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*Sheila Walsh*

**A Prophetic Voice? Albert Memmi's *Portrait du décolonisé arabo-musulman et de quelques autres*.**

Albert Memmi (1920-) is best known as the author of *Portrait du colonisé précédé de Portrait du colonisateur* (1957), a text theorising the psychologically destructive processes of colonisation which act to degrade both coloniser and colonised. In this article I will examine Memmi's attempt to compose a companion text to his most influential work, and to assess its analysis of the decolonised subject in the twenty-first century, particularly in the wake of subsequent world events, such as the riots which struck France in 2005 and more recently Great Britain (Henley 2011, Moran 2011), and the so-called 'Arab Spring' which mark the current time as an important period of social and political change.

Written and published during the era of mass decolonisation, Memmi's *Portrait du colonisé* came to be considered a valuable analytical tool in the emergent fields of colonial and post-colonial theory and an eloquent indictment of colonisation. It established Memmi's credentials in the intellectual sphere of social and political activism. He went on to write on topics such as dependence and racism in the decades which followed, though he remained less internationally known than theorists such as Frantz Fanon, the author of *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952) and *Les Damnés de la Terre* (1961) and Edward Said, the author of *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). Memmi's long career as an academic in France following Tunisian independence positions him closer to the European establishment than figures such as Fanon who joined Algeria's Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) opposing France and seeking Algerian independence in the war of 1954-1962. Recent suggestions that Memmi (a Tunisian Jew, one of the largest non-Islamic ethnic groups in North Africa) fosters sympathies with Zionism have impacted his credentials as a commentator on the relations between the West and majority Islamic nations. In a 2004 interview with Memmi for the *Irish Times*, Lara Marlowe describes him as 'eager to talk about his new book, the Decolonized' (Marlowe 2004, p. 60), but observes that he resisted her attempts to suggest that much of the analysis in his most celebrated

*Portrait du colonisé* could be applied to the contemporary situation in Israel and Palestine:

As I read *Colonizer*, I thought repeatedly of the Israeli-occupied territories. Memmi's analysis seemed to fit hundreds of thousands of Israeli settlers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and the millions of Palestinians whose lives are destroyed by the settlers' presence. But he brushes aside my observations. (Marlowe 2004, p. 60)

Marlowe then notes Memmi's affiliations to Israeli academia and poses a further question regarding his stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict:

Memmi's curriculum vitae notes that he holds an honorary doctorate from the University of the Negev, and quotes the Jerusalem Post calling him "one of the great Jewish thinkers". Is it possible, I ask him, that his Jewish origins have shaped his views of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

"You know, one never completely gets rid of one's origins", he says, [...]. (Marlowe 2004, p. 60).

Nonetheless, in the field of colonial and post-colonial studies, Memmi's *Portrait du colonisé* in particular remains highly respected and frequently cited. The portrait also proved to be prophetic of the social, political and economic fall-out of colonisation, and corrupt colonial systems of rule, which have stymied most decolonised nations in the wake of the mass-decolonisation of the 1940s, 50s and 60s.

In the twenty-first century, Memmi resumed the role of analytical portraitist and produced *Portrait du décolonisé arabo-musulman et de quelques autres*. Published in French in 2004 before being translated into numerous other languages, unlike Memmi's earlier portrait, it largely failed to capture the public and scholarly imagination. In light of recent world events which mark the current period as one of rapid and drastic change, particularly in the Arabo-Islamic world, this article aims to investigate if there is a case for a re-examination of this largely ignored but strangely prophetic work.

Memmi received a European-style education in Tunisia, a French protectorate since 1881 (Clancy-Smith 1994, p. 214), and was later employed there as a teacher following a university education in the Parisian *métropole*. Memmi drew upon first-hand experience of growing up under a system of colonial rule and of living through the experience of

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decolonisation when he wrote *Portrait du colonisé*. However, almost half a century later, when he wrote *Portrait du décolonisé*, his circumstances were vastly different, and infinitely more challenging in terms of personal experiences upon which he could draw.

