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# Savage wars? Codes of violence in Algeria, 1830s–1990s

JAMES MCDOUGALL

*ABSTRACT* Political violence in Algeria has often been accounted for only by recourse to caricatures of a society supposedly ‘intensely violent’ by nature, or else rationalised as the product of a peculiar political culture and national historical experience. Departing from both approaches, this article suggests that different occurrences of both state and non-state violence must be understood as particular, distinct moments in both the recomposition and breakdown of inherently conflictual social relations. While Algerian history (including colonial history) provides many examples of the non-violent negotiation of social and political tensions, the social production and experience of violence have been written into dominant historiographies and public culture in complex ways. These complexities of the successive ways in which different moments of violence have been encoded belie both theories of the inescapable reproduction of cyclical violence as a pattern of political behaviour, and less sophisticated, but enduring, clichés of ‘Algerian savagery’.

On a trip into the Algerian Sahara my friends and I gave a lift in our car to a blind man who had been stranded with his stick, a small bag and a huge terracotta serving-dish at a petrol station in an isolated village. He had been waiting all day in a gusting light sandstorm for a bus to his home town, but every one that had passed was crowded to its seams. Si el-Haj, as we all automatically referred to the older gentleman, rode beside me in the back seat and, perceiving that I was the only European in the party, quizzed me intently for a while in the usual amalgam of Arabic and French about the war in Iraq, my knowledge of Islam, what I thought constituted democracy, etc. He chatted to my friends about life in the area and the forthcoming saints’ festivals, led their prayer by the side of the road, and when we dropped him off at his home, insisted that we come in for tea and the local dried dates that taste like thick, dark chocolate. We sat on the floor in a clean, spartan reception room whose only furniture was a long, low table, a huge, chiselled French-style dresser and a recent, wide-screen television. Si el-Haj told a story about a local theft and complained about corruption in local bureaucracy; we stayed a respectable length of time and, after being warmly embraced, thanked and duly offered a fare for the lift, which we duly refused, we left. It was all

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perfectly pleasant and conventional. We learned shortly afterwards that Si el-Haj, who had been a locally prominent Islamist militant, had spent much of the past decade in prison. When he was arrested, we were told, a cache of arms had been found at his house along with a list of local dignitaries marked for assassination. It was in prison that he had lost his sight.

The purpose of the anecdote is not soothingly to suggest that Algeria's Islamist insurgents, whose campaigns of violence in the mid-1990s led simultaneously to the isolation of the country and to the internationalisation of a particularly horrific image of its internal politics, are basically decent, hospitable and ordinary people 'underneath', any more than it is sensationally to 'prove' that even the most apparently pleasant and benign individual encountered in this part of the world can turn out to be a 'terrorist' 'underneath'. Both readings of the story miss the point.

**'If an Algerian says: "I'll kill you"—he really will kill you':<sup>1</sup> violence as caricature**

Algeria has experienced so distressing a degree of violence in the course of its recent history that images and accounts of the country routinely reiterate two perceptions. First, a supposed ubiquity of violence, endured and inflicted, in Algerian society and its history—so that the infliction and suffering of violence becomes an explanatory factor in Algerian history and social organisation, rather than a problem to be explained. Second, the exceptional intensity of this apparently pathological fact. Nor is it only observers inclined to neo-Orientalist clichés or post-imperial nostalgia who acquiesce in this imagery. Other people from places in Africa and the Middle East which have their own terrible histories, from Iraq, Palestine, Sudan, can be heard (anecdotally) to say much the same thing. The image of endemic, ubiquitous and unusually extreme violence as a constitutive element of Algeria, whether in media clichés or in the spontaneous ethnography of casually informed observers as close by as Morocco and Tunisia or as far away the USA, or in the more ostensibly sophisticated garb of academic analysis, is a first and most readily apparent aspect of the problem of naming violence in this context, from the colonial conquest to the present. It should also be immediately apparent that this representation of a society so 'plagued', as Algeria's incumbent president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, himself put it in a re-election speech of early 2004, that all the other people of the world must keep a safe distance, itself does much violence to a country and a people who can only be caricatured, and who cannot begin to be understood, in these terms. The point of departure for an examination of violence in Algeria must be to acknowledge, but recuse, not reiterate, the caricature of 'savagery' with which Algerian history has been burdened, and which has generally debilitated understanding of this experience, rather than enlightening it.

Some understanding of the meanings of violence in Algeria, then, needs first of all to escape from this very old stereotype, in all its more or less elaborate forms. Conflictual social relations are as constitutive of this society as of any other; extreme forms of overt violence are not, by some particularly perverse

streak of ‘national character’, nor by inculcation through a long colonial oppression, themselves characteristic of Algerians. Any explanation—and I do not presume to offer one here—of those particular forms which physical violence has taken, in the war of independence and again in the 1990s, would have to begin with the social and political conditions in which such practices arose. And it would have to account for the choices made in resorting to a violence that is no more instinctive to Algerians than to anyone else.

To do this, however, would not mean *rationalising* violence, either (at the crudest extreme) as the expression of a peculiar culture, history and social organisation, or (at the most sophisticated) as ‘a virtue’ in a peculiarly Algerian political imaginary, constructed across several centuries in which violence served as the most effective means of accumulating symbolic capital.<sup>2</sup> Such rationalisations in fact offer only another form of that naturalisation which we began by recusing. On the contrary, any more adequate account will have to find ways to address the very irrational, unimaginable unnaturalness of a violence which is, precisely, ‘foreign’ to most ordinary Algerians, to their self-conceptions, world-view and morality.<sup>3</sup> At the same time it should be recognised that certain narratives which have ‘naturalised’ a vision of the past as constituted by permanent and reciprocal violences—in official history, public commemoration and political discourse—have had their own effective force in shaping decisions and behaviour in the present.<sup>4</sup> If it is true, however, that the echoes of past violence, remembered and narrated, do indeed constitute an important part of the symbolic universe of Algerian culture, history and politics, it is crucial to understand the particular formulation, deployment and reproduction of such symbols in terms of their specific historicity.

