any more than the Arab nations would welcome back the Jews. History does not flow backwards; woe to those who deny this. To destroy Israel in order to compensate Palestinians "would amount to resolving a tragedy by means of a crime."⁷⁴

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Memmi averred, set two nationalisms against each other. Each was relatively recent and therefore fragile; both peoples "have been and still are victims of human history." The conflict did not, however, set Palestinian revolution against Israeli reaction, Palestinian anti-imperialism against Israeli colonialism, or Palestinian poverty against Israeli riches, despite attempts to impose such interpretations on it. "*There is violence between the Arabs and the Jews because there is an historical conflict between two powerful and partially competing national ambitions, not at all between a social and revolutionary (Arab) movement and a nationalist and imperialist (Jewish) movement.*" Framing the conflict in false terms enabled the Left to assail Israel's right to exist and fling it "into the ignominious hell of the imperialist nations."⁷⁵ Only by abandoning Manichean oppositions and the flawed history on which they rest could a workable solution be found.

The good news, Memmi reminds us, is that strife between nations can be solved. In Marxist terms, such clashes are conflicts rather than contradictions; they do not call for the negation of either side. The important thing, the urgent thing, was to find a good-enough accord for the future rather than recurrently shedding blood in an impossible attempt to avenge the past. "A mediocre agreement is better than continual war," he pleaded.⁷⁶ Reason paired with realism was a practical demand as well as an ethical one.

Ironically, it is Memmi who therefore emerges as the true materialist against the Marxist idealism of Rodinson and Deutscher. "It is not, but definitely not, enough to be an ardent socialist, in order to build a socialist world," Memmi contends. "You have to know how to distinguish between what is possible and what is impossible." The alternative is "revolutionary romanticism, which sometimes gives rise to catastrophes." In what can only conjure Arendt's positions of the late 1940s along with those of contemporary one-staters on the left, he deplores "our friends . . . who, impatient with history, simply . . . reconstruct peoples and regions on the basis of the model they want them to follow."⁷⁷ This impatience, too, is a kind of vanguardism, though it often drapes itself in the language of justice and human rights.

In short, Memmi besought Israelis and Arabs to step out of myth and into reality, for only there can politics be made. For Israelis, this meant acceptance of a sovereign Palestinian state; Palestinians, like all other peoples, had every "right to perfect their existence as a nation." Furthermore, Israelis must never forget Palestinian suffering until such national ambitions were met; to ignore Palestinian statelessness, he warned, is "impossible, and dangerous." For Palestinians and the Arab states, reality meant replacing their view of Israel as a temporary, illegitimate trespasser with acknowledgment of the Jewish state as a sovereign nation. "The Palestinians have *never* stopped claiming the *entire* region," Memmi pointed out. "It is our life that is at stake. A day must come when the Moslem Arabs will admit that we too . . . have a right to existence and dignity."⁷⁸ Unlike Rodinson, Memmi saw the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a symptom, not the cause, of the region's political dysfunction and incessant violence.

Memmi wrote these essays in the late 1960s to mid-1970s. The settlements had not yet expanded, nor had Israel veered rightward to the Likud; the Palestinians had not yet spawned the suicide bombers or the fundamentalist fanatics of Hamas and Islamic Jihad. It is grievously painful to acknowledge that, five decades later, some Palestinians and many Israelis have moved further from the ethics of realism for which Memmi pleaded.

National independence is necessary, but it is not an end in itself. The nation's purpose is to abolish oppression, to advance justice, to nurture cultural and intellectual development in an atmosphere of freedom. In a

1972 speech in Jerusalem, Memmi warned Israelis that “there must be respect for social justice; otherwise the nation breaks apart. . . . The prophets must not remain mere myths to which you doff your hat.” Zionism, he reminded his audience, had roots in the socialist movement; it becomes a shriveled version of itself if it forsakes that heritage. Nationalism can easily be perverted into chauvinism, aggression, racism. “It is up to the dominated classes, the socialists, ourselves, to fight so that that doesn’t happen, so that *the social struggle is not dissociated from the national struggle*.”⁷⁹ Sovereignty could—but mustn’t—lead to a fetishization of the state.

Memmi regarded the Left’s anti-Zionism as indicative of a more general moral and political confusion. He insisted, as would Fred Halliday, that the sine qua non of any humane resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict was mutuality: No more talk of extermination! “The only truly socialist solution, the most serious criterion for judging whether or not a political attitude is an attitude of the left: does it seriously desire an *agreement* that takes into account the *existence*, the *freedom*, and the *interests* of *both* partners?” Binationalism, Memmi averred, might be a future dream, even a worthy one. But dreams should not hinder the attempt to alleviate suffering, injustice, and violence in the present. (In that case, they become nightmares.) The Occupation was politically and morally wrong. But it was not an existential wrong; it did not lead Memmi to doubt Israel’s right to exist. He concludes *Jews and Arabs* with a short article on Israel, written in 1974. “The Jew had no state, no nation, no flag, no land, no language, no culture,” he reminds his readers. “Do you know what that’s called? It is described as, experienced as, and called oppression.”⁸⁰

The establishment of a Jewish state has not, of course, vanquished anti-Semitism. How to interpret this failure? For Rodinson, it proved the foolishness of Zionism’s basic goal. For Memmi, the opposite was true. The hatred directed at Israel—from its Arab neighbors, from the Western Left, from anti-Semites on the right—proved the Jewish state’s necessity.

