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Albert Memmi, *Decolonization and the Decolonized*. Translated by Robert Bononno. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006. xii + 148 pp. \$17.95 US (pb). ISBN 0-8166-4735-6.

Review by Richard L. Derderian, California Lutheran University.

Noted Tunisian intellectual Alfred Memmi describes his latest book, *Decolonization and the Decolonized*, as a continuation of his 1957 classic, *Portrait du colonisé précédé du Portrait du colonisateur*, published in English in 1965 as *The Colonizer and the Colonized*.^[1] Whereas the latter concluded with the promise of the decolonized becoming “a man like any other,” the former focuses on how and why that promise has largely gone unfulfilled. Consisting of two parts, part one “The New Citizens,” looks at how formerly colonized societies have failed and why this failure has such a powerful bearing on the present. Part two, “The Immigrant,” examines the human displacement caused by failed postcolonial societies and its ramifications for immigrant children and receiving countries. While centering on the region and population the author knows best, the Arab-Muslim world and North Africans in France, Memmi draws parallels with a wide range of countries and offers insights and observations intended to have broader application. Provocative, engaging, and admirably translated by Robert Bononno, *Decolonization and the Decolonized* is a concise and very readable study that will be of value to specialists and general readers interested in the plight of developing nations and immigration.

The opening heading, “The Great Disillusion,” sets the tone for part one of Memmi’s study. Nearly fifty years after independence all of the high hopes for the postcolonial era have been swept away by the reality of endemic poverty, corruption and violence. Instead of enjoying the benefits of freedom, the formerly colonized find themselves stripped of all basic rights and liberties and shackled with even more oppressive, authoritarian regimes. Lacking any claim to legitimacy, postcolonial regimes have become increasingly dependent on close collaboration with the military and a dangerous game of concessions and repression aimed at religious extremists.

Instead of searching for solutions to their myriad problems, postcolonial regimes have hidden behind an array of diversions, excuses and myths. From the brutal and exploitative legacy of the colonial past to the constraints of neocolonial relations in the present, someone else is always held to blame. In many respects, the Palestinian-Israeli crisis, and the inordinate attention given to it by Arab-Muslim states, serves as another convenient diversion from the failure of postcolonial regimes to resolve their own problems at home. Memmi argues that postcolonial governments have had decades to sort out their problems and need to begin assuming responsibility for their continued shortcomings in the present. He especially regrets that most third world intellectuals have not had the courage to offer much needed voices of reason and to serve as a force of positive change.

It is the absence of internal forms of self-criticism that contributes to the silence in developing countries on a host of problems from suicide bombings and the condition of women to the plight of ethnic minorities. The critical voices on these issues almost invariably come from the outside which makes them suspect and easier to dismiss. Moreover, the timidity of third world intellectuals has left cultural heritages open to manipulation. Rather than functioning as a resource for creative solutions to present realities, postcolonial regimes exploit their heritage as a means of escaping into a mythic and glorious past. With their own cultures left underdeveloped and divorced from the present, postcolonial societies have had to maintain their reliance on the languages of the ex-colonizers because they are better suited

to addressing the conditions and concerns of today.

Instead of investing in modern forms of education needed to promote development but which might sow the seeds of revolt, postcolonial regimes in the Arab-Muslim world have funneled money into the construction of mosques and religious schools. Once regarded as a crutch, fundamentalists have now become formidable foes. For Memmi, fundamentalist gains are a direct threat to the few freedoms that postcolonial societies do possess and risk compounding the already arrested development of the Arab-Muslim world.

Under siege by fundamentalists, unable to provide for the basic needs of their people, riddled by violence and warfare, postcolonial societies are saddled with the additional handicap of being what Memmi describes as “nations born too late.” Desperately in need of cohesion and unity, postcolonial societies are based on the model of the Western nation-state that is already being outmoded in the West and superseded by new supranational bodies such as the European Union. If patriotism and national pride are on the wane in the West, they have even less of a hold on the members of the newest nations. Pronounced cultural differences and past failures to forge lasting national alliances make the prospect of any supranational Arab-Muslim alternative highly unlikely.