This article examines three distinct moments of the social production and cultural encoding of the various forms of violence, physical or euphemised, which have entered into the constitution of social relations in Algeria, as well as playing a part in their crisis and breakdown. These three narratives move from the colonial obsession with an imagined ‘native’ savagery, which both produced and exonerated the spectacular exercise of colonialism’s own violence, through the institution of a legal system of inflexible repression which came to dominate the nationalist imaginary of the colonial period and of its own history, to the complex afterlife of the war of independence and the emergence of new codes of legitimate warfare in the 1990s. The links between each moment are neither direct nor determining. Rather, each obeys a specific logic of its own, reflecting a particular constellation of circumstances. Si el-Haj, our Saharan fellow traveller and sometime alleged terrorist, is not a cipher for either the banality or the exoticism of violence in Algeria, but rather a man in a particular place and time with his own history, and his own view of history.

### **Piracy, banditry, fanaticism: the alterity of violence**

Imperial depictions of an empire’s subject populations and territories are adept at externalising the violence of the empire’s own exercise of power,

projecting it onto its victims as inherent to *them*. Rather than a specifically situated practice, with its own social and cultural logic, arising at a particular moment, ‘native’ violence is, in imperial eyes, necessarily irrational, instinctive, ‘savage’. Imperial power projection, on the other hand, is only ever conceived of as the necessary policy response to a specific situation: as deliberated, calculated (and now, of course, ‘precision targeted’). While modern Europe led the world in the practice of organised violence—economic, symbolic and physical, and on an increasingly apocalyptic scale—from the early 16th century onwards its accounts of the world simultaneously became increasingly effective at portraying, not the effects of the vertiginous expansion of its own capacity to produce and direct coercive force, but the mortal danger faced by its legitimate interests and civilising works among the anarchic, despotic or barbaric zones of disorder in Africa, Asia and the Americas.

One of the first theatres of this developing conception of civilised selfhood and barbarian otherness was the western Mediterranean, where long-standing patterns of trade and warfare underwent significant changes of meaning in correlation with both the developing structures of early modern European states and these same states’ expansion of colonial plantation slave economies across the Atlantic.<sup>5</sup> The original European stereotype of Algeria, as a fleshpot haven of renegade villains, a nest of pirates whose infamous depredations not only harried legitimate commerce but also enslaved white (and, by the early modern period, free-born) Christian subjects and citizens of Europe, is one of the earliest and most tenacious modern images of the alterity of violence.<sup>6</sup> The blanket bombardment of Algiers in 1816 by the British navy, which fired some 34 000 shells into the city in nine hours, and the French invasion and conquest in 1830 found their justification in the Algerines’ limited, and economically almost insignificant, return to a moribund corsairing which had in any case been forced upon them at the end of the 18th century when the European fleets effectively closed off to them any less overtly rapacious commerce.<sup>7</sup> This fact, of course, like the death and destruction inflicted by Lord Exmouth’s cannon and the ‘pacifying’ armies of de Bourmont, Lamoricière and Bugeaud,<sup>8</sup> was erased from the imperial narrative.

The point here is not simply to highlight the selective and self-serving automystification of imperial fantasies of power; it is, rather, to suggest that a fundamental psychological and ideological mechanism of colonial rule—one of the several ways in which Europeans not only produced imperialism, but contrived to live with it in perfectly good conscience, indeed in the conviction of its ‘greater good’—has been the externalisation of imperialism’s own violence onto its victim. This does not mean, of course, that the colonised internalised this projection, that they did in fact *become* ‘the sneering face of [Europe’s] own evil shadow’ which early colonial observers thought they recognised on the Mediterranean’s southern shore.<sup>9</sup> On the contrary, colonised populations were and remained, in this respect, the entirely innocent objects of a developing European world-view, one to which African and Asian peoples remained external precisely as their bodies and territories

were incorporated into the domain of European power projection. The efficacy of this operation lay not in the minds and practices of Algerians, but in those of Europeans.

Colonial violence was encoded, in Algeria as elsewhere, as defensive, preventive—even, already, as pre-emptive—a necessary response to the putative, and very really feared, instinctive, unpredictable and unlimited violence that the ‘native’ supposedly bore always within his breast, and of which his occasional self-assertion in rebellion was simply proof. All the early colonial typologies of Algerian violence—pirate at sea, bandit on land, religiously inspired fanatic, unremittingly suspicious xenophobe—are variations on this same obsessive theme, and the apologetics of the conquest’s war criminals are perfectly clear and, one imagines, of perfectly good conscience, on the subject:

Little does it matter if France in her political conduct goes beyond the limits of common morality at times. The essential thing is that she shall establish a lasting colony and that as a consequence she will bring European civilisation to these barbaric countries. When a project which is of advantage to all humanity is to be carried out, the shortest path is the best. Now, it is certain that the shortest path is terror; without violating the laws of morality, or international jurisprudence, we can fight our African enemies with powder and fire, joined by famine, internal division, war.<sup>10</sup>

