



Albert

Memmi

author of *The Colonizer and the Colonized*

DECOLONIZATION  
AND THE DECOLONIZED

translated by Robert Bononno

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**DECOLONIZATION  
AND THE DECOLONIZED**

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**WORKS BY ALBERT MEMMI**

*À Contre-courants*

*Agar, un roman*

*The Colonizer and the Colonized*

*Dependence: A Sketch for a Portrait of the Dependent*

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*The Pillar of Salt*

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*The Scorpion; or, The Imaginary Confession*

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# Acknowledgments

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# Introduction

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Rarely have I had so little desire to write a book. For in writing *Decolonization and the Decolonized*, I feared that my arguments would go unheard or be distorted, or might compound the problems faced by still fragile societies in need of our support. Nevertheless, when all was said and done, I felt there was an urgent need that formerly colonized peoples have an opportunity to hear a voice other than that of their so-called allies. When, in the 1950s, I wrote *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, I knew that some of my readers would refuse to follow me. Liberals, for example, like the highly esteemed Pierre Mendès-France, who felt that once the necessary reforms had been established, the colonized would abandon their quest for independence; or Marxists, who claimed, as usual, that decolonization consisted primarily in economic demands. I believed they were wrong and that the situation was more complex than that. I also expected to hear from another segment of popular opinion, one that defended the endurance of colonization; but that segment, aside from its errors of judgment, I enjoyed contradicting. I consoled myself for so many potential misunderstandings by convincing myself that I would at least obtain the complete approval of the oppressed; which turned out to be the case. But in writing *Decolonization*

*and the Decolonized*, I fear I have managed to annoy just about everyone. How often was it suggested to me—with a tone of irony or skepticism—that I should rather try to depict what has become of the colonized. In other words, that my efforts were misplaced. And certainly, at times, I did ask myself that very question; but this was not the source of my hesitation. It seemed to me that perhaps what was needed was to allow time to do its work.

Several decades have now passed. It is finally possible to evaluate what has been lost and gained, and possibly to draw certain conclusions for the future.

From the outset it must be acknowledged that, far from underestimating the benefits of the liberty conquered, or reconquered, by colonized peoples, it is important to emphasize all that remains to be done. National and ethnic liberation movements were legitimate and urgently needed, similar to the women's movement of today. But while we must continue to work so that all nations, young and old, all minorities finally stand as equals among equals, it is no less necessary, for that very reason, to examine why those pitched battles did not always produce the anticipated results. I concluded *The Colonizer and the Colonized* with the words "Having reconquered all his dimensions, the former colonized will have become a man like any other," but I also added "with all the ups and downs of all men to be sure." Clearly, the downside continues to play a preponderant role.

During the first years of independence, attentive and well-meaning observers grew concerned about the persistent poverty of formerly colonized peoples. Fifty years later nothing really seems to have changed, except for the worse. Their analysis was focused primarily on Black Africa. It is now obvious that the majority of Arab-Muslim and Latin American states, including those with sufficient resources, are not doing

much better. In spite of the sometimes spectacular growth of individual states, malnutrition, famine, and endless political crises also affect a number of Asian countries. Widespread corruption and tyranny and the resulting tendency to use force, the restriction of intellectual growth through the adherence to long-standing tradition, violence toward women, xenophobia, and the persecution of minorities — there seems to be no end to the pustulent sores weakening these young nations. Why such failures? What are the consequences on the physiognomy and behavior of the formerly colonized? These are the kinds of questions this portrait of contemporary decolonization attempts to answer.

Like *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, this work, which is to some extent its continuation, is neither a political tract nor a utopian dream. Except for the final pages, which examine future perspectives and are presented as a series of hypotheses, the book is an assessment of the present situation. It attempts to describe a new reality, the reality of people who were once but are no longer colonized, or nearly so, who sometimes continue to believe they are, and who are part of the unfolding drama of history.

As before, I have relied on the Arab-Muslim model, more specifically, the Maghreb. Simply because that is the region I know best, having been born and raised there, and having retained, in spite of the current difficulties, strong affiliations and friendships. And also because it presents some of the most intractable problems in the world. However, as often as possible I have made use of other experiences, and made comparisons with South America, Asia, and Black Africa in particular. I would be dishonest if I did not acknowledge that it is my hope that the majority of the decolonized recognize themselves in this portrait, at least partially.

