Albert Memmi: Anti-Semitism, Colonialism, Racism

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“I am Tunisian, but Jewish, which means that I am politically and socially an outcast. I speak the language of the country with a particular accent and emotionally I have nothing in common with Moslems. I am a Jew who has broken with the Jewish religion and the ghetto, is ignorant of Jewish culture and detests the middle class because it is phony. I am poor but desperately anxious not to be poor, and at the same time, I refuse to take the necessary steps to avoid poverty” (The Pillar of Salt, p. 331).

In these few words in his autobiographical novel, Albert Memmi describes the dilemma of his life. He is an outcast. He does not belong to his religious community, to his nation, to any particular group. He is a human being, and wants to be a universal human being…but the world won’t let him out of his box.

Memmi was born in Tunis (French Tunisia) in December 1920. He grew up in the Jewish ghetto and hated being a ghetto Jew. He attended the school of the Alliance Israelite Universelle, was drawn to French language and culture, and went on to study at the University of Algiers and later at the Sorbonne in Paris.

During the Nazi occupation of Tunisia, he was imprisoned in a forced labor camp from which he later escaped. After World War II, he supported the independence movement in Tunisia but was unable to find a place in the movement because he was a Jew and because of his French education. He left Tunisia and settled in Paris where he became a prominent writer and teacher, and was especially well known for his works analyzing and criticizing Colonialism. He

had a long and distinguished career; he died in May 2020 at age 99.

Like many other Jewish intellectuals who grew up in ghettos, Memmi simply wanted to be a human being…like everyone else. He deeply resented living in a cocoon separated from the mainstream culture of the land. He found the Jewish religious leadership to be narrowly focused, unaware of or strongly opposed to prevailing intellectual currents of the time. Religion, to Memmi and others like him, was a combination of superstitions and traditions that lacked meaning except for the ignorant.

Who could understand the dilemma of Memmi? Who could help him out of his self-enclosed world? There was no religiously significant person within the Jewish religious establishment who could reach the young aspiring intellectual. And outside of the Jewish community, there was a wall of hatred, anti-Jewish prejudice, dehumanization. Memmi lamented: “I do not believe I have ever rejoiced in being a Jew. When I think of myself as a Jew, I am immediately conscious of a vague spiritual malaise, warm, persistent, always the same, that comes over me. The first thing that strikes me when I think of myself as a Jew is that I do not like to consider myself in that light” (Portrait of a Jew, p. 15). In his novel, he made it clear: “I did not want to be Alexandre Mordekhai Benillouche, I wanted to escape from myself and go out toward the others. I was not going to remain a Jew, an Oriental, a pauper; I belonged neither to my family nor to my religious community; I was a new being, utterly transparent, ready to be completely remade into a philosophy instructor” (The Pillar of Salt, p. 230).

The Jewish predicament was forced upon him by a hostile non-Jewish world. “To be a Jew is first and foremost to find oneself called to account, to feel oneself continuously accused, explicitly or implicitly, clearly or obscurely….There is that constant hostility, that noxious haze in which the Jew is born, lives and dies” (Portrait of a Jew, p. 57). Jews are accused for any and every ill in the world. “The moment a nation is struck by a catastrophe, we are the first to be abandoned….When a nation is in trouble, when the world is in trouble, I know now, from the experience of my short life, there is danger for the Jew: even if the malady has no connection with Jews” (Ibid., p. 208). The non-Jewish haters treat Jews not as fellow human beings, but as repulsive stereotypes. “I am not only suspected and accused, I am bullied, restricted, curtailed in my daily life, in my development as a man….For the most serious element, perhaps, the one most difficult to admit, is that the fate imposed on the Jews is a degrading fate” (Ibid., p. 321).

How is a Jew to be liberated from this unpleasant fate? How can a Jew simply be accepted as an individual human being rather than as an ugly, hateful stereotype? Memmi reminisces: “When we graduated from the lycee at Tunis many of us decided to cut ourselves off from the past, the ghetto and our native land, to breathe fresh air and set off on the most beautiful of adventures. 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” (The Liberation of the Jew, p. 22). He, like many others, considered adapting to the styles and mores of the “majority.” By blending in, by accepting their way of life, he would be accepted. But he soon learned that no matter how much he—and other Jews—tried to assimilate, the non-Jews still saw them as Jews and still denigrated them for being Jewish.

So Jews tended to create their own inner world, to protect themselves psychologically from the constant Jew-hatred of the non-Jews. “I came to discover at the same time a fundamental truth: the ghetto was also inside the Jew. It was more than a stone wall and wooden doors, more than a collective prison imposed by others; it was an inner wall, real and symbolic, which the Jew had built” (Ibid., p. 129).

But Memmi ultimately came to a clear understanding of how to cope with being a member of an oppressed group. The first step is to admit the problem candidly. The next step is to deny oneself all camouflage and consolation for one’s misery. And then, above all, one must make an effective decision to put an end to the oppression. The oppressed person must take responsibility for shaking off the control of the oppressors. “The Jew, oppressed as a people, must find his autonomy and freedom to express his originality as a people” (Ibid., p 278). For Memmi, the ultimate goal is for Jews to live freely, independently, not under the thumb of others. In practical terms, that meant Jewish liberation is expressed through the State of Israel. “The specific liberation of the Jews is a national liberation and for the last years this national liberation of the Jew has been the state of Israel….If Israel did not exist it would have to be created….For Israel alone can put an end to the negativity of the Jew and liberate his positivity” (Ibid., pp. 283, 294).