Response to *Portrait du décolonisé* in 2004 was muted and in certain instances hostile. In the 'Présentation' of *Portrait du décolonisé*, Memmi voices his reticence in writing the new portrait: 'Rarement j'ai eu si peu envie d'écrire un livre; à cause du sentiment pénible que mon propos risquait d'être inaudible ou pervers; d'ajouter peut-être aux difficultés de gens encore fragile et qu'il faut continuer à défendre.' (Memmi 2004, p. 11) He understood that any intervention in the thorny area of decolonisation and relations between the West and the Arabo-Islamic world, post-9/11, could never win the approval of all, or even the majority of observers and commentators. Despite this, Memmi evidently felt that he had a contribution to offer. This article aims to assess this contribution particularly in light of recent world events such as the 'Arab Spring' and the civil war in Syria.

Memmi's *Portrait du colonisé* was first published in the late 1950s and alongside Martinique-born Frantz Fanon's *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952) and *Les damnés de la terre* (1961) it came to prominence as a landmark text on the psycho-pathology of colonisation. These texts remain among the most respected such works to have emerged from the Francophone world over the mid-twentieth century. Fanon's active participation in the struggle for Algerian independence, his premature death from leukaemia, the violence of his language, and the radicalism of his stance on colonisation drew immediate attention to his writing. Memmi, unlike Fanon, had not directly participated in a nationalist movement. Furthermore, he chose to move to France shortly after the declaration of Tunisian independence in 1956. His measured language, and the fact that his portrait also depicted, although it certainly did not justify, the side of the oppressor in the drama of colonial relations, meant that it was less striking at the time of its initial publication than Fanon's fiery indictments of Western racism, exploitation and persecution of colonised peoples in *Peau noire, masques blancs* and *Les damnés de la terre*. Over time Memmi's portrait came to be acknowledged as insightful and original, related with a level of objectivity rarely found in commentaries on colonial relations in the twentieth century. Memmi's

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preface to the 1966 edition of *Portrait du colonisé*, acknowledges his initially modest ambitions, and the evolution of the portrait into an inspirational text for colonised and other oppressed peoples worldwide:

Bref, j'ai entrepris cet inventaire de la condition du Colonisé d'abord pour me comprendre moi-même et identifier ma place au milieu des autres hommes. Ce furent mes lecteurs, qui étaient loin d'être tous des Tunisiens, [...] qui me confirmèrent, au fur et à mesure, que j'avais décrit ce que j'avais décrit était le lot d'une multitude d'hommes à travers le monde. (Memmi [1957] 1985, pp. 12-13)

In addition to recognition from colonised and exploited peoples from across the globe, the portrait also drew praise from fellow academics and intellectuals, most notably Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre drew attention to issues of racial and colonial exploitation in his prefaces to Senghor's *Anthologie d'une nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* (1948) and Fanon's *Les damnés de la terre* (1961). Memmi's *Portrait du colonisé* was also afforded the distinction of a preface by Sartre.

Implicitly noting Memmi's distance from the violent rhetoric of writers such as Fanon, Sartre lauds his objectivity, accuracy and measured delivery: "Cet ouvrage sobre et clair se range parmi les « géométries passionnées » : son objectivité calme, c'est de la souffrance et de la colère dépassée." (Sartre in Memmi [1957] 1985, p. 24) He also emphasises Memmi's portrayal of both sides of the colonial system, while maintaining a balanced observational rigour. He attributes this balanced perspective to Memmi's intermediate status, generated by his socially ambiguous position as a member of Tunisia's indigenous Jewish community, neither wholeheartedly accepted, nor rejected, by the colonised, or colonising, elements of Tunisian society under French rule (Sartre in Memmi [1957] 1985, pp. 23-24).

Much of the success of *Portrait du colonisé* has been attributed to this unusual double perspective which enabled Memmi to unpick the ideological fallacies and inherent structural weaknesses of colonisation, accurately predicting its collapse. *Portrait du colonisé* also warns of the problems facing citizens of newly decolonised nations as they deal with the legacy of their colonial past and risk falling prey to the numerous reactionary

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temptations fostered by it:

La liquidation de la colonisation n'est qu'un prélude [...] à la reconquête de soi. Pour se libérer de la colonisation, il lui a fallu partir de son oppression même, des carences de son groupe. Pour que sa libération soit complète, il faut qu'il se libère de ses conditions, certes inévitables de sa lutte. [...] En bref, il doit cesser de se définir par les catégories colonisatrices. [...].