Naturally, every situation is unique. The decolonization

of Latin America took place at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The current inhabitants are primarily of mixed race and often the descendants of the colonizers; they are Christians, which is why there are no religious problems, as in parts of Black Africa. Black Africans have experienced slavery as well as colonization; French-speaking Africa does not coincide with English-speaking Africa. However, generally speaking, I tend to think that the mechanisms governing decolonization, like those governing colonization, are, aside from local differences, relatively uniform. That is why I have retained the expression “third world,” even if the general tendency is to replace it by “countries of the South,” which is too restrictive, geographic in scope, and not really meaningful for my purpose — and because I have not found a better one.

For the most part, this portrait concentrates on three figures: the ex-colonized, who has remained in his country and become a new citizen of an independent state; the immigrant, who has chosen to live abroad, often in the former colonizing nation; and the sons and daughters of the immigrant, born in the country where their parents have settled. Although they do not coincide with one another, they are three aspects of the same character, and this three-part division forms the basis of my book.

I realize that I open myself up to criticism for my rather bleak presentation. I have, similarly, been criticized for what I have referred to as the *deprivation* of the colonized, the misfortune of being Jewish, or the fragile situation of the majority of women. Some preferred to believe that the proletariat was the paragon of virtue and woman, the human being par excellence. Like the colonized, the decolonized is not a saint; how could he be and continue to live through such an agitated period of his history?

In writing this book it was necessary to satirize certain

taboos. This examination should have been undertaken by the elites in the countries under discussion, but for reasons that also required explanation, they seem to have been overcome by a strange inability to think or act, so that, through their own acquiescence, they have given free rein to the most backward among them. Yet it is this critical combat that has given the democratic societies of the West their contemporary shape and triumphant dynamism.

The defenders of the formerly colonized are hardly much more helpful in this difficult and essential enterprise. Instead of promoting democrats, or joining them, in the wake of an understandable postcolonial guilt, they feel compelled to observe a kind of comprehensive complacency that tends toward demagoguery. This guilt becomes noxious when it leads to blindness, as it has with certain remorseful Christians and primitive Marxists. Catholics, wracked by doubt, feel it is morally necessary, and convenient, to encourage the formerly colonized in retrograde beliefs and practices. Voltaireans, who would willingly devour a priest alive, show deference toward imams. Associations established to defend secularism, after a long struggle against social and clerical conservatives, find that immigrants do not always make the distinction between the religious and the secular, and wonder whether or not the very foundations of the Republic need to be reconsidered. At the other extreme are those who consider that catastrophe was narrowly averted, that Europe will inevitably experience other "Kosovos." The embarrassment, if not the hypocrisy, of governments, their ineffectiveness in their dealings with new nations or in addressing the problems of immigrants, are of equal importance. There is work to be done in describing the interaction between former colonizers and the formerly colonized; although this was not my purpose, some aspects of such an analysis can be found here. More than a precautionary

compassion is needed if we are to help decolonized peoples; we must also acknowledge and speak the truth to them, because we feel they are worthy of hearing it.

Finally, I remain convinced that the best way of correcting such failures is to make an accurate assessment of them, which is what I have tried to do. This seemed to me the best way of assisting those who were once colonized—and their inevitable partners as well.

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# The New Citizen

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## The Great Disillusion

The end of colonization should have brought with it freedom and prosperity. The colonized would give birth to the citizen, master of his political, economic, and cultural destiny. After decades of imposed ignorance, his country, now free, would affirm its sovereignty. Opulent or indigent, it would reap the rewards of its labor, of its soil and subsoil. Once its native genius was given free rein, the use of its recovered language would allow native culture to flourish.

Unfortunately, in most cases, the long anticipated period of freedom, won at the cost of terrible suffering, brought with it poverty and corruption, violence, and sometimes chaos. Those days are long gone, lost in the fog of memory, when, with the dawn of independence—something the younger generations have not experienced—the national leader, finally released from prison, entered the capital to the screams of women and the shouts of men, barely able to hold back their tears. The slogans of national unity, heard at a time when everyone felt as if they were members of the same family, have been extinguished, and the faces we see are the pale faces of egotism.

