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*Recensão a **The Memory of  
Colonialism in Britain and France.  
The Sins of Silence,**  
de Itay Lotem*

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**Itay Lotem**  
***The Memory of Colonialism***  
***in Britain and France.***  
***The Sins of Silence***  
**Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, 428 pp.**

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Itay Lotem's *The Memory of Colonialism in Britain and France. The Sins of Silence* results from the author's PhD research at Queen Mary University of London. It presents readers with an impressive investigation into the memory of colonialism in the former metropolises of the two largest European colonial empires – Britain and France – since their demise in the early 1960s through to the mid-2010s. As the author puts it “[e]xamining the memory of empire is a way of asking how these societies understand their own histories in relation to an ever-changing present”.<sup>1</sup> He thus undertakes to follow specific actors who attempted to apply the memory of colonialism for political (?) purposes in the public arena – the state, intellectuals, activists. He does so by making an impressive assessment of decades of events, publications, speeches and debates, drawing from a wide range of literature, press, official sources, websites, interviews, and even online tweets. One of his first assessments is that the two countries very much differ in their public debates of colonial history – while French actors developed a memory vocabulary from early on (stemming from the memorial efforts following the

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<sup>1</sup> Itay Lotem, *The Memory of Colonialism in Britain and France. The Sins of Silence* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 5.

Second World War and the Holocaust), their British counterparts struggled to make sense of colonial memory in public discourses.

It should be noted that the author explicitly undertakes the delicate enterprise of inquiring into the usages of colonial history and not to put forward a history of racism and race relations in both countries. It is a clever and prudent choice as he demonstrates such debates often did not address the colonial links. Lotem's book is indeed a very commendable effort to trace the history and origins of contemporary debates around colonial pasts and memory politics.

The book is split into two parts, with five chapters each. The first part is dedicated to the French case, and the second one to the British context. The first part is very much a story of an alleged "silence" in the French public debate, a notion which the author consistently tries to relativize. Hence, from Chapter 1 onwards, "Tracing Postcolonial Silence in France", Lotem identifies "a process of de-prioritisation of colonial history in explaining actors' contemporary circumstances" instead of an actual silence.<sup>2</sup> The author interestingly shows how far-right and far-left movements focused their discourse and conflicts on immigration – which became the device to discuss racism and race relations in France – while disconnecting the phenomenon from the country's colonial past, thus aligning with the state's options of reframing the national narrative. That was visible for instance in the way both political camps addressed the Algerian War. While far-left activists reframed Algerians primordially as workers, far-right organisations took their references from Vichy France. Therefore, the immediate postcolonial choices of the state and activists alike promoted "the creation of a discursive space that did not perceive empire as a relevant political explanation of current events".<sup>3</sup> Similarly, when the debate on immigration flared up in the 1970s and the subsequent anti-racist activism developed in the 1980s, no links were made with the colonial past. The discussion was rather about the pertinence of a multicultural France.

<sup>2</sup> Lotem, *The Memory of Colonialism*, 59.

<sup>3</sup> Lotem, *The Memory of Colonialism*, 34.

The second chapter, “A Silence that Never Was? Appropriating the Algerian War of Independence”, focuses on the place of the Algerian War of Independence in the French public debate and how it also contributed to silencing colonial narratives. Lotem believes that, contrary to what “silence breakers” (such as the historian Benjamin Stora) state, images of the Algerian War were always present among the French population. Indeed, it was French war veterans who first mobilised to memorialise the conflict (and right from the war ending), as well as to have the conflict recognised as such in 1999. According to Itay Lotem, Stora’s definition of silence meant the “lack of public indignation over – rather than lack of interest in – the many transgressions of France in Algeria”,<sup>4</sup> as the conflict was indeed widely present in literature, film and the press. That sort of passionate debate was eventually triggered in 2000 by an account of torture published in the newspaper *Le Monde*. However, such debate “was not the occasion for the forging of a more nuanced and historically aware understanding of the Algerian conflict”.<sup>5</sup>

If such understanding was lacking, silence was not the cause, as the author shows in the following chapter, “*Devoir de mémoire* on the Road to 2005: The Republic and the Emergence of Memory Activism”, which explores the rise of a debate on colonial memory within a wider emergence of memory activism in France until 2005. This follows different actors who mobilised the notion of “*devoir de mémoire* (duty of memory)”, first brought into play in France regarding the Vichy period, in order to address France’s colonial past. The author shows how these groups – such as Antillean activists and *pied-noir* associations – did not challenge French republican rhetoric and the role of the state as “referee” of the national narrative – indeed, they asked to have colonial memory and minority narratives included in the French national identity.

