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BOOK REVIEW

Recto running head : THE JOURNAL OF NORTH AFRICAN STUDIES

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Histoire de l'Algérie et de ses mémoires, des origines au Hirak, by Emmanuel Alcaraz, preface by Guy Pervillé, Paris, Karthala, 2021, 304 pp., €29 (softcover), ISBN 978-2-8111-2359-8

History :

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This work is a worthy sequel to the critical history of memorials associated with Algeria's war for independence written by the author of the book's preface (Pervillé 2018). Emmanuel Alcaraz attempts a 'true narrative' (*roman vrai*) of the history that is intended to alleviate conflicts over official memories and memorials of various contending parties on both sides of the Mediterranean. Alcaraz, like Guy Pervillé, aspires to transcend the perspectives of politically committed historians, but he also recognises the impossibility of being totally 'objective' or 'impartial'. A 'true narrative' is still guided by the values and beliefs of the narrator. Alcaraz tries to demonstrate, however, that he may be exceptionally well situated to present a fair reading of Algeria's history to the French public.

In an epilogue 'essay of ego-history' he honestly lays out the shaping of his own perspective of Algeria. He was born in France into a family of displaced *pieds-noirs*. His father, of Spanish origins, had been a third-generation native of Oran. From a young age in Toulon, the author was exposed to colonial settler prejudices, including anti-Semitism, and received a conservative Catholic education. Consequently, he was familiar with sources of rightwing extremism that he would subsequently deconstruct. One of the strengths of his history is identifying the distortions of versions of the Algerian war used by various extremist anti-immigrant, Islamophobic movements emerging in France in the 1990s. His secular secondary and higher education had long since distanced him from his father's prejudices and nostalgia for French Algeria.

As a graduate student, he had little interest in Algeria, focusing instead on Latin America. After acquiring the necessary academic qualifications, he spent three years (2001–2004) as a French high school teacher in Venezuela, where he discovered the 'fragilities' of Hugo Chávez's populism, dependent as it was on petroleum revenues. Only in 2006, after marrying an Algerian legal scholar, did he become committed to North African studies and to preparing a doctoral thesis about official memorials of the Algerian revolution. While teaching high school in France, he then spent six years on his thesis, including many visits to Algeria. After completing his doctorate, he taught in Tunisian universities, being exposed to other views of neighbouring Algeria – the two societies being largely interdependent, he notes (263).

As elaborated in his 'ego-history', he now had three perspectives on populism: those of the extreme right in France, of the left in Venezuela, and the 'populisme arabo-musulman du pouvoir algérien' (261). Both Venezuela and Algeria were petroleum rentier states, and such 'rents' may have led him to extend the concept to symbolic or 'memorial' rents. The Algerian regime's very legitimacy depended in his view on a sort of 'memorial monism' based on 'l'unitarisme arabo-

musulman'. This enrichment of the rentier concept stemmed naturally from his doctoral dissertation, published in 2017 (Alcaraz 2017), introducing the idea of symbolic rents and showing how memorial sites were used to legitimate the Algerian authorities – *le pouvoir* – over half a century after the war. In 2013 he presented a paper at a colloquium for French historians entitled 'L'Etat algérien sous Boumediène', claiming Algeria 'construit sa légitimité en instrumentalisant à son profit la rente symbolique de la mémoire de la lutte menée par le peuple algérien contre son ancien colonisateur'.¹

His earlier work may have inspired Benjamin Stora, one of his thesis advisors, to use this idea of symbolic rent in his report commissioned by President Emmanuel Macron in 2020 about 'les questions mémorielles portant sur la colonisation, et la guerre d'Algérie' – in the hope of letting bygones be gone and soothe tensions within France and between the two countries. In it Stora regrets the history of the war in Algeria becoming a 'memorial rent'.² Macron in turn spoke of Algeria being founded on a 'memorial rent' collected by a 'politico-military system', thereby provoking Algeria into recalling its ambassador.³ As if to offer comic relief, Stora further enriched the concept of memorial rent, now viewed as a stake in the competition between Macron and Eric Zemmour, a presidential candidate of the extreme right.⁴

Whoever first inserted rents into the war of memorials, whether Stora or Alcaraz, was making efforts to 'pacify' contending historical recollections of the war. They obviously backfired. Alcaraz completed the book under review in late September 2021, just before Macron's use of the term in the Stora report precipitated the rupture in Franco-Algerian relations. Alcaraz too concluded, 'le pouvoir ne peut plus se légitimer avec le seul passé de la guerre d'indépendance, assimilé à une rente symbolique' (234–235).