Toutes ses dimensions reconquises, l'ex-colonisé sera devenu un homme comme les autres. Avec tout l'heur et le malheur des hommes, bien sûr, mais enfin il sera un homme libre. (Memmi [1957] 1985 pp. 162-164)

It is interesting to juxtapose the above citation with the final passage of Frantz Fanon's *Les damnés de la terre*: 'Pour l'Europe, pour nous-mêmes et pour l'humanité, camarades, il faut faire peau neuve, développer une pensée neuve, tenter de mettre sur pied un homme neuf' (Fanon [1961] 1991, p. 367). Despite Fanon and Memmi's very different approaches to nationalist struggle and decolonisation, the closing statements of their texts highlight their common heritage as the products of French colonisation allied to a metropolitan education. French colonial education exposed them to the values of European humanism, but they were also consistently confronted by France's failure, in the colonies where they grew up, to honour the very humanism she espoused. Memmi and Fanon demand effort and agency from the colonised subject if he/she is to surpass the suffering and injustice of colonisation and recover his/her basic humanity.

Can the psycho-pathological analyses, focusing on the common tropes of colonial systems, employed by Fanon and Memmi still work in the twenty-first century? Response to Memmi's *Portrait du décolonisé* would suggest that the answer is no, or that Memmi's approach to questions surrounding colonisation and decolonisation has at the very least fallen out of favour with recent trends in analysis and theorisation. Media response to *Portrait du décolonisé* was not uniformly negative; Alain-Gérard Slama writing for *Le Figaro Magazine* in 2004, for example, states that: "Le Portrait du décolonisé s'impose un demi-siècle [après *Portrait du colonisé*] comme la tentative de démystification la plus lucide de l'imaginaire dont meurent les pays affranchis de la domination étrangère." (Slama 2004, p. 49) Yet, Memmi's new portrait has largely failed to engage academic and scholarly debate

following its publication in 2004.

### **General context of *Portrait du décolonisé***

When Memmi resolved to write *Portrait du décolonisé arabo-musulman et de quelques autres*, the world was grappling with the immediate legacy of the 9/11 attacks on the United States. This legacy included US led declarations of War on Afghanistan's Taliban Islamic regime and on Iraq's secular dictatorship under Saddam Hussein. The dawn of the new millennium also saw an increasingly controversial focus on the large numbers of immigrants, and political refugees seeking to relocate from Africa to Western Europe. The far-right 'Front National' candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen's second place finish in the French Presidential Elections of 2002, following his surprise success in the preliminary rounds, was a high profile example of growing support for political conservatism and resistance to multi-culturalism and integration in Western European societies. Amid this volatile international climate, Memmi attempted a general portrait of the world's decolonised populations, but also paid particular attention to the Arabo-Muslim decolonised of North Africa and those immigrants who had settled in the French former metropolitan centre. As a Jewish, Tunisian-born, Francophone scholar who had relocated to Paris Memmi's self-appointed task was always likely to meet with the disapproval of decolonised, immigrant and French populations alike, since for all three Memmi could be seen as an outsider intervening in the most fraught aspects of their collective and individual existence. In a recent article titled 'Albert Memmi in the Era of Decolonization', Keally McBride cites Neocosmos' comments on Memmi's evolution into a representative of the European intellectual establishment and the limitations this imposes on his insights into decolonisation and immigration:

[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 author has lost his capacity to look through the lenses that made his initial book such a success. (Neocosmos cited in McBride 2011, p. 56)

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These circumstances, viewed in context, make Memmi's professed reticence to attempt a new portrait understandable. In an interview with Christian Makarian which appeared in *L'Express* of June 14<sup>th</sup> 2004, Memmi discusses the biographical approach he employs when selecting topics for his writing:

J'ai été professeur à Nanterre pendant plus de vingt ans et j'ai rencontré de nombreux étudiants issus du tiers-monde, [...] on m'a demandé à plusieurs reprises si j'avais changé d'avis par rapport à la publication de *Portrait du colonisé, portrait du colonisateur* (Gallimard). De fil en aiguille, j'ai réuni une grande masse d'informations, de rapports, de notes, et l'idée d'en faire un livre m'est venue peu à peu. [...] fondée sur une base autobiographique : je ne parle que de ce que j'ai vécu ou ressenti. [...] Je pars du concret pour aborder, par le travail, la généralisation philosophique dans un va-et-vient constant. (Memmi 2004 *L'Express*, p. 124)

This fluid, anecdotal approach accounts for aspects of *Portrait du décolonisé* which grated with academics and critics, but it also affords Memmi something of a 'get-out clause'; he is a messenger who merely conveys the cumulative effect of his lived experiences and impressions, whereas clearly, his choices regarding which elements to include in the portraits and used to stand in for vast numbers of unique individuals, are prejudicial to the overall impression which his representation conveys.