Nor was this basic ideological operation limited in scope or efficacy to the period of conquest and the wars of pacification from 1830 to 1870. The alterity of violence underpinned a crucial, constitutive reflex common among the European population. While never simply collectively shared by all—one cannot speak of a monolithic and undifferentiated ‘settler psyche’—it was a powerful presence in widespread socialisation processes and in the consensus of the colony’s internal politics. It remains present, even if only in the form of a cipher, in Camus’ *L’Etranger*, and reached its suicidal acme in the ultra-colonialist terrorism of the Organisation de l’Armée Secrète (OAS).<sup>11</sup> The conviction of quotidian colonial racism—‘the Arabs are cut-throats’—which so effectively held Algerians as invisible to settler society and, when visible, as intolerably threatening,<sup>12</sup> was itself an acute form of symbolic and psychological violence, simultaneously inflicted and endured (as an hysterically internalised fear of the ‘native’) by Algeria’s Europeans. It also served as the unspoken, since self-evident, ground of justification for the spectacular exercise of physical violence against Algerians by both regular armed forces and the settlers’ own militia. This is most obviously visible on a large scale in the reprisal massacres at Sétif and Guelma in May 1945<sup>13</sup> and later in the OAS death-squad murders of 1961–62. In these cases colonial violence was a massively and demonstratively disproportionate reaction to Algerian resistance. Not so much the suppression of the actual acts of violent resistance which Algerians had carried out, these spectacles of force were ferociously self-assertive pre-emptions of any conceivable resistance, a terrified exorcism of the latent ‘savagery’ of the ‘native’. As a divisional army commander after Sétif reported, the repression exacted was intended to

bring 'peace for ten years'.<sup>14</sup> The poet and playwright Kateb Yacine, who witnessed the events of Sétif at first hand at the age of 16, and later located the emergence of his own nationalist commitment in that experience, set the European settlers' response in a striking fictional dialogue, published in 1956, as the war of independence gathered pace:

F: This time they've understood.

N: You think so? I'm telling you, they'll have another go. We didn't do it properly.

Mme N: My God, if France doesn't deal with them ... we can't defend ourselves alone!

F: France has had it. They should give us arms, and let us get on with it. There's no need for law here. They only understand force. They need a Hitler.

Mme F, caressing [a schoolboy] R: And to think they go to school with you, dear [...]

R: Oh, things will change. We were scared before. There are lots of them in my class—there are only five of us who are French, not counting the Italians and the Jews.

Mme F: Take care, dear, they're savages!<sup>15</sup>

The massacres of May 1945 and the indiscriminate serial assassinations of the OAS were seen by their perpetrators as *defensive* actions, prompted as they were by the same fear (the same simultaneously internalised and externalised, endured and inflicted, violence) that Fanon, in one of his most astute passages, puts in the mouth of a metropolitan French child: '*Regarde le nègre!...Maman, un nègre!...maman, le nègre va me manger!*'<sup>16</sup>

### **'Order' and armed struggle: the law of violence**

Underlying these occasional conflagrations there was a more euphemised, everyday and insidious means of assuring imperial rule and of keeping Algerian 'anarchy' in check, through the juridical 'incarnation of the violence of the coloniser'<sup>17</sup> in special native-status legislation, the *indigénat*. Enacted in 1881 as a transitional, emergency measure, it remained in force in various forms until 1944. Overtly a wartime law, a set of emergency regulations for the suppression of revolt, but maintained thereafter in what was notionally a time of peace, the *indigénat* both symbolised and, in the exactions it entailed, made manifest that aspect of the colonial state which constituted an apparatus of permanent, routinised low-intensity warfare.<sup>18</sup> This, alongside the generalised extrajudicial regime of daily indignity suffered by a non-citizen, mostly disenfranchised and expropriated subject population, was a crucial pillar of the colonial order and constituted a major aspect of ordinary Algerians' experiences of colonialism. In the nationalist historical vulgate, this aspect is indeed the *only* face of colonial history, and it is this century-long story of inflexible, unreformable,<sup>19</sup> total oppression which leads, inexorably and as if by an equally iron law of historical evolution, to the

taking up of arms and the ultimate, supposedly military, defeat of the occupier by a corresponding, and obligatory, revolutionary violence.

This ‘law of violence’ in the unfolding of a collective Algerian destiny, a homogenising meta-narrative in which total, reciprocal conflict is understood as the determining law of history, has done much to obscure the intense complexities and contradictions of both colonial relations of power and the emergence of nationalism and armed struggle. The entirety of the colonial period, in the ‘official’ national history and its rhetorical commemoration, is seen in flat monochrome. As Jacques Berque, the eminent (and entirely sympathetic) historian and sociologist of Islam who grew up in colonial Algeria, observed: ‘the violence of the liberation struggle nourished a bitter, sometimes frenzied, literature denouncing the wounds inflicted by colonialism. In short, the literature retained from the colonial dialectic only the outer layer, and of that only what was destructive.’<sup>20</sup> The many deeper ‘layers’ of the long and viciously intimate colonial dialectic are as invisible to the nationalist orthodoxy as was the injustice of its domination to colonialist self-justification.

Principal among the crucial factors written out of this account is the long and impassioned search of Algerians for a workable reform of the colonial system, for a *peaceful* solution to the intolerable condition of their subject status within the free and egalitarian republic. Or for one which would liberate both communities in the colony (‘Algerians of long date’—presumably including the ancient local Jewish population—and ‘Algerians of recent date’, as one leading nationalist and Islamic scholar expressed the difference between the indigenous and settler societies as late as 1951<sup>21</sup>) from the mutually destructive relationship of violence which would ultimately consume them both. The francophone intellectuals who sought accommodation with and emancipation within *la mère patrie* from around 1908 up to the end of the 1930s are dismissed as at best misguided, at worst treacherous, ‘assimilationists’,<sup>22</sup> or grudgingly rehabilitated (and miscast) as precursors of the ultimate revolt in a preparatory phase of ‘political resistance’. This very notion is manifestly tributary to the later, and more worthy, ‘mature’ phase of armed struggle whose centrality determines, in this teleological re-reading, the meaning of all previous history since the conquest. In this interpretive dynamic, which seems to have emerged in the mid-1940s can be traced the deeply ingrained suspicion of its own intellectuals prevalent in Algerian political culture. The arabophone scholars and teachers of Islam, whose political programme was similarly reformist, gradualist and opposed to the use of violence, and who saw themselves as the ‘awakeners’, guides and spokesmen of the nation (whose ‘self-awareness’ they considered to be of their own making) are similarly drafted after the fact into the unifying teleology of ‘the national movement’ as the spiritual fathers of a revolution whose paternity was decidedly not theirs.<sup>23</sup> Read backwards from the exhilarating vantage point of victory, through an intensely divisive and traumatic war which could, nonetheless, be quickly enough re-imagined as the triumphant climax of one long, unending struggle over 132 years, the whole history of colonial Algeria appears to conform exclusively, unremit-

tingly, to the law of violence.<sup>24</sup> A violence to which no alternative was ever possible, against which no possible political victory (including that which in fact eventually occurred<sup>25</sup>) could be won, but which could only be overcome by a corresponding recourse to violence.