Fearful of the political consequences of innovation and failing to capture the imagination and excitement of their citizens, postcolonial regimes cling to power not only through violence but also through a perversion of the justice system. Colonial regimes, Memmi argues, were checked in their abuse of the laws by the oversight of the home country. No such constraints exist for postcolonial rulers. It is the pervasive insecurity and continual violence engendered by these lawless police states that has spawned Islamic terrorism in the Arab world today. Islamic terrorism is a manifestation of the violence that afflicts Arab-Muslim societies, a symptom of what Memmi describes as “a sick society.” Novel only in its indiscriminate use of violence, the nihilistic impulse that drives Islamic terrorism mirrors the larger tendency in the Arab-Muslim world to cast blame rather than search for constructive solutions to serious problems in the present.

Having failed their citizens on so many levels, the decision of many formerly colonized peoples to seek a better life abroad should come as no surprise. With its familiar culture and the presence of friends, relatives, and community resources, the decision to make the former colonizing country the destination of choice is also perfectly understandable. It is this decision to emigrate, one of the most glaring consequences of failed postcolonial regimes, that marks the transition to part two of Memmi’s study.

Immigration not only represents the failure of sending countries to retain those who are often their brightest and/or most ambitious, it is also a permanent reminder of the failure of the colonial project. Advocates of immigrant rights argue that past debts owed to the ex-colonized and the tremendous sacrifices required to emigrate make it incumbent upon receiving countries to adopt generous immigration policies. Opponents contend that national sovereignty is meaningless if we fail to defend our borders or the integrity of our national culture. The reality, Memmi stresses, is that Western countries cannot do without immigration. Faced with shrinking working age populations and rising welfare costs, the developed world has little choice but to continue its reliance on immigration.

It is the hostility that immigrants encounter that drives them into ethnic enclaves, or what Memmi labels as “the ghetto.” While offering many of the comforts and familiarities of home the ghetto becomes a trap. For the receiving country the ghetto offers evidence of the immigrant’s inability or unwillingness to integrate into the mainstream. For the immigrant, these accusations only intensify feelings of insecurity and rejection, strengthening the reflex to retreat even further into the ethnic enclave. The ghetto does not, however, help resolve the challenge of coexistence and the articulation of new forms of cultural identity.

One kind of response to the challenge of coexistence which Memmi finds especially troubling is the decision by Muslim women to wear Islamic headscarves. Often justified in the name of religious tolerance or free expression, Memmi argues that Islamic headscarves negate those very same rights that were so difficult to achieve in the West and are still denied to women in the Arab-Muslim world. Islamic headscarves are better understood as a “portable ghetto” that constrains the body of Muslim women much like other regressive practices such as female genital mutilation.

In most cases immigrants do find a new way of life in their adopted country. Joined by wives and family members, they build a new home and enjoy the benefits of the welfare state. While laboring to retain their roots, the planned return home gradually dissolves into myth and nostalgia. However, as the temporary stay becomes permanent a new divide takes shape between immigrants and their children. Different points of reference and different cultural norms separate immigrant parents and children. Parents are horrified by their daughters who embrace what they regard as the moral laxity of Western culture. Sons, who show no fear of the police, fail in their studies, and sink into unemployment and delinquency, are equally bewildering. For their part, immigrant children harbor feelings of embarrassment and contempt for their parents. They resent and refuse to perpetuate the humiliations endured by their fathers and are embarrassed by their mothers whose appearance and conduct fall far from the Western norms to which they aspire.