### **Structure and content**

Memmi's *Portrait du décolonisé* comprises two sections. The first examines the decolonised subject in the former colony and the second deals with the decolonised subject as an immigrant to the West and as the child of immigrant parents. Memmi's personal experiences as a Tunisian-born Francophone intellectual coincide neither with those of the decolonised subject, nor with those of the typical immigrant whom he elects to examine. His portrait relies upon his observations of, and research into, decolonised peoples living in newly independent societies, and of unskilled and/or impoverished immigrants who left their decolonised homelands in search of better opportunities in the West. Memmi's



perspective is no longer that of an intermediary figure both within, and excluded from, the system he describes, but that of an external observer, albeit one with a long pedigree of study and inquiry.

The opening section deals with common afflictions of decolonised and newly independent nations; disillusionment, corruption, poverty, autocratic and dictatorial rulers, a disproportionate level of power resting in the hands of organised religions or the military, an underdeveloped or silent intelligentsia and a conflicted or gagged literary community, over-population and mass-emigration. The second section deals with immigrants to the West and their children, addressing the specificities of immigration from the Maghreb to the former colonial centre, France, and exploring issues such as exile, ghettoization, attempted integration, religious conservatism, unemployment, delinquency, radicalisation and terrorism. Reviving the analytical techniques of his earlier *Portrait du colonisé*, Memmi coins personae such as the 'zombie' to act as the decolonised successors of the coloniser's 'Nero complex' and other figures. Unfortunately, new tropes such as Memmi's 'zombie', which seeks to depict the psychology of second generation immigrants relegated to the margins of French society, have a strongly pejorative tone and fail to delve deeper than relatively superficial observations (Memmi 2004, pp. 137-145).

In *Portrait du décolonisé* Memmi is forceful, even outspoken in his criticisms of aspects of Islamic practice in decolonised societies and among immigrants to the West. He does not hide his preference for secular societies and invites controversy, equating the tight bonds between Arabo-Islamic culture and the practice of Islam with a destructive primitivism: "L'islam n'est pas seulement une religion, c'est une culture et une civilisation qui englobent le social et même le politique. [...] L'islam, [...] demeure à la fois une prophétie et une législation ; le code civil et la religion coïncident." (Memmi 2004, p. 149)

This argument was systematically employed to justify denying North Africans the right to French citizenship in the Maghreb from the time of France's first military conquest in the region (Algeria in 1830). The notorious law of 1870 (named for government minister Adolphe Crémieux), allowing for the naturalisation of Jews in Algeria as French citizens, while refusing the same right to Muslims, amounted to an official endorsement of anti-

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Islamic discrimination on the grounds that Coranic law was incompatible with French civil law (Urbain 1862, Décret Crémieux 1870). Memmi was certainly aware that he shared this argument with colonial and imperial apologists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but this did not deter him from invoking it.

Throughout *Portrait du décolonisé* Memmi offers few concessions to conceptions of political correctness, however unpalatable this may be for a twenty-first-century readership. His earlier portrait acted as a vehicle for the expression of his criticisms of the deficiencies of the colonised and the coloniser, but *Portrait du décolonisé* is less general in the critique it offers. For example, Memmi condemns Islamic conservatism in relation to issues such as the wearing of the veil (*hijab*) by Muslim women in Western and in decolonised societies, and what he depicts as a reactionary insularity in response to Islamic terrorism:

L'affaire du port du voile est... pleine d'enseignements. [...] Ces petites sottes ne voient pas qu'elles agissent contre elles-mêmes, en refusant des lois qui les libèrent au profit de dogmes qui les asservissent. Elles exigent, au nom d'une laïcité mal interprétée, de ne pas être laïques. [...] On assiste à un retour du voile dans certains pays arabes, la Tunisie, par exemple, où il avait quasiment disparu, [...] Le voile est un ghetto portatif, révélateur du trouble identitaire qui affecte les immigrés musulmans, (Memmi 2004, pp. 105-107).