Reducing the complex totality of this history to the simplicity of total conflict, the 'law of violence' underpins an important post-independence political myth of the war of national liberation, as the divinely guided act of the People (in the singular) arising *en bloc* against the monolithic force of oppression. In the words of Algeria's leading nationalist poet, in an epic text officially commissioned to celebrate the writing of Algeria's national(ised) history, the voluntarist insurrection launched by a small fraction of radical nationalists on the night of 31 October – 1 November 1954 becomes an act of the entire people under God, telescoped into Islamic religious history:

Your Lord announced the Night of Destiny/ And cast a veil over a thousand months/ The people said: Your command, Lord!/ And the Lord replied: Your enterprise is mine!/ ...November. . .you changed the course of life/ And you were, November, the rising dawn/ You recalled to us, in Algeria, the battle of Badr/ And we arose, as the Companions of Badr.<sup>26</sup>

The official history of the revolution is that of a glorious epic in which only extremes of purity or corruption are possible, in which 'men were snatched from their mediocrity to become the "sublime heroes" or the "absolute traitors" of the unfolding tragedy'.<sup>27</sup> For Algerian historian Mahfoud Kaddache, 1 November was 'the beginning of a new and glorious page of the history of Algeria'.<sup>28</sup> The constitution of 1976 asserted in its opening paragraphs that the war of national liberation 'will remain in history as one of the great epics marking the resurrection of the peoples of the Third World' and that 'Algeria today holds a place of the first order in the international arena thanks to the worldwide influence of the Revolution of 1 November 1954'. It further asserts 'the continuity and reaffirmation of the noble ideals which have animated, from its beginnings, the great Revolution of 1 November 1954'.<sup>29</sup> As the original point of reference for the independent state, its supplier of legitimacy and principal symbolic resource, the revolutionary epic was instituted at the very centre of Algeria's political imaginary, the founding aporia of the nation's forgetful memory.<sup>30</sup>

This social memory of the seven years' war of decolonisation as the founding experience of modern political community, of the single myth of origin for contemporary Algeria and Algerians has had an important series of consequences. The first is the erasure from official history and social memory of the actual divisions and conflicts of the revolution, of the means by which an activist fringe of the radical nationalist movement, having launched the insurrection on its own initiative in order to transcend the factional crisis of its party,<sup>31</sup> thereafter inspired, persuaded and coerced the loyalty of the masses, and eliminated or absorbed their rivals along the way.<sup>32</sup> As everyone is perfectly aware but as it is perfectly impossible to admit, the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN)'s revolution, whose slogan remains 'by the people and for the people', in fact was made 'by the FLN for the

Nation...with the support of the People whenever possible and against the opposition of the People whenever necessary'.<sup>33</sup> The role of the active minority of revolutionary militants who in fact sparked the war is, of course, recognised. Indeed, the 'men of November' are particularly celebrated,<sup>34</sup> but they, and the counter-state institution of the FLN which succeeded them and eventually assumed power, are imagined as the expression of 'the People' (in the singular), not as their own, wilful, emancipatory–coercive selves, sometimes followed, sometimes opposed, and who certainly did not naturally subsume the whole of 'Algeria'.<sup>35</sup>

A second effect is the apparent converse of this—the actual expropriation of Algeria's people (in the plural) from the revolution and from the emancipation and self-determination it was supposed to bring. While the armed struggle is said to have mobilised *le peuple tout entier*, simultaneously a military elite issued from the revolutionary army, while proclaiming that the 'sole hero' was indeed the people, lost no time in asserting its right to rule over the people, a right which it considered had been earned in the prosecution of the war. While the war was said to have been the act of the unanimous nation, it in fact constituted a unanimist state out of the conflicts which split Algerians (Europeans from Muslims, and each community against itself), under the aegis of a postcolonial authoritarianism, alienating the state from 'its' people and eventually, in the eyes of many of the people themselves, considering them only with *hogra*, 'contempt'.<sup>36</sup> The doctrine of the historical necessity and inevitability, the supremely uncompromising virtue, of armed struggle (as against the necessarily compromising practice of politics) in the overthrow of colonial domination, and the legitimacy gained by engagement in that struggle—especially late in the war, after the early heroes of the guerrilla were mostly dead, and men flocked from the French army and from civilian life suddenly to swell the ranks of the ALN on the brink of victory<sup>37</sup>—required that all 'the People' be implicated in it, but only in the person of those who themselves incarnated the people's destiny, not through *any* destiny that the people themselves might, eventually, choose.

