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3-27-2018

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# James McDougall on the history of modern Algeria: a book review essay

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'The aim of this book', explains author James McDougall, 'is to explore ... what the reality of Algerian history has been for the people who have lived through it, what is motive forces have been and how these have been understood' (2–3). McDougall pursues this objective by shifting from a familiar, arguably worn historiographic trope, and presents 'not only Algeria's history "as it really happened" but of Algeria as a really existing place, rather than as a "model" or a case study of Third World suffering or heroic revolution gone bad'. He is interested in 'Algerians as the real people who live there, rather than as abstract actors in a tragic tale' (3). McDougall contends: 'We need to pay more attention to the making and sustaining of what in fact has historically been an extraordinarily robust, resilient society' (4). His 'primary focus ... is Algerian society and the continuous responses, innovations and strategies of people faced with the conditions of life dictated by their environment and inheritance, or imposed upon them by those would rule them' (5). Although McDougall evinces, as expected (given his important previous works), thorough command of political events, which is very impressively demonstrated, his book is primarily a social history. Along the way, he considers previous interpretations and 'myths'.

McDougall begins by surveying the history of the Ottoman Regency of Algiers, while providing a sweeping geographical, ecological, and socio-political description of the land and its peoples (Arabs, Berbers, *Kuluglis*,

Jews). He dismisses the popular image of a solely predatory, privateering 'state' (technically under the Ottoman suzerainty) and points out the greater economic importance of commerce, especially wheat exports. McDougall also addresses 'an enduring colonial myth held that on the arrival of the French, the Mitidja was nothing but a malarial swamp ... For most of the Ottoman period, the Mitidja was intensively cultivated and highly desirable land' (22–23). The Regency was at its height in the seventeenth century and sustained its power in the eighteenth. It was only in the beginning of the nineteenth century when its fortunes precipitously declined given poor harvests, pestilence, and civil strife. Furthermore, the Regency confronted increasingly aggressive Europeans (and Americans), highlighted by Lord Exmouth's bombardment of Algiers in 1816. Despite these troubling circumstances, Dey Ali Khodja (r. 1817–18) pursued reforms to reinvigorate the Regency while reasserting central power – a short-lived example of recovery and resilience.

Declining relations with France over a decades-old grain debt owed to Regency Jewish merchants along with creditors provoked the infamous *coup d'éventail* (blow of the fly-whisk) delivered by Dey Husayn against Pierre Deval, the French consul, which led to declarations of war and a French blockade in 1827. McDougall places the Algerian affair in context of Charles X's 'abortive, grand strategy ... to counter British naval preponderance in the Mediterranean, to dismember the Ottoman empire, and to redraw the political map of Europe'. Eventually, 'the assault on Algiers remained as the last attempt of a wildly unpopular government to gain international prestige, shore up its domestic support, and silence the opposition's demands for limit on royal power' (51). The French capture of Algiers in July 1830

did not suddenly transform the deeper patterns of Algerian society. Despite the immense upheaval and terrible mortality that ensued, the occupation of Algiers and the long struggle that followed it resulted neither from the single-minded pursuit of an expansionist policy (not a great-hearted project of civilisation or a genocidal one of extermination) by the French, nor from a continuous and undifferentiated "century-long resistance" by the Algerians. Beyond such myths, the story is more complex, less clear-cut. (50)

Four chapters recount the 'complexities' and contradictions inherent in the history of French colonialism in Algeria. The French state, now headed by Louis-Philippe after Charles X's deposal several weeks after the capture of Algiers, did not know what to do with the conquest before a consultative commission advised colonisation in 1834. During this period of 'restricted occupation', practices were already marked ('in embryo') by

unaccountable acts of atrocity denounced as such by a government unable to prevent them, and whose own avowed policies made them possible; conversely, a sincere and humanist liberalism unable to extricate itself from a conception of "civilization" whose territorial expansion by European agency among "backward" peoples would provide the warrant for every act of expropriation and brutality. (57–58)

In turn, Algerians sought to accommodate these contradictory new realities or resist them.

