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BOOKS

THE LIBERATION OF THE JEW by
Albert Memmi (The Orion
Press, 1966).

THE JEWS in this important book carry the mark of a global problem, and their liberation requires its solution. Albert Memmi sees the Jews as a colonial people, much like the Negro Americans of today and the Africans and Asians of the recent past. Being colonized is not just a socio-political condition, one of oppression; it is also a state of mind, in which those that are set upon come to view themselves with the rejecting eyes of their oppressors.

Memmi, in studying the Jews, sees the tell-tale signs of their self-rejection wherever he looks. Like other hunted men, for instance, Jews conceal their identity by changing their names. But this attempt to pass is usually half-hearted; names are chosen which do not fully conceal. A Jewish doctor from Central Europe named Kalmanovitch renames himself Kalman; Silverman becomes Silvers; and Davidovitch, David. These self-defeating name-changes, explains Memmi, result from a rejection of one's self-rejection, an embarrassment about the attempt to conceal one's true identity.

In Jewish humor Memmi finds the signs of the tensions, uneasiness, and complicated self-hatred which permeate the psyche of the colonized. The image of the Jew in many of the jokes that Jews themselves love to repeat presents a picture that is not at all flattering. These jokes reflect many of the unfavorable stereotypes so often used in epithet; Jews appear in these jokes as cunning and cowardly money-lovers. Memmi suggests that the purpose of such humor is to take the edge off the non-Jew's hostility and for the Jew to examine his own misgivings. Another prevalent type of Jewish joke reflects the more subtle characteristics, anxiety and depression, which result from the Jews' history as an oppressed people. An example is this story in which one

"That's a long way off," says the other.

"From what?" asks the first.

Efforts to assimilate reveal the same basic patterns of insecurity and self-rejection. Negroes, Jews, even women, writes Memmi, tend to admire and copy the colonizer. Moreover, for assimilation to succeed, one must forsake one's past, parents and friends; one must become impervious to echoes and strip off one's identity. And, we may add, when a new bridge seems to appear, like a fraternity or a choice neighborhood which opens up, so many Jews move in that soon it itself becomes known as "Jewish," i.e., the bridge collapses under the weight of those crowding to seek passage. Even those who pass are known as ex-Jews. In short, assimilation provides no exit, nor do religious conversions and mixed-marriages, which Memmi explores in a similar vein.

The Jewish experience is not all self-rejection, Memmi stresses; but even in the case of self-acceptance, the Jews' values, like those of other unfree men, are colored by their basic oppressed conditions. Some Jews find a life in a community of ethnic friends, newspapers, and books. But this is a closed world, a ghetto life, and one which depends on the good will of the outsiders. Others are moved by a vision of their being a chosen people selected by God to carry out a mission; but this is no more than a counter-myth, indicative of a burning need to prove one's "worth." Similarly, ethnic literature, art and culture provide no liberation. The minority writer or artist is caught in the tension between representing his collectivity and expressing his humanity.

What is to be done? *The Jewish problem cannot be solved, Memmi stresses, within the confines of the societies which host the Jewish people because these societies are the colonizers. The Jewish problem must be solved in a territorial solution, in a country where Jews will themselves comprise the whole so-*

"If Israel did not exist it would have to be created," he says. While Memmi recognizes that it is not practical for all Jews to move to Israel in the near future, he believes that seeing oneself as a citizen of Israel, sharing in the national experience, and uniting around its defense, is next best to emigration to Israel. Memmi is deeply concerned for the future of Israel and he warns that should that nation be destroyed, Jewish liberation would be set back for centuries. He offers a new theme for Jews throughout the world—a brotherhood for Israel and of Israel. This brotherhood need not revere Israel as a perfect society; Memmi himself feels free to criticize it, as for instance in its policy toward the Arabs. Rather, participation in the brotherhood would entail both responsibility for the future of Israel (even to the extent of paying a tax) and a right to demand changes. There is no other basis for Jewish liberation.

Memmi's study is largely introspective. He sees first his own inner turmoil, as magnified by an ultra-sensitive personality, and he describes the Jewish situation from this perspective. Much of what he sees is correct, but colored in strong, somewhat morbid purple by his experiences as a Jew, events which include a sentence in a forced labor camp during World War II. Born in Tunis in 1920, Memmi emigrated to France after the war, and now teaches at the Sorbonne. He thus experienced both the French colonization of Tunisia and Tunisian colonization of the Jews.

Many an American Jew may accept Memmi's solution, but not his characterization of the problem. An urgent friendship for Israel—yes; an intense sense of oppression—no. Memmi's book, however, will help American Jews to see in their names, humor, literature, and even religion, the marks of the universal Jewish state manifest in the less fortunate life led by most Jews most of the time.

Negro-Americans and the many whites concerned with social justice will be surprised by the unexpected support this book lends to the Black Muslim thesis that no solution other than a territorial one will be found to the Negro problem. A popular substitute is the encouragement of an urgent friendship for Black Africa. But Memmi would say that such a half-solution will yield no more than a half-freedom, that there will remain a strong residue of self-hatred and a potential for fuller oppression with every turn of history's wheel. The book leaves one wondering: did a colonized people ever fully liberate itself without attaining a free society of its own?

AMITAI ETZIONI

Prof. Etzioni, of the Department of Sociology, Columbia University, is the author of *Winning Without War*.

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