Indeed, the *hirak* pointed to a complete breakdown of legitimate authority. Starting on 22 February 2019, masses of people throughout much of Algeria peacefully marched against the system each Friday – and students on Tuesdays – until Covid-19 somewhat curtailed their activity and the police suppressed it in 2021. Alcaraz viewed it to be a consequence of internal warfare between the clan of Gaïd Salah, the military chief of staff, and that of Mohammed Mediène, a.k.a. Tewfik, the former head of military security. Tewfik's forced retirement in 2016 had evidently been a political smokescreen.⁵

Alcaraz described the many aspects of the Algerian war brought to light in the *hirak* that official memorials had supposedly occluded. As in his earlier book, he stressed the FLN's Soummam Conference of September 1956, which established a constitution based on the primacy of political over military decision-makers. He sympathised with the *hirak* manifesting the expiration of memorial rents.

His book is divided into three parts, Algeria before 1954, the war for independence, and a concluding part on how the history was used by various parties since 1962. He rounded off his study with a sixteen-page chronology from 238 BC (reign of Massinissa) to 20 September 2021, when Macron apologised and offered reparations to the harkis, the Algerians who had served the French army in colonial Algeria.

This history of Algeria is not easy reading. It is highly condensed, with the 65 pages of the first part covering 2192 years. Each subsection is headed by a question raised in recent polemics, starting with whether the Algerian state and nation existed before the French conquest of 1830, the same question Macron unfortunately raised in his recent altercation about memorial rents. Alcaraz then drew a subheading, 'the forgetting of the Berber, Jewish, and Christian past in the Algerian national narrative'. Here, as in many other references to the shortcomings of official history, he seems to be beating a dead horse. He did not cite distinguished Algerian historians, such as Hassan Remaoun, nor even some compatriots, notably Charles-André Julien. As to whether an Algerian state existed before 1830, there was no need to begin with Massinissa and Jugurtha. In a well-documented history coordinated by Remaoun, its 21-page chronology of prewar Algeria begins in 1505 with the Spanish capture of Mers el Kebir.⁶ Alcaraz's account actually agrees with the Algerian historians that Algeria had already acquired the foundations of a state in the Ottoman Empire before 1830, much like Tunisia.

Alcaraz's dense history of the war assumes readers who are already familiar with the subject matter. He continued to beat the dead horse of an official national narrative (*roman*), arguing for instance, that the massacres of 1945 were not 'genocide', as one official Algerian foundation insisted. He offered many interesting factoids in passing. He upgraded the heritage of Messali Hadj, as have Algerians in recent years, and observed that neither Messali nor other leaders of his radical nationalist party had ever collaborated with the Nazis.

Most of the questions organising Alcaraz's history of the war would seem of greater interest to readers focused on France than on Algeria. For instance, 'Can the violent acts attributed to the coloniser be on the same scale as those of the FLN against the Europeans?' and 'Did the French army win the war and did the French government suffer a diplomatic defeat?', Alcaraz offers reasonable, well-documented responses to his questions. De Gaulle did not snatch diplomatic defeat from the jaws of victory, but Alcaraz did blame him for betraying the harkis.

He also underlined the weaknesses of the transitional period to independence, which might have benefited from international assistance had it not been for de Gaulle's fixations on national grandeur. He supplemented his case study of violence in Oran during the concluding weeks of French Algeria with an interview with his father, a lieutenant in the merchant marines who visited his parents in Trouville (Ain El Turk), about ten miles west of Oran, during the spring of 1962. The author's grandparents stayed in Algeria until September, when they departed for economic reasons rather than personal safety.

The third part of the book is not so much about the history of Algeria from 1962 to 2021 as about the abusive uses of previous history by various factions of the extreme right in France. Across the Mediterranean the Algerians get only sixteen cramped pages until the *hirak*, and their organising questions are bizarre. 'Why didn't the Algerian authorities (*pouvoir*) recognise the acts of violence [of the FLN] committed [during the war] against Algerians?', and 'Is there a link between colonisation, the Algerian war, and the Algerian civil war?' referring to the violence following the resignation of President Chadli Bendjedid and cancelling of parliamentary elections in January 1992. Alcaraz put those memorial rents to work in the following dense summary of his argument.

