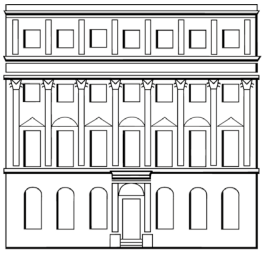

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Review of Itay Lotem, *The Memory of Colonialism in Britain and France: The Sins of Silence*

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ITAY LOTEM, *The Memory of Colonialism in Britain and France: The Sins of Silence*, Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), x + 428 pp. ISBN 978 3 030 63718 7. £99.99

Over the past two decades, Western European publics have engaged in major debates about their respective states' colonial pasts and involvement in slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. During these years, the history of colonialism has transformed from a sideshow into a primary arena in which heads of states, parliaments, societal groups, migrant communities, activists of all political stripes, academics, courts, journalists, and diplomats negotiate not only the terms of remembrance, but also the contours, values, hierarchies, and inner workings of their societies. While the strong scholarly interest in (collective) memory has already produced a number of fine case studies on particular events and countries, transnational and comparative perspectives are still surprisingly rare. Itay Lotem's rich and conceptually informed study of the ways in which colonialism and slavery have been remembered publicly in France and Great Britain is an important contribution to a better understanding of the general patterns and particularities of the surge in colonial memories across Europe.

In centring his study on France and Great Britain, Lotem uses a classic comparative framework which has often been dominated by contrasting depictions of French and British colonial policies and the end of their respective colonial empires. However, the picture of a 'pragmatic' and, as a result, more peaceful exit from empire by Great Britain—in contrast to French die-hard intransigence—has in recent years been shattered by a number of studies that highlight the enormous ('emergency'-style) violence of British decolonization. In a way, Lotem applies this critical gaze to the period after (formal) decolonization by showing that Great Britain is not exempt from post-colonial memory conflicts. As he tends to read the British case through the prism of developments in France, Lotem's readers may even see a certain deficiency in the British memory debates. This is largely due to the book's conceptual underpinnings and its main thrust. Lotem is interested in how colonialism became the focus of a particular 'politicised memory vocabulary' (p. 19) derived from the German concept of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or of 'introspective memory' (p. 16), that is, a

challenging yet healing societal confrontation with a difficult past. This memory vocabulary, which began to reach French mainstream media and high-level political discourse in the early 2000s, makes the colonial past a necessary prism through which to understand present-day societal issues, in particular as they relate to racism and race relations. Lotem's concluding remarks seem to reject the idea that this particular framework of remembrance is a necessary end point of coming to terms with the colonial past; throughout most of the preceding account, however, it does serve as a kind of *telos* against which other uses of the colonial past are measured.

The book's analysis is based on a variety of sources, in particular print and online news media, and secondary literature. Lotem also interviewed a considerable number of notable memory activists and scholars, both in France and Great Britain. From the references given, these interviews appear to largely confirm and illustrate knowledge available in other sources, rather than yielding completely new insights into the inner workings of memory politics. In the case of French memory debates in particular, the book also builds on a considerable body of scholarly publications, and, at times, Lotem could have related his scholarship more clearly to the existing historiography. Quite a number of crucial publications, many of which converge with Lotem's findings and arguments, are not referenced, including Frank Renken's important study of the memory politics of the Algerian War of Independence in France, Dietmar Rothermund's collection *Memories of Post-Imperial Nations*, and Michel-Rolph Trouillot's seminal *Silencing the Past*, the latter taken up by Gert Oostindie in the debates about Dutch post-colonial memories. Or they get short shrift, such as in Elizabeth Buettner's groundbreaking study *Europe after Empire* (with an entire part devoted to memories) or Romain Bertrand's *Mémoires d'empire*.[1]

[1] Frank Renken, *Frankreich im Schatten des Algerienkrieges: Die Fünfte Republik und die Erinnerung an den letzten großen Kolonialkonflikt* (Göttingen, 2006); Dietmar Rothermund (ed.), *Memories of Post-Imperial Nations: The Aftermath of Decolonization, 1945–2013* (Cambridge, 2015); Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, 1995); Elizabeth Buettner, *Europe after Empire: Decolonization, Society, and Culture* (Cambridge, 2016); Romain Bertrand, *Mémoires d'empire: La controverse autour du 'fait colonial'* (Bellecombe-en-Bauge, 2006); Gert Oostindie, *Postcolonial Netherlands: Sixty-Five Years of Forgetting, Commemorating, Silencing* (Amsterdam, 2011).