### **Terrorists, patriots, victims and martyrs: the inheritance of violence**

This complex underside of the foundational political culture of revolutionary legitimacy begins to explain the strange ambivalence of the social memory of the war of independence as, outside the political field, it is actually experienced in Algerian life. There is a tension, tangible in private and in certain public expressions (the press, cinema, literature), between the war remembered as enactment, the epically memorialised active prosecution of the guerrilla in the maquis, and the reality of the war as the endurance of massive counter-insurrectionary violence at the hands of the French army. Of these two aspects, the latter is, if anything (and unsurprisingly, given the numbers of people involved), more prevalent, more acutely felt and more generally remembered. The FLN maquisard (*mujahid*) remains a ubiquitous summarising symbol of national virtue and honour, expression of Algeria's greatest trials and triumph, and repository of society's values and

commitments. The kind of poster one can see on the walls of a youth association office—with the text of the national anthem, *Qassaman* (written by the same poet mentioned earlier), unfurled above an artist's impression of a company of uniformed *mujahidin* running into battle amid the explosions of French bombs—and the imagery of schoolbooks and popular histories, as well street names and their commemorative portraits and plaques, exude this message. At the same time, however, there is, at a deeper level of popular imagination, the predominant image of a war fought against, rather than by, Algerians, of the people of Algeria, as a whole, as having endured the war fought against their emancipation rather than having actively fought a war for it. Fifty years after the outbreak of the insurrection many small towns and villages, or distinct quarters of towns, are still easily identified as having been established by the colonial army as 'regroupment centres', forced-relocation camps where the rural population, driven away from their homes and off their lands (which were razed, napalmed and cordoned off as free-fire zones) were resettled in squat, cramped shelters under the observation of a local garrison. The memory of the cordons and *ratissages* ('raking-over', the systematic, intrusive searches of urban districts, or combing of whole rural zones), the uncounted disappearances, internments, summary executions, torture and rape, involved, of course, far more people as objects of a violence visited upon them than were ever under arms (or engaged in any other active capacity) as agents of revolutionary war.

These two sides of the conflict are in a sense complementary, and the figure of the *mujahid*, marching victoriously under the national flag across the frontier at independence, is the obverse image of the 'one and half million martyrs' which the war is routinely said to have cost Algeria.<sup>38</sup> The dead, both the civilian victims of colonialism and the actively fighting martyrs fallen 'on the field of honour' in the maquis, are perhaps the strongest of all postwar national symbols. Beyond the structural symbolic complementarity of these aspects of Algeria's social memory, however, there remains a certain malaise, an unspoken recognition of the horrific tragedy of the war, below the 'glorious' rhetoric of its celebratory myth. In Merzak Allouache's 1976 masterpiece, *Omar Gatlato*, internationally recognised as one of the first Algerian films to break the mould of postwar heroic epic and portray a deeper, more intimate and multifaceted reality of Algeria, the revolution is an acknowledged but distant backdrop. It is referred to explicitly, almost as pre-history, in Omar's opening speech but then more subtly in the guise of an occasional tattoo-drumming soundtrack cut with views over the Algiers rooftops, a neat reference to Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers*, shot in the city a decade earlier. In *Omar Gatlato* there is a remarkable sequence where the hero is assailed, one imagines for the *n*th time, by his braggart uncle evidently fabricated tales of heroism during the revolution, and does his best to pay no attention. Throughout the scene the main character's elderly relative, a man who has himself quite obviously witnessed and lived through colonialism and the war, sits unmoved in the corner of the shot, his eyes fixed on the television—and says nothing.

The figure of the ‘fake *mujahid*’ (*faux mujahid*), a scammer who, in independent Algeria, has forged testimony of his wartime service so as to receive the substantial benefits available to a recognised, card-carrying ex-maquisard, is the grotesque complement of the torch-bearing freedom fighter whose lofty statue adorns the base of the colossal martyrs’ monument on the Algiers skyline. The question of the numbers of *faux mujahidin* (and of whether, in fact, there are any) is hotly disputed and occasionally the scandal gives rise to exasperated ire in the press. The country’s favourite and most infamous caricaturist, Ali Dilem, portrays a card-wielding loafer in conversation with his signature female figure (who stands in all his work as a cipher for Algeria): ‘That’s it, I’ve got my card.’—‘You fought in the war?’—‘No, I filled in the form!’<sup>39</sup> Another Saharan anecdote may also contribute something in this regard. On our return trip from the desert, a distinguished gentleman with spectacular white whiskers hitched a short ride with us. He was, he said, a former maquisard himself (he exhibited his card, to our great curiosity), and was now engaged in a local self-defence group, one of the militia units armed by the state during the 1990s to fight Islamist guerrillas and, reportedly, not infrequently constituted by FLN veterans. Most of these *patriotes*, the generic term applied to all such militia, have since been stood down and (at least officially) disarmed, but his group had continued to exist as an auxiliary arm of the customs service, tracking contraband traffickers across the desert. When the man had left us, one of my friends remarked speculatively that the story, in this case, might actually have been true. In his own experience genuine former *mujahidin* generally do not introduce themselves as such, rarely have the famous card, and are intensely reluctant to talk about it.

The societal inheritance, then, of this history which is said to be ‘inhabited by violence’ is, at the personal, familial, local level, and at that of national political culture, the rhetoric and monuments of commemoration and the narratives of official history, a most ambiguous one. In this context, the notion of violence, in any one of a series of historical guises (Ottoman corsairs, anti-colonial *mahdis*, nationalist revolutionaries) as having simply provided a generic model of political behaviour for replication in all subsequent moments of Algerian history, is clearly too simple. There are, undoubtedly, aspects of the insurgency and repression of the 1990s which explicitly echo, in the language and self-view of the actors involved, the codes of earlier violence. Islamist militants are *mujahidin* fighting a holy war for the recovery of Algeria’s ‘authentic values’ and the popular sovereignty of the *mustad’afin* (the oppressed, the new ‘wretched of the earth’) against the corruption and tyranny of those who have ‘betrayed’ the promise of the revolution, against the traitors of the ‘party of France’ (*hizb fransa*) who have compromised Algeria’s true destiny. The army and its auxiliaries are *patriotes* fighting the alien and un-Algerian terror of ‘sons of *harkis*’,<sup>40</sup> who have betrayed the nation through their allegiance to the ‘Islamist international’ and seek to destroy the republican state created by the revolution, condemning Algeria through ‘programmatically regression’ to a barbaric medieval theocracy. Some, at least, among the Islamist insurgents in the

early 1990s explained their strategy of terror—the murders of low-level state functionaries, police officers, artists and intellectuals—with reference to the war of liberation. In a contemporary documentary film, a woman recalls the explanation given her by a family acquaintance and member of an armed group, after his colleagues have murdered one of her relatives, a woman police officer: ‘It’s just like in the war of independence’.<sup>41</sup> And, correspondingly, the senior army officers behind the suspension of elections in January 1992, and the subsequent repression of the Islamist opposition, explain their move as a ‘patriotic act’ and a ‘Novembrist’ engagement for the salvation of the state and nation.<sup>42</sup>