From his personal struggles as a Jew, Memmi extrapolated his concerns to all oppressed peoples. In his classic work, The Colonizer and the Colonized, he underscored the arrogant assumptions of the European colonial powers. Colonialists posit an unbridgeable gulf between themselves and their victims. “The colonialist stresses those things which keep him separate, rather than

emphasizing that which might contribute to the foundation of a joint community. In those differences, the colonized is always degraded and the colonialist finds justification for rejecting his subjects: (p. 71). The self-assured oppressor assumes all the virtues, and expects the victims to adapt to the ideas and values of their oppressors. “The point is that whether Negro, Jew or colonized, one must resemble the white man, the non-Jew, the colonizer” (p. 122). But no matter how hard the victims try to emulate the oppressors, they “can never succeed in becoming identified with the colonizer, not even in copying his role correctly” (p. 123). The situation is intolerable for the victims. “Must he, all his life, be ashamed of what is most real in him, of the only things not borrowed? Must he insist on denying himself, and, moreover, will he always be able to stand it? Must his liberation be accomplished through systematic self-denial?” (p. 123).

The colonialist dehumanizes victims, treats them as inferior beings who deserve to be treated as inferiors. But at some point, the victims will find the courage to rebel and to repudiate the arrogance of the oppressors. “The West has discovered that it cannot live peacefully if the majority of the world’s inhabitants live in poverty, envious of the developed world. Because of its very progress, the West has become a fat glutton; it stuffs itself with food and destroys its toys like a spoiled child” (Decolonization and the Decolonized, p. 129.)

Memmi devotes serious attention to the nature of racism. He sees the problem as impacting on almost everyone. “Each time one finds oneself in contact with an individual or group that is different and only poorly understood, one can react in a way that would signify a racism.…We risk behaving in a racist manner each time we believe ourselves threatened in our privileges, in our well-being, or in our security” (Racism, p. 23). Racist attitudes/behaviors are characterized by building up oneself while devaluing others. To bolster one’s own ego, one tears down others who are perceived as threats or competitors. “Racists are people who are afraid; they feel fear because they attack, and they attack because they feel fear” (p. 97).

In its limited sense, racism is the attribution of negative attributes based on biological factors. People of the victim race/group are branded as being biologically different, and the differences are innate and negative. But more broadly, the issue of racism transcends biology. “The word racism works perfectly well for the biological notion.…Heterophobia would designate the many configurations of fear, hate and aggressiveness, that, directed against an other, attempt to justify themselves through different psychological, cultural, social or metaphysical means, of which racism in its biological sense is only one” (p. 118).

Racism rejects others in the name of biological differences. Heterophobia rejects others in the name of no matter what difference.

Racism and heterophobia are not limited to psychotic individuals or hateful groups. “In almost every person there is a tendency toward a racist mode of thinking that is unconscious, or perhaps partly conscious, or not unconscious at all…Racism, or perhaps I should say heterophobia, is ultimately the most widely shared attitude in the world” (pp. 131, 132). People seek to bolster their own egos by attributing negative value to others who are different in any way. The most obvious targets of racists are the victims who are already the most oppressed. It is easiest to attack those who are weakest.

How do individuals/groups overcome the tendency to racism and heterophobia? They must come to realize that “racism is a form of charging the oppressed for the crimes, whether actual or potential, of the oppressor” (p. 139). In other words, haters reflect their own negative traits when they brand others. Once they realize that their hatred is a reflection of their own fears and weaknesses, they can try to overcome it. They must not be frightened by people of different races, religions, nations. “Differences must be lucidly recognized, embrace and respected as such. Others must be granted their being as other, with all the enrichment of life that might be possible through their very differences” (p. 155).

Memmi devoted his life to understanding and combatting racism and heterophobia. In spite of his monumental achievements as teacher and author, he never escaped the feeling that he was oppressed. His very Jewishness was a source of anguish to him because so many non-Jews viewed Jews as caricatures rather than as fellow human beings. Yet, his first hand feelings of being alienated and oppressed enabled him to fully identify with others who were victims of colonialism, racism, hatred. If Jewishness was a burden to him, it was also the source of his greatness.

Although he was alienated from religion, he had a deep spiritual sense. In his novel, The Desert, he wrote almost longingly: “I have always loved those moments when one finds oneself alone with one’s Creator, and I wonder whether it is not for that reason that God requires prayer, for that daily encounter with ourselves” (pp. 54-55). But he found no rabbinic or spiritual personalities who could adequately address his concerns or cultivate his spirituality.

Memmi wrote: “Do not become a stranger to yourself, for you are lost from that day on; you will have no peace if there is not, somewhere within you, a corner of

certainty, calm waters where you can take refuge in sleep” (The Pillar of Salt, p. 316).

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To me, Albert Memmi represents generations of thinking Jews who have struggled with their Jewish identities. They have felt oppressed by ubiquitous anti-Jewish attitudes and actions; they have been dissatisfied with presentations of Judaism that are akin to superstition and blind obedience; they have felt unfairly stigmatized and set apart. They have wanted simply to be free and dignified human beings, judged by their individual actions. They have wanted to share in the life and culture of humanity as a whole, and they have wanted to contribute to the betterment of the world.

In my long career as a Sephardic Orthodox rabbi, I have related to many Jews—young and old—who shared some of the feelings and concerns articulated by Albert Memmi. I have learned much from them, as I hope they have learned from me. When a Jew becomes a stranger to him/herself, inner peace and self-respect are endangered. To be a liberated Jew means to be a self-respecting, confident, compassionate human being. It means accepting Judaism and Jewishness as great privileges that should be celebrated. Albert Memmi was a tormented soul who could not find his way clear to be a liberated, confident Jew. In his failure, though, there are seeds of redemption for other thinking Jews. We cannot allow ourselves to be boxed in by others. We must insist on our freedom and humanity.