Naturally, it is reassuring for a people to be governed by leaders of its own; flattering to see its flag flapping in the wind in place of that of the colonizers, to be able to call upon a nascent armed forces, have its own currency, be represented

among the family of nations by ambassadors and diplomats from the homeland. But not everyone can be an ambassador or consul, not everyone is gifted enough to take advantage of the new climate. Certainly, we shouldn't underestimate efforts that bear fruit, but, for the majority, things haven't changed much. There has been a change of masters, but, like new leeches, the new ruling classes are often greedier than the old.

In truth, for the economy at least, this could have been anticipated. Whenever a leader of the anticolonial struggle was asked for details about his social program, he would respond vaguely, "The time is not right; we'll know better later, after the liberation." The time may not have been right, there were other urgent matters to attend to, but since then nothing much has happened. We might have expected, in the Arab countries at least, that the middle class, the only one capable because of its skills, its technical and cultural education, would have taken care of the administration of national business matters in the interests of its people. This was utopian. Instead, this class exacted privileges for itself and developed a political and administrative system to protect them. In the colonies it was said, sarcastically, that the job of the sheiks, local leaders recruited from the ranks of the colonized, was to grab the goats by the horns so they could be milked more easily, goats here symbolizing the colonized. The new sheiks, appointed by their government after independence, serve their leaders in that same capacity. Worse than the hypocrisy of ideology, relations between classes, like relations with peoples, are governed by rapine rather than philanthropy: Why should the local middle class be less disinterested than anywhere else? When have the privileged ever given up their privileges except under the threat of losing them?

## A Paradoxical Poverty

Poverty, however, is not fatal, and a handful of examples demonstrate this. Tunisia, a small, non-oil-producing country (which may be a blessing in disguise), China, and India have made important progress in the struggle against poverty. What is still needed is the will to conquer it and the intelligence to develop the means. A few years ago, during a friendly meeting with the ambassador of a third-world nation, we happened to ask about his country's efforts to fight poverty. It seemed to us that this would be a priority. We were naive. He answered us, with some embarrassment, by listing the other efforts, equally important as far as he was concerned, that his government was responsible for. We had just discovered, much to our astonishment, that for a number of third-world governments, the elimination of poverty was not their major concern; they did not consider it the principal problem facing their people. Yet, from the evidence, poverty leads to and helps prolong ignorance and superstition, stagnant forms of social behavior, the absence of democracy, poor hygiene, sickness, and death.

Certainly there are degrees of poverty. The Maghrebian or Egyptian fellah can eat his daily vegetable couscous or bowl of beans; in some places people do not even have that much. In Black Africa the tourist who takes the trouble to stray from his air-conditioned hotel or the luxurious out-of-the-way camps used by vacationers, and dares to enter the local homes, will be horrified by what he finds. How could he forget those smoke-filled interiors where the women cook directly on the beaten earth, rinsing their food in basins of dirty water? Or the children, as attractive as ebony dolls, dirty and partially dressed, many of whom will soon become statistics, numbering among the premature dead. Or the

beautiful young women, as graceful as gazelles, who will die in childbirth for lack of antibiotics (antibiotics have not always existed but they exist now and could save them). Along the main roads one sees matronly women, wrapped in fat, seated throughout the day behind tables of cheap planks, waiting for buyers for their few pounds of fruit or vegetables, the proceeds from which they'll use to buy food for the family dinner and some fuel for the lamps and stove. If our tourist wanders into the country's interior, he will discover malnutrition and disease everywhere he goes, and, of course, an archaic culture, magical practices, and the imaginative fantasies that nourish the people but that in turn help to keep them poor.

What is the reason for such long-standing crises? It may be understandable for countries lacking natural resources or adequate social and governmental support, but why in Venezuela and Nigeria, which are loaded with oil, does at least 20 percent of the population live below the threshold of poverty? Fifty percent of the inhabitants of Zimbabwe, where diamonds are mined, live in the most dire poverty. In wealthy Argentina, which could feed four or five times its own population, children faint from hunger in the schools and streets. Professionals are reduced to raising chickens in their bathrooms, selling cakes baked by their wives. In North Korea a third of the population survives only through food support from around the world. In India, one of the leading global producers of grains, poverty has until recently been too great to measure. Not only do these countries not grow, they often become impoverished. Some wag has suggested referring to them as "countries on the road to underdevelopment." But the expression could easily be applied to Algeria, Kuwait, even Saudi Arabia, whose per capita income has decreased 60 percent since 1980. Why has Algeria, which discovered its immense hydrocarbon wealth at the same time as Norway,

remained in an alarming state of poverty, while Norway, once one of the poorest countries in Europe, is now one of the most developed? Why has Mexico, also an oil-producing country and one of the leading beneficiaries of tourist dollars, been subject to periodic crises that have led it to the brink of bankruptcy and forced it to beg for debt relief from foreign debtors? In 2003 Argentina declared that it would unilaterally cancel three-quarters of its debt; between individuals this would be considered fraud and subject to prosecution.