L'influence, sur les acteurs en guerre civile dans les années 1990, d'idéologies caractérisées par l'obsession de la pureté, l'hypernationalisme arabo-musulman de la mémoire officielle algérienne, ne condamnant pas les violences entre algériens pendant la guerre d'indépendance algérienne, et les idéologies de l'islam radical dans une société où la construction de la citoyenneté est fragile, est probablement une cause importante de la radicalité des violences observées dans les années 1990.

In fact, the decline of fossil fuel rents in the mid-1980s did subject the regime to strains requiring an ever greater reliance on its symbolic rents, but official controls over historical narratives were considerably relaxed after the downfall of the single-party regime in 1989, enabling the publication of honest political memoirs, beginning with those of Belaid Abdesselam, the fallen czar of Algeria's failed industrialisation.⁷ As Alcaraz notes (208), Boumediene never decided to favour 'islamo-populisme' over Abdesselam's modernisation project, although their respective advocates clashed over education policies.⁸ Moreover, Alcaraz's so-called populism is that of Ahmed Taleb-Ibrahimi, affirming Algeria's Arab Islamic identity, and it had nothing to do with the radical Islam supposedly propounded by various militias that were infiltrated by Algeria's security services.

Ironically, the questions raised by this book are likely to pacify contending Algerian narratives, but not quite as the author intended. Silence or controlled outrage will be in order, now that Algeria's chief of staff has recalled the two most influential generals of the 1990s, Khaled Nezzar and Mohammed Mediène.⁹

Memorial rents are likely to dissipate under the growing scrutiny of Algerian historians, even as the recent rise of hydrocarbon rents alleviates the need for the symbolic ones. The author has written a 'true narrative' to the best of his ability, but his efforts to stay 'objective' above the fray may occlude some of the events over the past thirty years treated more objectively by Algeria-Watch: Information sur la situation des droits humains en Algérie.¹⁰

Notes

1 <http://www.emmanuelalcaraz.com/article-participation-au-colloque-les-decolonisations-au-xx-eme-siecle-heritages-continuites-discontinuit-120594238.html> ✕

2 Benjamin Stora, *Les questions mémorielles portant sur la colonisation et la guerre d'Algérie* (January 2021), 13. <https://www.elysee.fr/admin/upload/default/0001/09/0586b6b0ef1c2fc2540589c6d56a1ae63a65d97c.pdf>. The published version of Stora's report, *France-Algérie, les passions douloureuses* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2021), has been reviewed by Arthur Asseraf in *The Journal of North African Studies* (published online: 9 December 2021). <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2021.2012012>. ✕

3 <https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/alger-rappelle-son-ambassadeur-en-france-pour-consultations-20211002>, citing https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2021/10/02/vous-etes-une-projection-de-la-france-emmanuel-macron-s-adresse-aux-petits-enfants-de-la-guerre-d-algerie_6096830_823448.html ✕

4 https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2021/12/11/en-france-aussi-la-guerre-d-algerie-est-une-rente-memorielle_6105636_3232.html ✕

5 Hachemaoui (2020) is one of the very few observers of Algerian politics to have seen through the smokescreen. He is not cited by Alcaraz, who did not discuss the political games being played in the final years of Bouteflika's presidency. ✕

- 6 Hassan Remaoun, *L'Algérie, histoire, société et culture* (Paris: Casbah Editions, 2000), 309–329. ✘
- 7 Mahfoud Bennoune and Ali El-Kenz, *Le hasard et l'histoire: entretiens avec Belaid Abdesselam*, 2 vols. (Algiers: ENAG, 1990). ✘
- 8 Ali El-Kenz, "Algérie, les deux paradigmes," *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 68, no. 1 (1993), 79–86. ✘
- 9 For the most recent update, see George Joffé, "Algeria: be careful what you wish for," *The Journal of North African Studies* 26, no. 5 (September 2021), 819–826. ✘
- 10 For instance, see "Trente ans après le coup d'Etat: Regards croisés de témoins et observateurs," *Algeria-Watch*, 19 January 2022. <https://algeria-watch.org/?p=81360>. ✘

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Pervillé, Guy. 2018. "*Histoire Iconoclaste de la Guerre d'Algérie et de sa Mémoire*." Paris: Vendémiaire. Reviewed by Clement M. Henry in *The Journal of North African Studies* 25, no. 5 (September 2020), 838–841.