Lotem's book is divided into two largely parallel accounts of the memory debates in France (part I) and Great Britain (part II), from the 1960s through to the late 2010s. In each part, his analysis remains largely within a national framework. The richness and complexity of the material collected and examined by Lotem certainly justify this methodological choice. Yet, as so often when a national framework is applied to supranational issues—of which colonial rule and slavery, as much as the memory conflicts about them, are without doubt prime examples—there is a risk of jumping to conclusions. This may be relatively insignificant when Lotem names French historian Benjamin Stora—and not Algerian freedom fighters—as the coiner of the term 'Algerian Revolution' (*al-thawra al-jaza'iriya*; p. 61). It weighs more significantly, however, when the international arena and bilateral relations—and the role of the past in 'soft' North–South diplomacy, restitution claims, and so on—are omitted in an attempt to explain the political and public prominence of the memory of colonialism and its dynamics over the past two decades.

The two parts of the book, although roughly equal in length, differ in scope and in structure. The part about France follows largely well-trodden paths and pursues a clear sequence of arguments; its chronological scope is centred on memory activism and debates around the year 2005, often regarded as a pivotal moment in French colonial memories, and thus has a clear narrative arc. The part about Great Britain, by contrast, is slightly less structured, more meandering and complex, more of an open-ended investigation of unfolding events than a synthesis of a (supposedly) closed chapter in history; chronologically, it moves much closer to the present day, with a strong emphasis on the years around the Brexit campaign in 2016. This difference is not just due to the time gap between events in France and in Great Britain; it is also reflective of the different dynamics of the debate in the two countries. As Lotem convincingly shows, thanks to the involvement of the historical profession, the French memory debates early on bore a strong tendency towards self-reflection and self-historicization, including the production of well-established narratives and a chronology (for example, 2005 as a watershed year). In the British case, such prefabricated narratives are lacking, which makes part II a more difficult, but also very exciting and rewarding read.

Chapter one of part I shows how the French state, seeking to move away from the divisive issue of the Algerian War of Independence, colluded with political activists in a 'de-prioritisation of colonial history' (pp. 32, 59) and did not even change course when immigration and racism became political flashpoints in the 1970s and 1980s. Chapter two retraces the debates surrounding the remembrance of the Algerian War of Independence, with a focus on the war veterans as an important memory lobby. Chapter three then hones in on how the French state, parliament, and minority groups began to apply the 'duty to remember' to the histories of slavery and colonial repression, leading to commemorative and legislative action, and shows how the discourse of victimhood and historical justice was also appropriated by the repatriate *pied-noir* community in pushing for the infamous law of 23 February 2005, which stipulated, among other things, that French school curricula should put a positive spin on French colonialism in North Africa. While most of what Lotem presents in these chapters will be known to people familiar with the existing literature, he brings in new aspects, for instance by highlighting the role of historian and public intellectual Benjamin Stora in putting forth a conceptual framework of political memory in which debates about the remembrance of the Algerian independence struggle, and later the entire colonial past, would unfold.

Chapter four shows how the conflicts about France's colonial past transformed into a broader debate about the French Republic and its colonial legacies in the present. Here, Lotem puts emphasis on newly emerging memory activists (the Indigènes de la République and the Conseil représentatif des associations noirs) who used historical references to colonialism and slavery in their attempts to stimulate discussions about racism, Islamophobia, and the ways to undo them (reparations, and so on). Chapter five examines how these debates became a vehicle in French party politics. While Lotem is relatively detailed on how the political camps, especially the Right led by Nicolas Sarkozy, responded to the debate about the 2005 law by mounting an anti-'repentance' discourse, he fast-forwards through the post-Jacques Chirac presidencies under Sarkozy (2007–12), François Hollande (2012–17), and Emmanuel Macron (since 2017). It would have been interesting to explore the ways in which these presidents,

and the entire political system, continued to struggle with the ongoing memory controversies, and to what extent their responses were marked by changes and continuities.