But this has not been simply the instinctive reiteration of culturally entrenched patterns of political behaviour. Rather, such expressions reflect a continuous, deliberate reinvention, and struggle for the appropriation, of the strongly valorised and widely diffused inheritance of the war of independence and the nationalist register of legitimacy in a situation of political implosion where the symbolic order has been fragmented, and where symbolic goods are up for repossession. The necessity and legitimacy of armed struggle, inherited by the army as ‘shield of the revolution’<sup>43</sup> or by Islamist maquisards as new *mujahidin*, and of Islam as the core component of national belonging (despite the opposition to this doctrine in the councils of the wartime FLN<sup>44</sup>), find new significance in the entirely altered circumstances of the new political and social struggles emerging in the 1980s and 1990s. To these already established registers are added new, previously unthought elements, introduced from elsewhere. Doctrinal imports from the Middle East include a reinvented notion of the ‘Islamic state’ influenced by the Taliban emirate in Afghanistan, the practice of *takfir* (declaring ‘nominally’ Muslim rulers and regimes to be apostates) as theorised by Egyptian Islamist radicals, and the sacralisation of redemptive *jihad* even against Muslim civilians who are reluctant follow the Islamist ‘call’. (Omar Carlier, in this regard, points to the contrast with the peasant insurgents of early 20th century colonial Algeria, who, even amid the frantic bloodletting of millenarian revolt, allowed Europeans to live who consented to utter the *shahada*, the formulaic expression of testimony to Islam.<sup>45</sup>) The emergence of this reinvented lexicon, pressed into the service of a radical, transnationalist, utopian and chiliastic Islamism, is part of the new conflict’s geopolitical context, just as Bandung, self-determination, socialism and Third Worldism were in a previous time.

The comparison most often drawn between the forms of violence enacted during the war of independence and those of the 1990s—the mutilation of bodies, the extreme, exhibitionist atrocity against one’s physical adversary which leaves ‘the body of the victim without even the value of a sacrifice, [being] ostensibly dehumanised’<sup>46</sup>—also requires more subtle reading than that furnished by the label of ‘Algerian savagery’.<sup>47</sup> A beginning might be made in the decryption of ‘the accumulation of tensions occasioned by the unravelling of each and every mechanism of social solidarity’ which Algerian society has endured in its multifaceted (urban, rural, demographic, economic, educational, linguistic, political) crises since the early 1980s.<sup>48</sup> The most recent reproduction and recoding of the recourse to political violence in

Algeria is the product of its own, specific context of crisis, and of the ways in which this crisis has been managed, or mismanaged, exploited and exacerbated, by particular actors.<sup>49</sup> Such conditions of crisis, with which Algeria has been particularly terribly afflicted, have nonetheless been shared, in varying degrees, with other parts of Asia and Africa. They are not intrinsic to Algeria, its social organisation, cultural values or political ideas, and no more are the forms of terribly extreme overt conflict which, in this case, have arisen out of it. Each moment of the breakdown or recomposition of social order presents its own possibilities within its own context of constraints, but no ingrained societal or political structure of violence, as an innate characteristic or determining law of history, inherently precludes the creation of alternatives. However difficult such choices are and however unlikely such alternatives may appear given the circumstances of the past decade,<sup>50</sup> they undoubtedly remain possible. However many savage wars Algeria may have suffered, Algerians have not thereby been collectively brutalised into thinking with savage minds.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Tunisian saying (reported in personal communication, 1999).
- <sup>2</sup> L Martinez, *La Guerre civile en Algérie*, Paris: Karthala, 1998, p 9.
- <sup>3</sup> Thus the early actions of armed Islamists in the 1990s were initially attributed in public opinion to 'foreigners'.
- <sup>4</sup> H Remaoun, 'La Question de l'histoire dans le débat sur la violence en Algérie', *Insaniyat*, 10, 2000, pp 31–43; A Moussaoui, 'Du danger et du terrain en Algérie', *Ethnologie française*, 31, 2001, pp 51–59; and J McDougall, 'Martyrdom and destiny: the inscription and imagination of Algerian history', in U Makdisi & P Silverstein (eds), *Memory and Violence in the Middle East and North Africa*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, forthcoming 2005, ch 8.
- <sup>5</sup> G Weiss, 'Mediterranean captivity and the language of slavery in early modern France', paper presented to the Society for French Historical Studies, Paris, June 2004; and Weiss, 'Barbary captivity and the French idea of freedom', *French Historical Studies*, forthcoming 2005.
- <sup>6</sup> For a recent restatement of the theme, see RC Davis, *Christian Slaves, Muslim Masters. White Slavery in the Mediterranean, the Barbary Coast and Italy, 1500–1800*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003. For an incisive analysis of the relationship between imperial vulnerability and imperial power, see L Colley, *Captives. Britain, Empire and the World, 1600–1850*, London: Jonathan Cape, 2002.
- <sup>7</sup> D Panzac, *Les Corsaires barbaresques. La fin d'une épopée, 1800–1820*, Paris: CNRS, 1999; and L Valensi, *On the Eve of Colonialism. North Africa before the French Conquest, 1790–1830*, New York: Africana, 1977, ch 5.
- <sup>8</sup> Respectively, the commander of the Anglo-Dutch naval expedition of 1816 and the early generals of the French army of Africa.
- <sup>9</sup> Valensi, *On the Eve of Colonialism*, p xiii.
- <sup>10</sup> Quoted in M Bennoune, *The Making of Contemporary Algeria. Colonial Upheavals and Post-Independence Development*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, p 40.
- <sup>11</sup> The 'ultra' terror group formed in 1961 by militant European settlers to resist the abandonment of 'Algérie française'.
- <sup>12</sup> While individually an Algerian could be *mon pôte Ali* ('my mate Ali'), visible, collective self-assertion was intolerable, as is evidenced, for example, by the fact that, before independence, organised (and authorised) demonstrations by Algerians in the city of Oran which dared to leave the so-called *village nègre* and descend the main boulevard toward the Place d'Armes in the European *centre-ville* were met with police repression. On both of the only two occasions that such marches occurred before 1962, there were deaths among the demonstrators.
- <sup>13</sup> On 8 May 1945, and for several days following, an abortive insurrection in these districts of eastern Algeria was followed by massive retaliation by military, naval and air forces, and (especially in Guelma) by local militia armed and supervised by the local sub-Prefect (who had been a wartime hero of the anti-Nazi resistance). Around 200 Europeans were killed in the initial rioting; the most reliable estimates of Algerian casualties seem to range between 15 000 and 20 000 (the official nationalist figure