La réussite relative des intégristes est d'avoir mis au point un cercle infernal : la terreur contre les Occidentaux génère une méfiance contre tous les Arabes et cette méfiance alimente le ressentiment contre tout l'Occident. (Memmi 2004, p. 164)

Over recent decades some in the media and academic circles have equated Memmi's recent work with a Zionist perspective. Such associations were fuelled by his attempts in *Portrait du décolonisé* to relativize the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in terms of numbers killed in juxtaposition with the loss of life in the Rwandan genocide or the genocide of Kurds in Iraq (Memmi 2004, pp. 40-43).

For reasons including those just outlined, to date Memmi's new portrait has not fuelled scholarly debate, or captured the imagination of the world's oppressed as his *Portrait du colonisé* did during the twentieth century. In *Portrait du décolonisé* Memmi

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appears to anticipate this frosty reception by highlighting what he identifies as a refusal by many decolonised subjects to accept responsibility for their situation, attributing blame to the former coloniser, or the West in general for their suffering, and for the shortcomings of the decolonised nation:

Si le décolonisé n'est toujours pas le libre citoyen d'un pays libre, c'est qu'il demeure le jouet impuissant de l'ancienne fatalité. Si l'économie est défaillante, la politique inégalitaire, la culture fossilisée, c'est toujours la faute de l'ex-colonisateur ; non de la saignée systématique du produit national par les nouveaux maîtres, ni de la viscosité de sa culture qui n'arrive pas à déboucher sur le présent et le futur. (Memmi 2004, p. 36)

In a recent article, McBride identifies one of Memmi's own observations in *Portrait du décolonisé* as key to the text's failure to make an impact on the field of post-colonial studies and decolonisation: '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' (McBride, 2011, p. 53). Now that the common enemy of coloniser and colonised alike, the corrupt and corrupting colonial system, is gone, the parameters for analysis are increasingly problematic to define. The reifying effects of much postcolonial theory make a coherent and simplified approach to any engagement with broad issues, such as that favoured by Memmi, a virtually impossible task. McBride addresses this obstacle to Memmi's attempted reprise of the analytical methodology he employed with critical success in *Portrait du colonisé*:

If the entire world today is properly understood as postcolonial, how can one possibly make sense of it? [...] This is why monographic works that detail specific 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 [sic], Fanon and Memmi. (McBride 2011, pp. 60-61)

Recent critical theory tends to group Memmi with figures such as Fanon and Césaire, treating them as mid-twentieth-century precursors of postcolonialism, for example, Jacques Pouchepadass in *La situation postcoloniale* (2007) writes: 'les écrits militants d'Albert Memmi et de Frantz Fanon, sans parler du *Discours sur le colonialisme* d'Aimé

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Césaire, tous parus dans les années 1950 ou peu après, qui sont d'ailleurs célébrés comme des textes précurseurs par les postcolonialistes d'aujourd'hui' (Pouchepadass in Smouts, 2007, p. 179). Following the publication of *Portrait du décolonisé* Memmi has not come to be considered as a postcolonial scholar or a scholar of decolonisation, but rather as a relic of an earlier era.

**New relevance?**

Despite the controversial and pejorative nature of aspects of Memmi's analysis in *Portrait du décolonisé*, I believe that there are gains to be made from a reappraisal of this largely ignored work, while bearing in mind its flaws and limitations. The turbulent nature of relations between the West and the Arabo-Islamic world over the past decade and the tide of political unrest, revolution and bloodshed sweeping much of North Africa and the Middle East, could lend certain areas of Memmi's gloomy portrait of the decolonised world new credence.

It is worth noting that Memmi's *Portrait du décolonisé* makes repeated reference to the oppressive and corrupt regimes of rulers in Egypt, Libya, Syria and in his native Tunisia, in addition to regimes in Iraq and Afghanistan which were dominating international headlines in 2003 (Memmi 2004, pp. 30-32). These nations have supplanted Iraq and Afghanistan in recent news headlines, and diplomatic agendas following the dawning of the so-called 'Arab Spring' in January 2011. Memmi highlights the ruling regimes of Egypt, Syria and Tunisia which were considered by most observers, when he was writing in 2003, to be among the most stable and progressive majority Islamic nations born of the collapse of European Empire:

Le népotisme est, on le sait, l'un des traits spécifiques des régimes mafieux. [...] Mieux encore ils s'efforceront d'établir une continuité dans le temps [...] ; le fils du Syrien al Asad a succédé à son père ; l'Égyptien Moubarak vient de révéler qu'il avait un fils, ouf ! [...]