The concept of “*devoir de mémoire*” emerged in the 1990s, associated with the memory of the Vichy state and its responsibility in the

4 Lotem, *The Memory of Colonialism*, 78.

5 Lotem, *The Memory of Colonialism*, 83.

Holocaust, as Jewish activists successfully managed to pressure the French state into officially recognising its role. Memory was then incorporated into republican politics, no longer only a memory of victories but also as a process of “coming to terms with the past through social introspection and the integration of notions of responsibility for past crimes into new political identities”.<sup>6</sup>

The author then demonstrates how “*devoir de mémoire*” was soon appropriated by other groups in order to promote their own narratives, notably by activists wanting to “break the silence” on the massacre of Algerian protesters in Paris on 17 October 1961. The first memory activism directly related with colonial history was that regarding colonial slavery, with Antillean activists and politicians campaigning for the recognition of slavery as a crime against humanity, which they eventually obtained in 2001. Another community that resorted to the “*devoir de mémoire*” notion to advance their “narrative of victimhood”<sup>7</sup> on a national scale in the 1990s was the *pied-noir* community of former settlers in Algeria after decades of local and regional memory activism. When the French state eventually recognised the value of the actions of the French in Algeria in 2005 (which fully revealed the contradictions in the republican model of appeasing communities with the *devoir de mémoire* rhetoric), it prompted a public debate led by historians against a battle between memory and history and such appropriation of history by the state.

The 2000s were a turning point as activists and associations started to challenge the republican structures instead of claiming for their belonging to them and Chapter 4 examines this moment by looking into two of those organisations: the *Indigènes de la République* and the *Conseil représentatif des associations noires*, both founded in 2005, a moment of acute social tension in the French suburbs. As race emerged as a political category, these organisations addressed structural racism as a heritage of French colonialism, thus politicising history. According

6 Lotem, *The Memory of Colonialism*, 95.

7 Lotem, *The Memory of Colonialism*, 114.

to them, the republican ideal of supposed colour-blindness was actually a promoter of inequalities, preventing racialised minorities from attaining full citizenship. According to Lotem, “the novelty of these organisations was the co-opting of a language that relied on references from colonial history in order to draw attention to issues of contemporary discrimination”, even if it “greatly oversimplified the mechanisms of race relations in France”.<sup>8</sup>

Chapter 5 explores how national French political actors (parties and intellectuals) reacted to the debates about colonial history after 2005. The debate of the 23 February 2005 law recognising the contributions of the French in former colonies represented the politicisation of colonial history along party lines. The right championed the *piéd-noir* cause and criticised the repentance approach, while the left “articulated the necessity to confront its colonial history in order to increase republican cohesion”.<sup>9</sup> Most of all, this confirmed the prominence of memory vocabulary and symbols among politicians while discussing the colonial past. President Macron commanding a report on the restitution of African pieces went a step further in passing from vocabulary to actual policies.

Chapter 6 opens the book’s second section which approaches the British case. This chapter explores the silence and the lack of a memory culture in Britain regarding its colonial past by mapping different moments. Those include the abolition of free transit within the Commonwealth and the failure of the Commonwealth Institute. Debates around them did not address imperial aspects. Even an imperial moment such as the Falklands War was presented by Margaret Thatcher’s government as the defence of national “English” territory. Moreover, Lotem uses the case of the short-lived and private-owned Commonwealth Museum to illustrate “the reluctance of institutions to engage with the memory of empire, often out of fear of being seen as complicit in its toxic sides or

<sup>8</sup> Lotem, *The Memory of Colonialism*, 154.

<sup>9</sup> Lotem, *The Memory of Colonialism*, 166.

even in the campaign to rehabilitate it”.<sup>10</sup> When the Brexit referendum came about in 2016, “even as the Leave Campaign demonstrated that imperial notions were still ready to be politically mobilised”,<sup>11</sup> it was the political left that politicised the empire, by invoking and criticising Conservative “nostalgia” (lack of memory vocabulary).

The initiatives and moments invoked in this chapter are many and the author sometimes struggles to build a coherent narrative around them. The following chapter, named “Silence II: Convivial Multiculturalism’s Tyranny of the Present”, makes a much more convincing case for the public silence over empire in Britain by exploring how the discourse on race relations was shaped by the idea of multiculturalism in the 1980s, which glossed over racial inequalities. The discussions about race were disconnected from colonial history on both sides of the political spectrum. Indeed, “[t]he promise of multiculturalism was bound together with the reinvention of the present as a convivial space rather than its contestation through introspection of the past”.<sup>12</sup> Even when official reports in the late 1990s identified institutional racism in Britain, thus showing the limits of multiculturalism, the conversation about race was framed around community and individual actions, rather than historical continuity, eventually reinforcing the so-called silence.