- being 45 000). See J-P Peyroulou, 'La milice, le commissaire et le témoin: le récit de la répression de mai 1945 à Guelma', *Bulletin de l'Institut d'histoire du temps présent*, 83, 2004, pp 9–22; and J-L Planche, 'La répression civile du soulèvement nord-constantinois, mai-juin 1945' in D Rivet et al, *La Guerre d'Algérie au miroir des décolonisations françaises*, Paris: Société Française d'Histoire d'Outre-Mer, 2000, pp 111–128.
- <sup>14</sup> Quoted in A Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria, 1954–1962*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996, p 28.
- <sup>15</sup> K Yacine, *Nedjma*, Paris: Seuil, 1996, p 220.
- <sup>16</sup> F Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Paris: Seuil, 1971, pp 91–92.
- <sup>17</sup> C Collot, *Les Institutions de l'Algérie durant la période coloniale (1830–1962)*, Paris: CNRS/Algiers: OPU, 1987, pp 190–200 (quote at p 200).
- <sup>18</sup> A simultaneously unyielding and highly flexible system (since almost anything—from travelling to gathering firewood to pasturing one's flocks—could be constituted, in particular circumstances, as an infraction), the *indigénat* was based on the (constitutionally illegal) premise that certain acts not normally punishable under French criminal law were in fact crimes if committed by persons of 'native personal status' (ie after 1870 and until 1944, most Algerian Muslims).
- <sup>19</sup> The (only partially enacted) new dispensations of 1944–47, which finally removed the *indigénat*, established parity of elected representation for the European and Muslim communities, bracketing the Muslim vote in a second college, where 1 300 000 electors, voting on behalf of a population of eight million, voted for the same number (60) of Algerian representatives as the 532 000 voters of the first (overwhelmingly European) college. J-C Vatin, *L'Algérie politique. Histoire et société*, Paris: FNSP, 1983, pp 260–261. Subsequent elections, most notoriously those held under Marcel-Edmond Naegelen (Governor-general from 1948 to 1951—a socialist and anti-fascist resister during World War II), were notable for the blatant fraud deployed by the administration.
- <sup>20</sup> Berque, *Dépossession du monde*, quoted in Valensi, *On the Eve of Colonialism*, p xiii.
- <sup>21</sup> Interview with shaykh Larbi Tebessi, *Alger républicain*, 10 November 1951.
- <sup>22</sup> The classic formulation of their position was made in a newspaper article of 1936 by the liberal leader, Ferhat Abbas, whose stand was considered 'treachery to the national cause' by the radical nationalists.
- <sup>23</sup> J McDougall, 'S'écrire un destin: l'association des 'ulama dans la révolution algérienne', *Bulletin de l'Institut d'histoire du temps présent*, 83, 2004, pp 38–52. For more detail on the 'ulama (Islamic scholars), see McDougall, *History and the Culture of Nationalism in Algeria*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming.
- <sup>24</sup> In the words of Houari Boumédiène (Algeria's iconic president from 1965 to 1978): 'This generation has not only fought colonialism, but has known the signal honour of achieving victory. There resides the difference between ourselves and our ancestors.' Speech made in 1976, quoted in H Remaoun, 'Pratiques historiographiques et mythes de fondation', in Ch-R Ageron (ed), *La Guerre d'Algérie et les Algériens, 1954–1962*, Paris: Armand Colin, 1997, p 317. Evoking the leader of 'primary resistance' in the 1830s to 1840s, an Algerian historian asserts what became conventional truth: 'The revolution in Algeria began with 'Abd al-Qadir, and never ceased since his time'. Muhammad al-Tammar, *Ta'rikh al-adab al-jazâ'iri*, Algiers: SNED, nd (1969), p 278.
- <sup>25</sup> Independent Algerian official memory cultivated a myth of victory by arms, but the revolution was, in fact, ultimately successful not on the battlefield (which remained dominated at the end of the war by the French), but through its international political efforts and the creation of a situation of critical instability to which the only solution, for the French, had to be political and not military (as de Gaulle eventually understood, although his rebellious generals did not).
- <sup>26</sup> M Zakarya, *Ilyadhat al-jaza'ir*, Algiers: Ministry of Original Education and Religious Affairs, 1972, p 45 (p 23 in accompanying French translation). The 'Night of Destiny', *laylat al-qadr*, celebrated on 26–27 Ramadan, is the night on which the first of the Qur'anic revelations is held to have been vouchsafed to the Prophet (Q97). The battle of Badr, fought in 2 AH (623–24 CE), was a crucial battle of the Prophet's campaigns in the Arabian peninsula.
- <sup>27</sup> B Stora, 'La Guerre d'Algérie quarante ans après: connaissances et reconnaissance', *Modern and Contemporary France*, 2 (2), 1994, pp 131–139 (quote at 131).
- <sup>28</sup> M Kaddache & D Sari, *L'Algérie dans l'histoire. (t5) La Résistance politique (1900–1954: Bouleversements socioéconomiques*, Algiers: OPU, 1989, p 127.
- <sup>29</sup> *Journal officiel de la République algérienne*, 15(94), 1976, p 1042.
- <sup>30</sup> B Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London: Verso, 1991, ch 11.
- <sup>31</sup> The Parti du Peuple Algérien (Algerian People's Party—PPA), founded in 1937 and clandestine since 1939, and its (legal) electoral cover, the Mouvement pour le Triomphe des Libertés Démocratiques (MTLD), established in 1946.
- <sup>32</sup> The most violent confrontations, both in the maquis and, especially, in the emigrant community in France, occurred between the FLN and the rival Mouvement National Algérien which was formed by dissident ex-militants of the PPA/MTLD.