Against the backdrop of the French memorial landscape, part II turns to the British case. Chapter six shows that, despite the Commonwealth and the rise of immigration as a controversial issue in British politics, no coherent remembrance of the British Empire and its legacies emerged; for Lotem, 'short flares of imperial sentiment' (p. 209), such as during the Falklands War and the Hong Kong handover, and (mostly critical) references to 'imperial nostalgia' (p. 195) in the wake of the Brexit vote, did not really establish a broader memorial framework. Chapter seven, taking a similarly long-term perspective, argues that British debates about race and multiculturalism, although rooted in colonial vocabulary, did not initiate a broader societal reflection about racism's colonial history; the few explicitly anti-colonial voices, such as those of Black British activists in the 1960s and 1970s, were increasingly muted by what Lotem describes as a future-oriented 'multicultural silence' (p. 260). Chapter eight shows how, since the early 2000s, British involvement in the slave trade and slavery has become an important arena of remembrance, in which official state commemoration (for example, the 2007 bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade) and demands for reparatory justice by minority groups clashed, leading to still ongoing legal and political struggles about compensation. Lotem also points to the beginnings of the public remembrance of slavery and the slave trade in the very different local settings of Bristol and Liverpool in the 1990s.

Chapter nine moves closer to the present day by arguing that in the 2010s, anti-racist activism in Great Britain began to (re)include references to the colonial past, as illustrated by controversies about art installations and colonial statues (the Rhodes Must Fall movement) as well as the emergence of a new generation of writers and public intellectuals discussing race and Blackness in Great Britain (for example, Reni Eddo-Lodge, Afua Hirsch, and David Olusoga). Chapter ten discusses 'the balance-sheet approach', a public strategy of dealing with the legacies of the British Empire that highlights its positive (that is, modernizing) effects against its wrongdoings, or vice versa. Originally employed by conservative and right-wing academics and

commentators (for example, Niall Ferguson) to rehabilitate British colonial rule against an alleged left-wing mainstream, it also became popular among their critics who sought to counter the rehabilitation of empire by putting emphasis on its victims and crimes. The tragic hero in Lotem's account is British historian David Anderson, who sought, in vain, to steer the debate about British violence during the 'Mau Mau War' in Kenya (1952–60), and later state efforts to cover it up, away from the good empire/bad empire binary and initiate a more complex debate about the colonial abuses of the British justice system.

Throughout the book, Lotem is well aware of the pitfalls of writing the history of the present. In most cases, historians rely on the benefit of hindsight—in contrast to the historical actors themselves, historians usually know how the historical processes they study ended. The historicization of the present cannot be based on this (sometimes deceptive) certainty of hindsight, and its results may be even more tentative than historians' accounts generally are. It may be due to this cautiousness that Lotem's Franco-British comparison does not end in the generalized models or theories that comparative historical scholarship often claims. While presenting a host of lucid vignettes and well-constructed case studies, the part about the British case, in particular, ends in the somewhat anticlimactic discovery that the British debates (as yet) lack a French-style framework of political memory. In the book's concluding remarks, this approach, however, takes an interesting turn, when Lotem states that despite the widespread use of a politicized memory vocabulary, the ever-increasing presence of the colonial past in the public space has not brought about the healing of historical (and social) justice and the overcoming of racism that was expected—bringing the French case closer once again to the British one, despite all the differences between their approaches to a difficult past. By the sheer wealth of information and insights he provides, Lotem proves himself to be an invaluable guide through the fast-moving debates about the memory of colonialism that will continue to demand the attention of societies and states in Europe and beyond.

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