Such is the paradox. Generally speaking, the third world is poor and dying of starvation. Potentially it has the wherewithal to supply the needs of all its citizens, but lacks organization and suffers from an ineffective, absurd, and scandal-ridden system of distribution. Why in the Middle East, a world that is still based on a feudal order, do certain Bedouin families possess such fabulous wealth from lands where they arrived more or less by accident? We could, it is true, ask the same question about the American settlers. Why is it that all members of the human community do not share equally in the gifts provided by nature? But I'd like to put that utopia aside for now. The fact remains that any continent, no matter how poor it may appear, contains the wherewithal to feed all its inhabitants. So why the present disaster?

## Corruption

We can discuss at length the reasons for this tragic absurdity. They include technological delays, lack of enough trained technicians, inadequate intellectual support structures, backward institutions and cultures, fierce international competition, and uncooperative weather patterns. But one remains common to nearly all of them: corruption. Corruption is not limited to the third world; it is, or has become, universal. It

has affected even the oldest and most respectable Western nations, where scandal follows scandal, facilitated by the speed and suddenness of exchange. The stock market, the pivot and mirror of the state of an economy, and which should regulate and manage various interests, has become a machine for punishing the weakest and least informed, therefore, indirectly the poorest. But corruption remains shameful and disguised. In young nations, less sensitive in this respect, it is cynical and brutal, a kind of generalized system of payoffs, accepted or tolerated by everyone, a kind of institution. The corruption ranges from the policeman, to whom the grocery store owner gives a bunch of leeks or artichokes so he will be left in peace, or the highway patrolman who collects a sort of personalized highway "toll," all the way up to the large importers of agricultural machinery, who pay dividends to bureaucrats to obtain import licenses or a friendly meeting with a minister. When the past president of Madagascar began draining the country on a regular basis, it was obvious to everyone, and came with the blessing of France, supposedly the country's great protector and friend. Corruption is universal and affects everything and everyone, including the young, who receive a handful of reassuring crumbs and are complicit, complacent, or resigned victims. It affects rich and poor countries alike, but the greatest corruption frequently accompanies the greatest poverty. Nigeria, one of the richest countries in Africa, has one of the poorest populations in the world and, at the same time, one of the highest levels of corruption. Cameroon, which may be the most corrupt country on the planet, has the greatest number of people living in poverty. More generally, if it were necessary to classify nations, the nations of Black Africa would come out on top for this destructive combination of poverty and corruption.

Corruption is not just morally blameworthy, it expresses and helps maintain the breakdown of the social fabric. It negates creativity and impedes innovation, which requires initiative and effort. Instead of establishing companies, it is easier and more immediately profitable to demand outlandish kickbacks on transactions, sometimes fictive, or on international aid, a large part of which never reaches its destination. It is easier to pretend, by cooking the books or offering bribes, to launch extensive capital works programs that will never be completed or even begun; easier to build garish hotels that remain half empty using government loans that will never be paid back, through financial schemes that would be legally actionable if government agencies didn't simply close their eyes to what was happening around them. This kind of manipulation goes on all over Africa, Muslim and Christian, in Catholic Mexico as well as the virtuous Islamic Republic of Iran and the lay democracy of India. Periodically, a head of state will solemnly announce his intention to fight rampant corruption—as if the thieves were promising to restore order. Arsène Lupin disguised as the chief of police.

By the same token, with all the scheming and the insidious laxity, the fortuitous and too easily acquired wealth is rarely reinvested in the country, which would be the norm in a healthy economy. It is estimated that between 40 and 80 percent of the proceeds are—surreptitiously but with the tacit agreement of foreign governments, which also benefit—transferred to secret accounts abroad. At present no one has estimated the amount of oil income that is similarly converted into real-estate investments in London and New York. The border between public and private finance is often difficult to determine. At the time of the Gulf War, it was shown (as was already known) that the head of state, Saddam



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