- <sup>33</sup> H Roberts, *The Battlefield: Algeria, 1988–2002. Studies in a Broken Polity*, London: Verso, 2003, p 211, n 1.
- <sup>34</sup> The original leader of the Front Islamique du Salut (FIS), Abassi Madani, derived his own legitimacy from having been one of this select band. The prevention of the FIS's victory by the interruption of the electoral process in January 1992 was correspondingly declared a 'Novembrist' act by its architects in the military.
- <sup>35</sup> M Harbi, *Le FLN, mirage et réalité, des origines à la prise du pouvoir (1945–62)*, Paris: Jeune Afrique, 1980; and Harbi, *L'Algérie et son destin: croyants ou citoyens*, Paris: Arcantère, 1992.
- <sup>36</sup> 'Hogra barakat', an end to the disdain of the powerful for the powerless, is a leitmotiv slogan of recent protests against the political status quo in Algeria.
- <sup>37</sup> The ALN, the FLN's revolutionary armed forces, were constituted as such at the Soummam conference in 1956. The late flood of adherents to the struggle at the moment of the ceasefire in March 1962 gave rise to the term *marsiens* (a laconic pun on the homonymous *martiens*, Martians).
- <sup>38</sup> The official '*milyun shahid*', an enduring repetition whose value is not historical but symbolic, is generally recognised as an ideologically inflated figure. While calculations are hotly disputed, the likely true figure of Algerian war dead appears to be around 300 000. See Ch-R Ageron, 'Pour une histoire critique de l'Algérie', in Ageron (ed), *L'Algérie des Français*, pp 7–13; and X Yacono, 'Les pertes Algériennes de 1954 à 1962', *Revue de l'Occident musulman et de la Méditerranée*, 34, 1982, pp 119–134.
- <sup>39</sup> Cartoon appearing in *Liberté*, 17 November 2002. The original reads: 'Ça y est, j'ai eu ma carte'. 'T'as fait la guerre?' 'Non, j'ai fait la demande'.
- <sup>40</sup> The *harkis* were auxiliary counter-insurgency and 'self-defence' troops recruited among the Algerian population. The term has come to signify any Algerian held to have collaborated, in any capacity, with the French army during the war.
- <sup>41</sup> J-P Lledo (dir), *Chroniques algériennes*, 52 mins, Algiers–Paris: Audience productions/Planète, 1994.
- <sup>42</sup> K Nezzar (Minister of Defence in 1992), *Algérie: Échec à une régression programmée*, Paris: Publisud, 2001, and his various interventions in the press, especially *Le Soir d'Algérie*, 11 October 2003, 3 February 2004; and interview with Nezzar by A Shatz, 'Algeria's ashes', *New York Review of Books*, 18 July 2003.
- <sup>43</sup> According to the 1976 constitution, art 82.
- <sup>44</sup> Particularly in the various Algerian student unions (UGEMA, UNEA, UEAP), where membership contingent on adherence to Islam was a point of contention, and most importantly in the drafting of the Tripoli programme, the unfulfilled constitutional document of 1962, most of whose artisans were in favour of a secular republic and opposed to the designation of Islam as religion of state.
- <sup>45</sup> O Carlier, 'D'une guerre à l'autre, le redéploiement de la violence entre soi', *Confluences Méditerranée*, 25 (1998), pp 123–137.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, p 136.
- <sup>47</sup> R Delphard, *Vingt ans pendant la guerre d'Algérie. Générations sacrifiées* (a memorial account of the war as seen by young French conscripts), Paris: Michel Lafon, 2001, ch 11.
- <sup>48</sup> Carlier, 'D'une guerre à l'autre', p 136.
- <sup>49</sup> H Roberts, 'Doctrinaire economics and political opportunism in the strategy of Algerian Islamism', in J Ruedy (ed), *Islamism and Secularism in North Africa*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994, ch 8.
- <sup>50</sup> Possibilities included the short-lived presidency of Mohamed Boudiaf in 1992; the Sant'Egidio (Rome) reconciliation platform in 1995; and the civil concord of 1999. Each of these episodes is, of course, controversial (on the latter, see especially International Crisis Group, Africa Report 31, *The Civil Concord: A Peace Initiative Wasted*, Brussels, 9 July 2001). The possible outcomes of the second presidential mandate gained by Abdelaziz Bouteflika in April 2004, on a platform of 'national concord', peace and stability, remain to be seen.