Ainsi, comme chez les marionnettes, le potentat se croira libre de ses mouvements, sinon invulnérable et éternel. Du reste, en attendant sa lointaine succession, il utilisera tous les moyens, légaux et illégaux, pour

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mettre son pouvoir à l'abri. (Memmi 2004, pp. 27-29)

Memmi demonstrates that he has retained his social and political foresight, emphasising a dangerous political complacency toward the deeply flawed and corrupt regimes of these apparently moderate nations, and the untenable conditions of poverty, oppression and denial of access to basic humanitarian and democratic rights endured by their citizens:

L'exception tunisienne, même grevée de l'incompréhensible pression policière, prouve déjà que tout est possible ; l'illettrisme a presque disparu, la condition de la femme s'est largement améliorée. Mais n'est-ce pas, là encore, que l'on préfère ignorer les véritables raisons de la misère, qui sont internes, et donc accessibles aux changements ? Que les nantis et les potentats veulent surtout distraire l'attention des gouvernés, les persuader que leur dénuement est inévitable, le résultat de la fatalité ou de quelque complot des étrangers, espérant ainsi désarmer leur ressentiment et prévenir leur révolte ? (Memmi 2004, pp. 39-40)

Public frustration with inadequate and corrupt rule in the very countries singled out by Memmi in *Portrait du décolonisé*, boiled over from January 2011, with long-established regimes and their rulers successively overthrown in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, with Syria subject to sustained popular uprising against its President Asad, countered by bloody and widely condemned military repression leading to civil war, humanitarian crisis and most recently accusations of the use of chemical weapons against the civilian population. Many academics and commentators felt that Memmi's *Portrait du décolonisé* when it was first published in 2004 'fera sans doute moins date que les écrits de 1957' (Boulouque 2004, p. 48). Despite these initial assessments Memmi's new portrait appears to have successfully gauged the ticking time-bomb among the popular classes of North African and Middle Eastern societies with great precision, especially for a Westernised academic, far removed from the realities of life in those regions.

Couched in unpalatably blunt and pejorative criticisms of Islamic leadership, and of decolonised and immigrant Arabo-Muslim communities, the more salient points of Memmi's analysis, particularly of decolonised societies, appear to have escaped the attention of the scholarly community and the public at large, or at least to be at odds with

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recent trends in academia and cultural theory.

Memmi also warns of increasingly unstable and volatile inter-community relations in countries with large immigrant populations, or populations of immigrant origin in *Portrait du décolonisé*:

Une corrida avec la police, dans une voiture volée, peut se transformer en catastrophe, laquelle enclenche un cycle de représailles et de ripostes (Memmi, 2004, p. 145).

Habiter la banlieue des pauvres est habiter une autre ville [...] où les forces de l'ordre, il est vrai, exaspérées par l'incessante difficulté de leur tâche et la remise en question de leur autorité, n'apportent pas toujours le doigté dont elles font preuve dans les beaux quartiers. (Memmi 2004, p. 141)

Memmi's warnings preceded the riots which devastated many French urban centres in 2005, and more recently London and other British cities with high proportions of immigrants, and citizens of immigrant origin in 2011. French and British explosions of violence, rioting and looting were sparked off by police involvement in the deaths of adolescents and young men of immigrant or Afro-Caribbean origin, and served as a frightening illustration of the failures of integration in both French and British (both former Imperial powers) societies. But, were the diagnoses of the failure of decolonisation and integration, and of an endemic malaise across the Western and Arabo-Muslim world, the only accomplishments of Memmi's *Portrait du décolonisé*? Or did that work offer any viable remedies, or ways of circumventing these problems, which could be pertinent to the period of crisis and change currently occurring on a global scale?

### **Vers un autre monde ?**

Toward the conclusion of *Portrait du décolonisé* Memmi poses a question that has preoccupied many commentators and political leaders over the turbulent opening decade of the twenty-first century: "Mais alors où allons-nous ? J'entends par « nous » tous les habitants de la planète," (Memmi 2004, p. 150). It is in the European heritage of

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Enlightenment universalism that Memmi locates, albeit in the most hypothetical of terms, hope for a positive future. Solidarity and secularism are the key lynchpins of the system of relations proposed by Memmi as a way forward for the world's decolonised and former colonising peoples:

La laïcité est la condition première d'un universalisme véritable, celui qui, sans traquer les singularités, les transcende.