Abd al-Qadir's efforts to construct a sovereign state in western Algeria receives, as anticipated, considerable attention and reflection:

The dichotomy between religious sincerity and political pragmatism sometimes imagined by historians, along with the more obviously reductive images of Abd al-Qadir as either a "fanatic" or a "nationalist", are preconceptions without meaning for the situation they try to describe. For Abd al-Qadir, there was clearly nothing abstract about Islamic principle, and there was no contradiction between the claim to establish a unified sovereignty on the basis of "the pure law of God" and the recourse to the practical

means available for its enforcement. His vision of state-building ... would be meaningless without the effective force to assert it. (61–62)

McDougall reminds that Abd al-Qadir's 'bid for sovereignty' was not only challenged by the French, but also by regional Muslims, notably the Tijaniyya brotherhood and, after the battle of Wadi Isly in 1844, the Moroccan sultanate, which had previously been supportive. Abd al-Qadir surrendered in 1847.

McDougall recounts other French campaigns and conquests – the storming of Constantine; the defeats of Bu Ma'za and Bu Ziyar; the asphyxiation of the Awlad Riyah in the Dahra; the intrusion in Kabylia, and the suppression of the Awlad Sidi Shaykh. The widespread revolt of 1871 particularly stemmed from al-Muqrani's declining social and economic positions, affecting his accommodation with the French. His revolt

was neither a millenarian attempt to throw the French into the sea nor a sudden recrudescence of "primary" resistance to invasion; it was, rather, a defence of interests and of an established system of social relations that had thus far been able, however uneasily, to come to terms with the new conquerors. (78)

Despite the revolt's suppression and subsequent vast expropriation of Muslim land (e.g. expedited by the Warner Law of 1873),

up to the first decades of the twentieth century, Algerian society ... proved astonishingly resilient, capable of recovery from the demographic near collapse of the conquest and its consequences, and of reconstituting its spiritual, cultural – even, in some cases, its political and economic – capital, and, in the countryside, maintaining reduced but still important margins of self-direction. (83)

Furthermore,

resistance ... could still find expression in discreet sedition, popular preaching and storytelling, and in circulating rumours and echoes of events, sometimes from far away, expressing millenarian hopes for an end to the daily grind of oppression, as well as pragmatic adaptation or despair for the present. (ibid.)

As disclosed by the enduring tribal *firqa* and *jama'a*, McDougall contends that 'in the countryside ... despite the frequent misery ... ties of social solidarity and patterns of continuity proved resilient' (140) Basically, despite colonial exactions, Algerians sought to demarcate autonomous space and assert agency.

McDougall rejects the comparison of French Algeria to the 'American West of extermination and reservation, or the later South Africa of apartheid, although both would be invoked ... as examples at different times and to different purposes' (88). Algeria was instead an anomaly, where liberal democracy enjoyed by the European settlers

sealed the subjection of Algerian Algeria, once "pacified", to a fate of exclusion, dispossession, denigration and impoverishment ... What is remarkable ... is the way Algerians not only survived the effects of this enormous paradox, but worked to turn it to their own purposes. (88–89)

Taking into account recent scholarship, McDougall recognises that 'a tenacious pattern in North African Jewish historiography has tended to reiterate liberal colonial images of previously downtrodden Algerian Jews being emancipated and uplifted by the civilizing influence of French law and education'. He points out:

Algerian Jews ... did not consider themselves in need of “regenerating”. They both resisted the reformers’ policies, and adopted their language and institutions to their own ends, seeking to protect and preserve the continuity of their own religious, educational and familial practices (114).

The Crémieux decree conferred French citizenship upon Jews in 1870 (but not Saharan Jews until 1961); however, their new privileged social position also stoked notorious anti-Semitism among settlers, who waited until 1889 for citizenship to be granted to children of foreign fathers. Furthermore, there was ‘a slow but steady transition of the Jewish community from its rootedness in the “indigenous”, Arabic-and Berber-speaking population, to identification with European, French Algeria – much to the horror of the Europeans’ (116). Vichy revoked the Crémieux decree in 1940; Charles de Gaulle restored it in 1943.

