

Notes on Albert Memmi's Colonizer and the Colonized

MEMMI

The myth of the colonized: that the colonizer is superior and the colonized weak and inferior.

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...to endorse the myth and then to adapt to it, is to be acted upon by it. That myth is furthermore supported by a very solid organization; a government and a judicial system fed and renewed by the colonizer's historic, economic and cultural needs.

"...colonization creates the colonized just as...it creates the colonizer."

"The most serious blow suffered by the colonized is being removed from history and from the community. Colonization usurps any free role in either war or peace, every decision contributing to his destiny and that of the world, and all cultural and social responsibility."

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. In Europe, as Memmi says, the marginalized and the otherwise oppressed complain that the means of control of power are in the hands of the few, that they have little influence of government policy. But at least they have a superficial right to change that situation. As Memmi puts it : "they are deceived or weary, but not enslaved." They can and do revolt as history shows.

AGENCY

"The colonized on the other hand, feels neither responsible nor guilty nor skeptical, for he is out of the game. He is in no way a subject of history any more. Of course, he carries its burden...but always as an object....No matter how briefly colonization may have lasted, all memory of freedom seems distant..."

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GOVERNING

"'They are not capable of governing themselves,' says the colonizer. " As Memmi puts it "How could he be interested in something from which he is so resolutely excluded?"

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NATIONALITY/CITIZENSHIP

"The colonized enjoys none of the attributes of citizenship; neither his own, which is dependent, contested and smothered, nor that of the colonizer. He can hardly adhere to one or claim the other. Not having his just place in the community, not enjoying the rights of a modern citizen, not being subject to his normal duties, not voting, not bearing the burden of community affairs, he cannot feel like a true citizen. As a result

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of colonization, the colonized almost never experiences nationality and citizenship, except privately. Nationally and civically he is only what the colonizer is not."

CITIZENSHIP & EDUCATION

The colonized then according to Memmi deletes the ideas of citizenship from his ambitions and perspectives, and so "Nothing therefore suggests to the young colonized the self-assurance or pride of his citizenship....Obviously, there is likewise nothing in his school education, in which references to the community and the nation are always in terms of the colonizing nation"

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FAMILY

An interesting feature of colonized societies identified by Memmi, with which you may agree, is the over-dependence on the family, on traditional values. "Colonized society is a diseased society in which internal dynamics no longer succeed in creating new structures. Its century-hardened face has become nothing more than a mask under which it slowly smothers and dies. Such a society cannot resolve the conflicts of generations, for it is unable to be transformed. The revolt of the adolescent colonized, far from resolving into mobility and social progress can only sink into the morass of colonized society....

"Sooner or later then, the potential rebel falls back on the traditional values. This explains the astonishing survival of the colonized's family....The young man will marry, will become a devoted father, reliable brother, responsible uncle and, until he takes his father's place, a respectful son. Everything has gone back into the order of things. Revolt and conflict have ended in a victory for the parents and tradition."

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It is not an original psychology which explains the importance of the family, nor is it the intensity of family life which maintains vigor in the family and pulls the individual back to that more restricted cell, which saves and smothers him."

LOCAL RELIGION/SUPERSTITION

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"With its institutional framework, its collective and periodic holidays, religion constitutes another refuge value, both for the individual and for the group. For the individual, it is one of the rare paths of retreat; for the group, it is one of the rare manifestations which can protect its original existence....It is a spontaneous action of self-defense. a means of safeguarding the collective consciousness without which / a people quickly cease to exist." Thus both the family and beliefs have been refuges against colonial society's denial of a full social role ."

PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

The colonized Memmi tells us is refused "assimilation" and "nothing is left for him but to live isolated. The colonized is "driven back by colonization, and to a certain extent, lives with that situation."

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For the colonized says Memmi "Planning and building his future are forbidden. He must therefore limit himself to the present, and even that present is cut off and abstract."

In one sense that is what this course in historicizing and contextualizing the present tries to defy and overturn.

HISTORY

But whose history is Hong Kong's history. The colonized says Memmi "draws less and less from his past. The *colonizer* never even recognized that he had one; everyone knows that the commoner whose origins are unknown has no history." "Who are his folk heroes?" asks Memmi of the colonized. "At most he may be able to give us a few names, in complete disorder, and fewer and fewer as one goes down the generations. The colonized seems condemned to lose his memory."

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The memory of a people, as Memmi reminds us, rests on its institutions. But the "colonized's institutions are dead or petrified. He scarcely believes in those which continue to show some signs of life.... He often becomes ashamed of these institutions, as of a ridiculous and overaged monument."

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This takes us back to the celebration of festivals. The colonizer's festivals record like the names of places victors and victories and other such historical moments and men, the colonized celebrates religious holidays "located at the beginning of history, rather than in history. From the time they were instituted nothing else has happened in the life of that people. That is, nothing peculiar to their own existence which deserves to be retained by the collective consciousness and celebrated. Nothing except a great void."

"The few statues which decorate the city represent (with incredible scorn for the colonized who pass by them everyday) the great deeds of colonization."

EDUCATION

"By what else is the heritage of a people handed down?" asks Memmi. The answer by "the education which it gives to its children, and by language, that wonderful reservoir constantly enriched with new experiences. Traditions and acquirements, habits and conquests, deeds and acts of previous generations are thus bequeathed and recorded in history."

But what of the colonized's education. "The memory which is assigned to him," writes Memmi, "is certainly not his own. The history which is taught him is not his own....Everything seems to have taken place out of his country....The books talk to him of a world which in no way remind him of his own; the little boy is called [John]

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and the little girl [Jane]; and on winter evenings John and Jane walk home along snow-covered paths, stopping in front of a chestnut vendor..."

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The teacher and the school represent a world which is too different from his family environment. In both cases, far from preparing the adolescent to find himself completely, school creates a permanent duality in him."

Now of the following passage see how much would still be true of Hong Kong's linguistic situation: "The colonized is saved from illiteracy only to fall into linguistic dualism. This happens only if he is lucky, since most of the colonized will never have to suffer the tortures of colonial bilingualism. They will never have anything but their native tongue; that is a tongue which is neither written nor read, permitting only uncertain and poor oral development."

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Memmi makes a distinction between ordinary bilingualism and what he calls colonial bilingualism:

"The difference between native language and cultural language is not peculiar to the colonized, but colonial bilingualism cannot be compared to just any linguistic dualism. Possession of two languages is not merely a matter of having two tools, but actually means participation in two psychical and cultural realms. Here, the two worlds symbolized and conveyed by two tongues are in conflict; they are those of the colonizer and the colonized...[and] the colonized's mother tongue, that which is sustained by his feelings, emotions and dreams, that in which is tenderness and wonder are expressed thus that which holds the greatest emotional impact, is precisely the one which is the least valued....If he wants to obtain a job, make a place for himself, exist in the community and the world, he must first bow to the language of his masters. In the linguistic conflict within the colonized, his mother tongue is that which is crushed."