[...] La solidarité n'est pas seulement un concept philosophique et moral, c'est une nécessité pratique, sans laquelle nous vivrions dans une tourmente permanente. [...]

Serait-ce alors, vraiment, la fin de la civilisation occidentale ? Peut-être au contraire sa véritable universalisation. Car le meilleur de l'Occident fera nécessairement partie du patrimoine commun. [...], les Arabo-musulmans doivent reconnaître [...], que l'Occident fait dorénavant partie d'eux, comme l'Occident doit admettre que les musulmans font dorénavant parti de lui.

Mais pour avancer vers cette utopie [...], ce devrait être le même combat à l'échelle de la planète entière, car il y va de notre salut commun. (Memmi 2004, pp. 165-167)

Much like the aspirational conclusion of Memmi's *Portrait du colonisé*, the closing statements of *Portrait du décolonisé*, framed by the interrogative heading "vers un autre monde ?", appeal to a basic conception of humanism, recalling France's fabled self-image as 'le pays des droits de l'homme'. In solidarity and in the best of Western universalist values, such as a carefully applied secularism, Memmi locates potential for the world's decolonised and marginalised peoples to escape from, and surpass, their history:

Peut-être [...] que nous n'avons d'autre issue que de laisser faire le temps, avec l'espoir qu'il aille vers un mieux. Mais si nous pouvions, si peu que ce soit, agir sur notre commun destin, y avoir quelque part, si minime soit-elle, nous serions inexcusables de ne pas l'avoir tenté. (Memmi 2004, pp. 167-168)

As in his earlier *Portrait du colonisé* Memmi's proposed solution calls for extensive agency on the part of marginalised and repressed peoples and their more affluent Western counterparts in former colonising nations, emphasising the challenge this will involve for all concerned.

## Conclusion

It appears unlikely that Memmi's *Portrait du décolonisé* will be afforded a place in the canon of post-colonial theory and sociological analysis alongside his earlier *Portrait du colonisé*. *Portrait du décolonisé* is not the era-defining text that its predecessor came to be, nor will Memmi become 'the' theorist of decolonisation. Nonetheless its observations are not devoid of merit. Memmi's concluding vision for a diverse but secular world, and for the implementation of a revised form of Western universalism capable of honouring its lofty ideals, acknowledges the inescapable impact of Western hegemony on our world, and calls on the decolonised and others to accept rather than deny this legacy, but to adapt and rework it in a more just, modern and secular context. This formula for progress is demanding and presents numerous difficulties. It necessitates extensive and concerted collaboration, generosity of spirit and considerable concessions, particularly to secularism. Memmi's concluding utopian vision also jars with the disillusionment pervading the majority of his portrait:

Tout cela, avons-nous averti, est de l'ordre du souhait. Peut-être y a-t-il quelque naïveté à espérer que, dans un proche avenir, les uns sauront tempérer leur ressentiment, les autres leurs avidités. [...] Mais aux premiers on doit répéter qu'on ne se peut pas vivre éternellement dans le ressentiment, surtout si l'on veut vivre ailleurs que dans son pays natal ; aux seconds qu'ils ne pourront contenir longtemps l'agitation des affamés et des humiliés. (Memmi 2004, p. 167)

In 1960, British Prime Minister Harold McMillan spoke of 'The wind of change [that] is blowing through this continent [Africa], and whether we like it or not, this growth of national consciousness is a political fact' (Shipway 2008, p. 199). I believe that with his *Portrait du décolonisé*, as with his *Portrait du colonisé*, Memmi successfully identified a turning point in global history. It is also apparent that Memmi's achievements as a figure of revolutionary, innovative thought will continue to be associated with the mid-twentieth rather than with the twenty-first century. Current debates on the new 'winds of change' are not ones where the voice of Memmi is likely to be given the weight it was afforded



when he wrote as a contemporary of Fanon, Césaire and other theorists who also emerged from the colonial system which they sought to critique. Let us hope that the 'winds of change' currently sweeping the Western and Arabo-Islamic worlds alike, alongside the challenges set out in texts such as Memmi's *Portrait du colonisé* and *Portrait du décolonisé* will help to inspire a new generation of revolutionary thinkers.

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