“Rarely have I had so little desire to write a book.”⁸¹ So Memmi announces in the first line of *Decolonization and the Decolonized*, which has sometimes been interpreted as a refutation of his previous works. (One American critic’s review was titled “Albert Memmi’s About-Face.”)⁸² That is a serious misreading. Memmi revisits ideas he began forging in the

1950s. But the criticisms he makes and the values he asserts are a continuation of his previous convictions.

Published in 2004, *Decolonization and the Decolonized* analyzes what has gone wrong in many countries of the previously colonized world. It is a discomfiting book; “I fear I have managed to annoy just about everyone,” Memmi admits.⁸³ This is not a book of nostalgia, regret, or self-flagellation. But it is a book of sadness, disappointment, and anger.

Memmi had not become a colonial apologist; on the contrary, he assails colonialism as “collective slavery.”⁸⁴ And he never exhibits the contempt for ordinary people that permeates the work of a Third World critic like V. S. Naipaul. Memmi’s indignation is directed mainly at political and military leaders (“criminal idiots”), timid intellectuals, and religious fundamentalists. He critiques the widespread fixation on “an archaic golden age and glorious future,” a phenomenon especially prevalent in the Muslim world. But he sees this as a way to keep the powerless opiated: “Isn’t this what the aristocrats want?”⁸⁵

The book focuses on the Arab world, including North Africa, for that is what Memmi knew best and where he had sustained long friendships. (Its original title was *Portrait du décolonisé arabo-musulman et de quelques autres*.) Nevertheless, his analysis fits many countries in other regions. The post-colonial problems he addresses are sobering: hunger, gross extremes of poverty and wealth, incessant warfare, subjugation of women, persecution of minorities, religious fanaticism, backward educational systems and social customs, conflation of religion and politics, stifled intellectual life, terrorism, state brutality, and an absence of democratic freedoms. “There seems to be no end to the pustulent sores weakening these young nations. Why such failures?” He acknowledges the “understandable postcolonial guilt” of European leftists—which, as a North African, he did not share—but warns that “guilt becomes noxious when it leads to blindness.” Mostly, though, he is interested in the internal development, or lack thereof, of the states in question. The book’s aim, he explains in a cutting phrase, is to describe people who “are no longer colonized” yet “sometimes continue to believe they are.” Describing their situation as “neocolonial” will not take us far; the term is essentially tautological, and serves mainly “as a screen and rationale.”⁸⁶

The emphasis on interior reality rather than external subjugation is at the heart of this book’s ethos—and of the controversies over it. Memmi

did not imagine that foreign exploitation ended on the day a nation won independence; he was acutely aware of the continuing, enormous inequities between the world's rich and poor countries. But he insists, as would Halliday, that the post-emancipation trajectory of a nation or region cannot be understood simply as a reaction to, or product of, Western colonialism. Memmi wants to examine how the formerly colonized nations have *used* the independence for which they suffered and bled. Even the victims of a bad past—of which there are many—can create a livable present and build a viable future. Isn't that the belief that motivates every revolution? For Memmi, the formerly colonized are answerable for their praxis of freedom, just as the former colonizers are responsible for the damage they had wrought.

Much of Memmi's wrath is directed at Arab intellectuals, especially those who now live in the safety of the West. Imprisoned within a self-made fortress—the word he chooses is “autistic”—they are unable to hear, see, or speak the truth to their people. This was no small matter, for Memmi viewed honesty as the intellectual's primary vocation. Arab and Muslim intellectuals, he charges, had virtually ignored “the stupefying phenomenon of suicide attacks. . . . Hardly a word about the condition of women. . . . Not a single statement about the fate of minorities. . . . Almost no one openly opposed the Taliban regime. . . . No one dared to condemn, unless in private, Saddam Hussein.” (Luckily, there is one issue that inspires courageous stands: “Nearly everyone had an opinion about Israel's right to exist.”)⁸⁷ In *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Memmi had warned that the colonized's shame prevents him from realistically assessing himself, his culture, and his political situation; five decades later, he looked at the rancid fruits of that incapacity.