Much like the once newly independent ex-colonized man, Memmi describes immigrant sons as a “new man” still in the process of being created. In revolt against parental authority and the education system, they find themselves left with few options but to take up the same kinds of devalued and despised work as their fathers. Unemployed and trapped in broken communities, immigrant sons experience a growing sense of frustration and bitterness—sentiments that only intensify when traveling from beleaguered fringe communities to the more prosperous city center. In search of meaningful models, they adopt the clothing, hairstyles, music and dance of other oppressed minorities—with African-Americans having an especially pronounced influence. They express their disdain for the French national anthem, proclaim their allegiance to Saddam Hussein or Ousama bin Laden, set fire to cars, and clash with the police.[2]

At the heart of the matter are the questions that surround the integration process. Doubts about the ability of immigrant communities to assimilate are nothing new in French history. Italians and Poles were once thought to be too bound to their cultures of origin to ever successfully find a place in French society. What has changed, however, are growing French uncertainties about the strength and merits of French culture. In particular, the ability of schools and educators to continue in their role as the principle vectors of integration is now in doubt. Moreover, it is not clear how much new Muslim communities should do to prove their successful assimilation. What concessions can or should Muslims make without abandoning the integrity of their culture?

As these issues affect much of the world today, Memmi moves toward his conclusion by asking what we can all do. Recognizing our “reciprocal dependence” is a start. Developed nations must understand that poverty in the developing world will invariably affect them. Developing nations must also realize that continued progress hinges on interaction and involvement with the rest of the world. In short, no nation is an island. The reality in the West, Memmi reminds us, is that developed countries need immigration to bolster declining populations and to maintain generous welfare states. It is the uncertainty in the West about Western values and culture that hinders the process of integration. Economic liberalism and Marxism, the twin models of development in postcolonial societies have both been disappointing. Both have only contributed to the poverty that mires much of the developing world. Fundamentalism, however, is not the answer. By favoring privileged elites and promoting a policy of withdrawal from the world, fundamentalism only risks exacerbating existing problems.

Projecting into the future, Memmi argues that poverty, which supplies most of the world’s terrorists, is one of our greatest challenges. For development to accelerate, however, more needs to be done to shed

light on how corruption has led to the squandering of much needed resources. From arms sales to money laundering, Western nations also need to recognize how they have been complicit in this corruption. But the true needs of the people will not be met until developing countries remove the strongmen and establish real self government.

Equally important is the threat of Islamic fundamentalism. The Arab-Muslim majority, Memmi stresses, needs to see that it has nothing to gain from the conflict with the West which the fundamentalist minority hopes to provoke. Reason and the search for what unites need to prevail over our differences and divisions. To ensure the triumph of reason we need to take a more aggressive approach to poverty, corruption and despotism. To advance freedom of thought and expression, developing states must enshrine the principle of secularism and learn to distinguish between religious and social membership. In other words, an Arab does not necessarily have to be a Muslim. In keeping with the global tradition of cultural borrowings, the best aspects of Western civilization need to be made part of a shared world heritage. By promoting individualism, liberty, equal opportunity for women and human rights, third world countries will be better equipped to overcome past problems and present difficulties. For this to happen, however, Arab-Muslims and non-Muslims need to unite against the forces of fanaticism and intolerance.

A concise but expansive treatment of developing countries and the condition of immigrant communities today, Memmi's study is a welcome addition to the corpus of literature on the postcolonial world. Admonishing the timidity of third world intellectuals, Memmi practices what he preaches by offering a bold and unflinching critique of all that has gone wrong since independence. Whereas his findings and proposed solutions may not break any new ground, they are presented in a clear and accessible form that will be appreciated by specialists and general readers alike.

NOTES

[1] Albert Memmi, *Portrait du colonisé precede par Portrait du colonisateur* (Paris: Buchet, Chastel, Corrêa, 1957), originally translated in English by Howard Greenfeld as *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (New York: Orion Press, 1965).

[2] For more on the condition of North Africans in France see Richard L. Derderian, *North Africans in Contemporary France: Becoming Visible* (New York: Palgrave, 2004).

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