Throughout their history, ‘anxieties, resentments and insecurities ... marked relations between the settler population and their government’ (88). Despite their being integrated as three French departments since 1848, with their dominant position complemented and reinforced institutionally, e.g. the *Délégations financières*, settlers remained persistently apprehensive of metropolitan indifference or intrusion (Jules Ferry’s Senatorial Commission [1891]) as well as latent hostility by the *indigènes*/Muslims (expressed overtly at Margueritte in 1901 and during conscription protests during World War I). McDougall notes: ‘The triumphalism ... of “the centenary of Algeria” in 1930 barely disguised their fretful insecurity’ (133).

Colonial policy particularly aimed to ‘contain’ Algerians in several ways. The policy of *cantonnement*, along with the Sénatus-Consulte of 1863, reduced and restricted Algerian-held land. Dating particularly from the Sénatus-Consulte of 1865, Algerians could only acquire French citizenship by denying their Muslim status – a choice relatively few would make. Furthermore, disciplinary summary punishment exercised by officials against the *indigènes* (referred to as the *indigénat* [status as a native]), arbitrarily suppressed Algerians and contradicted core values identified with the ideals of French jurisprudence.

For example, via the *bureaux arabes*, army officers administering the countryside with wide authority were often portrayed ‘as benevolent, “enlightened despots”, armed with intimate knowledge ... and an instinctive sympathy for the people under their administration’. McDougall points out ‘such ideas were more usually the conjoined twin, not the antithesis, of repression, and dispossession, and the *bureaux*’s officers remained generally ... dismissive of civil liberties and liberal law’ (121).

Nevertheless, McDougall emphasises: ‘It was primarily within the spaces, and often with the symbols created by that Republic that Algerians in these years reconstituted and asserted their social, cultural and political life’ (133). The Tlemcen migration of 1911 symbolically rejected colonialism. The *Jeunes Algériens* (e.g. Chérif Benhabylès, M’hamed Ben Rahal, Belkacem Benthami) adhered to French ideals while criticising their lack of application in Algeria. The Jonnart Law of 1919 provided greater opportunities, albeit circumscribed, to voice concerns. Algeria began experiencing a ‘process of political community-formation’ (ibid.) as illustrated by the activism of Emir Khaled, Messali Hadj, Mohamed-Salah Bendjelloul, Ferhat Abbas, and Abd al-Hamid Ben Badis, all of whom receive detailed attention. Not usually mentioned regarding his role in emerging Algerian nationalism, McDougall discusses Abbas’s support of *ulama* positions as actually complementary to his own: ‘On the more pressing, immediate concerns of the improvement and emancipation – from ignorance, impoverishment and the *indigénat* – of their community, defined by its being Muslim, they were agreed’ (160). The Blum-Viollette bill introduced in 1936 aimed to give over 30,000 Algerians the franchise. Nevertheless, the ‘lost opportunity’ claimed by historians belied, according to McDougall, ‘the promise of reform to be an illusion’ (177). The bill was eventually shelved, but it was already anachronistic given Algerians’ rising expectations and actions.

Mass politics began to be practiced after World War I characterised by the emergence of political parties, e.g. Messali Hadj's *Étoile nord-africaine* in 1926, along with proliferating media. Algerians also appropriated public space through music (Mahieddine Bachetarzi) and sports (boxer Omar Kouidri). Furthermore, greater contact occurred between colonial communities since the Algerians' accelerating population growth resulted in tens of thousands migrating to cities and to France to seek employment. On the other hand, McDougall reminds: 'The overriding characteristic of the colonial situation was not Algerians' "contact" with Europeans but their invisibility' (134), as exemplified by Albert Camus's investigative reports from Kabylia appearing in 1939. Algerians would soon become more visible.