One of the tragedies Memmi discusses is the ways in which violence has filled the chasm created by the absence of civic institutions. Without the rule of law, power is mediated through the gun and the bomb. He is acutely, indeed tenderly, aware of how deeply the formerly colonized yearn for an end to violence and terror in their lives; surely this is the *sine qua non* of a normal existence. He castigates the betrayal of that desire: “After decades of independence they are still cutting throats in Algeria, imprisoning people in Tunisia, torturing in Cuba, and condemning the uncovered faces of women in Iran and Algeria. Mass graves have been discovered in Iraq; populations fleeing before imminent massacre have

been counted in the hundreds of thousands. . . . In Black Africa . . . entire ethnic groups are massacred. . . . In Algeria the army has maintained a reign of terror.”⁸⁸

With almost uncanny accuracy, Memmi foresaw that the democratic uprisings now known as the Arab Spring would fail in the absence of civic institutions and a pluralist mind-set; such rebellions would actually strengthen authoritarian governments *and* the power of fundamentalist groups. “The immobility of the regime allows no room to hope for any immediate change. What is needed is its total collapse. Yet every disturbance results in increased repression,” he argued. “The country of the decolonized is a country without law, where there is rampant institutional violence that can only be countered by even greater violence. The fundamentalists know this and await their moment. The ‘law of God’ . . . will suppress even the few scraps of freedom that have been conceded by the ruler.”⁸⁹ Thus the wild swings between the brutality of the nominally secular dictatorships and of the religious fundamentalists dedicated to overthrowing them.

And a decade before the *Charlie Hebdo* and Bataclan terror attacks in Paris, Memmi perceptively analyzed the dilemma of Muslim-French citizens, especially those born in France to North African parents. He viewed the French *banlieues* much the way he viewed his childhood ghetto. “Those who extol the romanticism of the ghetto have no idea what they’re talking about,” he wrote with a touch of annoyance. “Living in a poor suburb [of Paris] is like living in another city.” While the parental generation often strove to assimilate, the younger generation rebelled against this, though without formulating a sustainable alternative identity. The problem was not that the young were caught between cultures (so was a young Albert Memmi), but that they had no tools with which to navigate them. “The son of the immigrant is a kind of zombie,” Memmi observed. “He is a French citizen but does not feel in the least bit French. . . . He is not completely Arab. He barely speaks the [Arabic] language. . . . He would be hard pressed to read the Koran he waves around during demonstrations like a flag, similar to the head scarf worn by young women.”⁹⁰ The youths’ resistance to assimilation was matched by the refusal of France’s white communities to welcome them. Assimilation might be an official ideal, but few on either side seemed to really want it.

Memmi's positions in this last book might be called "neoconservative," except that there is nothing conservative about them. His critiques grew out of his commitment to internationalism, reason, and social justice. He specifically rejects the clash of civilizations thesis: "There is now a single, global, civilization that affects everyone, including fundamentalists." The dream of separate development and self-sufficiency—shared by rich and poor nations, albeit for different reasons—is dead. "We now live within a state of previously unknown dependence," Memmi insists.⁹¹ The challenge is what to make of that shared destiny.

Both Marxism and neoliberal capitalism had failed the Third World, which prompts Memmi to raise the challenging question: "So, what should we do?" By "we" Memmi meant, well, you and me—"All the inhabitants of the planet, . . . former oppressors, formerly oppressed, and even those who believe they remain outside history." This is the grammar of inclusion. And of responsibility: In the family of man, we are all adults. In a world that appears increasingly fragmented but is in fact permanently interconnected, international solidarity "is not only a philosophical and moral concept, it is a practical necessity."⁹² As he had with Jews and Arabs, Memmi demanded that we acknowledge interdependence as an undeniable fact. He believed, as did Arendt, that we are condemned to share the world with others; that is the human condition.

Maxime Rodinson, Isaac Deutscher, and Albert Memmi belonged to roughly the same generation and shared many traits. Each emerged from poverty on the basis of outstanding intellectual abilities; each was a self-made man. Each came of age during the rise of fascism and, then, the Shoah; each subsequently observed, and cheered, the emergence of millions of people from colonial oppression into independence. Each adhered to principles that were anti-fascist, anti-colonialist, secular, and socialist, and defined himself as such. Each was a bridge between the Old Left and the New, and responded to the challenges the latter posed. Each was a brilliant intellectual. Yet each was wrong about a lot of things: for Rodinson, belief in a progressive Arab revolution; for Deutscher, faith in a democratized Soviet Union; for Memmi, expectation that Israel would become a secular and socialist beacon. Each was, I suspect, a disappointed man.

It was their attitudes toward Israel that separated them most radically—or, put another way, that starkly illuminated the ways in which

their worldviews diverged. Rodinson, the traditional Communist and confirmed anti-Zionist, viewed Israel as at best a colonial fact and blamed it for the Middle East's relentless political strife. Deutscher, the dissident Marxist, came to accept Israel as a result of the Shoah but turned sharply against it after its 1967 victory. Memmi, the anti-colonialist, believed that Jews and Arabs could and must achieve national independence in tandem. In the following chapter we will see how Fred Halliday, a New Leftist from a younger generation, navigated the tension between anti-colonialism and democratic values with which Rodinson, Deutscher, and Memmi had wrestled. For Halliday, too, Israel would become decisive, divide him from longtime friends and allies in Europe and the Middle East, and force him to reevaluate the bedrock principles of the New Left.