Chapter 8, “Breaking the Chains? Slavery in Britain’s Public Space”, explores how different initiatives tried to challenge the dominant memory on the slave trade in the 1990s: the abolitionist version. In the early 2000s, activists managed to successfully lobby for slavery to be discussed in Parliament. However, its memory proved to be once again marginal, as debates focused on fighting against current forms of slavery. The author demonstrates how British politicians were “uncomfortable [...] with the politicisation of history for its own purpose”,<sup>13</sup> in opposition to their French counterparts. The 2007 bicentenary of abolition represented an exception as it became a field of dispute between memorial narratives.

10 Lotem, *The Memory of Colonialism*, 213.

11 Lotem, *The Memory of Colonialism*, 223.

12 Lotem, *The Memory of Colonialism*, 253.

13 Lotem, *The Memory of Colonialism*, 278.

Chapter 9, “New Contestations of Race and Empire”, explores the emergence of empire to explain race relations in the 2010s, as multiculturalism entered into crisis. Despite the emergence of Black history in the 1980s, in the context of the development of cultural and postcolonial studies, this did not trigger any discussion on colonial legacies. Moreover, racism and anti-racism were depicted by activists as fundamentally individual attitudes, lacking the “memory vocabulary to demand to a collective confrontation with colonial history”,<sup>14</sup> which was still visible during the anti-racist protest initiatives of the 2010s (also imported from contexts that did not exactly resemble the British case). Moreover, authors engaged in activism formulated racism as a personal, everyday experience. These were mostly authors of African descent who assumed the role of “middlepersons” to put an end to a supposed lack of knowledge on colonial history and its integration into the national narrative. Therefore, representation outshone the importance of a memory vocabulary in stark contrast with the French case.

This idea of a lack of a memory vocabulary is further developed in the tenth chapter, “The Tale of the Imperial Balance Sheet”, which examines the politicisation (and popularity) of the balance sheet approach to colonial history in Britain since the mid-2000s, with debates being framed within the ideas of “pride” and “shame”. The author illustrates this through the case of the public debate on the British repression of the Mau Mau uprising in colonial Kenya, which ended up being absorbed by the balance sheet approach, reinforcing the exceptionalism of its violence within British colonial history. Eventually, such an approach would still be found in the debates around the toppling of Edward Colston’s statue in Bristol in 2020, “with little to no long-term piercing of the public silence over empire”.<sup>15</sup>

With silence a key concept throughout the book, the author shows that there are different “silences”: “[w]hile in France references to ‘absence’ were a political tool used by memory activists to gain public hearing, in Britain it was part and parcel of the postcolonial settlement”.<sup>16</sup> Strik-

14 Lotem, *The Memory of Colonialism*, 310.

15 Lotem, *The Memory of Colonialism*, 377.

16 Lotem, *The Memory of Colonialism*, 381.



ingly, if the author declares to have chosen these case studies because of their apparent similitudes, he ends up making an argument based on their particularities and specificities to explain their different approaches to colonial memory (for instance, the lack of a British Algeria).

The first part of the book provides a more fluent reading, while the second one displays a more dispersed narrative, which interestingly confirms the author's thesis – in France, there is an expansion of memory vocabulary and devices, while for Britain there is a map of initiatives without a proper grammar to tie them all together. The two parts do not communicate between them as much as one might have expected.

There are questions that remain unanswered, such as the prominence of Algeria in the public narratives of empire in France. It would have been interesting to know more about the place of the other African colonies in those narratives or if their memory simply just became intertwined and/or overshadowed by that of Algeria.

Unfortunately, the book reinforces the already prominent place of French and British colonialism in the literature. One would wish similar studies will be undertaken concerning more peripheral former colonial empires, such as the Italian, the Spanish, the Portuguese or the Dutch cases. It also reinforces the place of a limited number of actors as gatekeepers of memory, including political and academic actors, an aspect which deserved further discussion.

Nonetheless, Itay Lotem's book is a very welcome contribution to a conversation which sometimes lacks context and historicity. Its careful and rigorous analysis provides a thorough and consistent history that surely will be of value for both the academic and the public debates.

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