'The public politics of protest inherited from the interwar years', McDougall observed, 'now unfolded in a sharpened atmosphere' (183). The 1940s featured the Manifesto of the Algerian People (1943) (called for self-determination and an array of reforms); the Ordinance of 1944 (which gave full citizenship to 65,000 without the loss of Muslim status and ended the summary punishments associated with the *indigénat*); the events in and around Sétif, Guelma, and Kherrata in May 1945, during which 6000 to 8000 Algerians may have perished [45,000 according to Messali Hadj's *Parti du peuple algérien*] (180); the Statute of Algeria (1947) (inaugurated an Algerian Assembly; greater representation in the National Assembly in Paris; and intensified Algerian party politics, i.e. the Messalist *Mouvement pour le triomphe des libertés démocratiques* [MTLD] and Abbas's *Union démocratique du manifeste algérien*). Despite consequent corrupt elections manipulated by the colonial government, McDougall acknowledged: 'The Ordinance and the Statute did effect a broadening and accentuation of mass politics' (185). In particular, intra-MTLD political and ethnic (Arab-Berber) rivalries and the emergence of a new generation of impatient younger and confident nationalists ('a militant minority' some of whom participated in the MTLD-created paramilitary *Organisation spéciale*) advocating armed revolution, resulted in the formation of the *Front de libération nationale* (FLN) in 1954. McDougall underscored:

Despite its title, the FLN renounced the political union that had proven elusive ... It would not be a "front" of combined, existing political movements. Instead, its leaders demanded the dissolution of existing political parties and the adherence of all patriotic Algerians (198).

The chapter on the War of Independence is concise and comprehensive. McDougall contends that the formation of the FLN 'was a politically astute gamble on the depth of latent popular support and at the same time a negation of politics. But it would not be unable to escape the political struggle that gave it birth' (198). Indeed, McDougall notes the specific significance of the Soummam platform (1956):

[It] marked a decisive moment for the FLN, both because it laid the bases of an Algerian counter-state that would build its sovereignty against the French campaign to re-conquer and (at last) "integrate" its Algerian *départements*, and because of the conflicts it provoked, which in turn would shape and colour Algerian politics for decades afterwards. (208)

McDougall traces the rise of the external army and security services; the increasing intra elite factionalism between interior and exterior nationalists; the violent rivalry with the Messalist *Mouvement national algérien*; and, in particular, the inauguration of a 'counter-state' where 'the FLN's tax-collectors and judicial tribunals were a truly revolutionary force ... FLN instruction to boycott some colonial institutions – elections, law courts, taxation – were widely followed (boycotts of schools and medical facilities were less successful)' (211).

France's 're-conquest' featured misperception as well as repression:

Successive French governments, convinced that the FLN was merely a terrorist organisation ruling its hapless people by fear and objectively (whether it knew it or not) advancing a global communist threat, and that the loss of Algeria – with ... its newly discovered hydrocarbon resources in the Sahara – would

be catastrophic for France's international standing and economic security, insisted that "the Algerian problem" was social and economic rather than political. (217)

The Constantine Plan exemplified French social and economic ambitions and intentions. (Some of its projects would continue in the post-colonial period.)

McDougall explains that Algeria's independence did not result in a Fanonist liberation marked by a 'new personality'. Deferring instead to Larbi Ben M'hidi, McDougall states:

Algeria's people had borne the war in both senses, suffering and supporting it, rather than experiencing it as a liberation in itself. The war itself, in its atrocious unfolding ... had indeed revolutionized Algerian society, mobilizing long-standing codes and structures of social solidarity into a new, assertive, militant sense of political community. (233)

Nonetheless, he concluded: 'Whether the revolution could be made to work for the people, and the state to govern by the people, remained open and unanswered questions. When independence was won, everything, in this sense, remained yet to do' (ibid). As the next chapter put it, the revolution was 'unfinished'.

The War of Independence had enormous consequences: 'It had torn Algerian society and even Algerian nationalist politics apart'. There was also the inventive

unifying fiction of unanimous national resistance ... The history of the war and of the FLN became legends, both drawn upon in a routinised rhetoric to claim legitimacy for those in power and appealed to by those excluded from power, or suffering under it, as a "confiscated" truth which, if only known in uncensored detail, would reveal the hidden cause behind all the country's subsequent ills. (237)

McDougall analyzes Algeria's socialist ideology (as articulated by the Tripoli Program [1962] and Algiers Charter [1964]) as well as the origin and organisation of the oligarchic *pouvoir* ('the real system of power' [244]). Concerning the Ahmed Ben Bella-Houari Boumedienne rivalry (resulting in the former's deposal in June 1965): 'Boumedienne was able, as Ben Bella had not been to impose himself as the supreme arbiter over the informal factions and different constituencies who were now brought into the system' (252). Under Boumedienne, state plans aspired to achieve economic independence, but as a rentier state (overly dependent on hydrocarbon export revenues) Algeria faced the vicissitudes of the international market. Although Algeria enjoyed impressive growth rates, 'the economy was wildly unbalanced: industry expanded, but agriculture stagnated or regressed' (258) (despite the vaunted Agrarian Revolution launched in the early 1970s).

Concurrently, there was significant educational achievement. Nevertheless, while school attendance soared, illiteracy persisted, particularly among women. Accelerating population growth also restricted opportunities. Furthermore, debates over the use of French and Arabic – bilingualism – complicated matters and seemed to contradict the objectives of the Cultural Revolution positing a compatible Muslim, Arab, and socialist identity as espoused by the National Charter of 1976.

The charismatic Ben Bella is usually associated with Algeria's Third Worldism, but Boumedienne, in his own austere way, championed the non-aligned movement. McDougall admiringly considers Boumedienne's initiative (1974), regarding a 'new world economic order', a 'striking vision' (253). His death in 1978 brought Chadli Benjedid to power.

Given the events of the 1980s and the early 1990s, many have portrayed the Boumedienne years as a 'golden age' subsequently tarnished, if not abandoned, by Benjedid's administration. McDougall takes a different, balanced view. He notes that

the basic realities of *le pouvoir* and its tutelary relation to society ... did not change ... The crises that came to the surface in the 1980s had developed long before ... Chadli's weakness was his inability to impose himself, as Boumedienne had done, as the recognised arbiter of factional conflict. (271)

With plummeting petroleum prices and rising debts, McDougall reflects upon the discussions of Mouloud Hamrouche (the Secretary General of the Presidency) along with other economic reformers, who began meeting in 1986 and suggested 'autonomising state-owned enterprises and decentralizing their funding' (281) Essentially, they aimed to address the 'reality of a dysfunctional state capitalism' (282) by advocating efficiency and competition. The group specifically proposed an independent central bank to manage and monitor foreign investment and loans, as well as currency; the termination of state control over foreign trade (a particular source of corruption); and the inauguration of *fonds de participation* to allocate funds to the public sector (282). (When Hamrouche was prime minister [September 1989 to June 1991, he endeavoured to implement these ideas, but the contemporary tumult tempered his initiatives and their efficacy.) As for the 1988 upheaval, McDougall states: 'To what degree the uprising was an expression of popular frustration, resentment and anger, and to what degree stoked, set alight and manipulated by which factions(s) within the regime, remains impossible to prove' (284).

The next chapter, covering 1992 to 2012, begins by considering the *qui tue qui* (who is killing whom) quandary ('doubt and bitter dispute') that 'troubled the Western media, the online public sphere and ... the international community. It exasperated and infuriated many of those in Algeria who themselves were living with constant threats of death and saw their friends and colleagues murdered around them' (291). McDougall provides an assiduous survey of the conflict(s) and its many actors, but acknowledges:

The possibility of writing a satisfactory history of what happened in Algeria in the mid-1990s remains slim twenty year later, not because sources are unavailable – testimonies of various kinds as well as intense contemporary media coverage abound – but because, in the context of a fundamentally unresolved conflict, the tools necessary to the indispensable criticism of the sources are lacking. (292)

Thus, historicism particularly matters regarding the strife (and will continue to do so). 'Competing narratives' and 'contradictory stories', characterised 'the divergent ways in which Algerians themselves sought to make sense of what was happening to them' (294).

Yet again, despite political fragility in the early 1990s (e.g. the assassination of Mohamed Boudiaf) and the horrendous brutality of the 'dark decade', Algerian society survived and sustained

as it had under the ravages of colonialism and in the throes of revolution. And while both state and society thus proved more resilient than might perhaps at first appear, the relations between them too, however, torn, were capable of reconstitution. (294)

Once again, Algeria relied upon

long-established practices of informal politics and even older institutions ... as well as through a recomposed, formally pluralistic party-political machinery that often doubled, or was linked to, such institutions at local and regional level ... Algerians tentatively rebuilt their social space on the basis of a broad consensus of values, within which social and political divisions could be played out without recourse to arms. [as illustrated by the Arab Spring]. (295)

Although contemporary Algeria faces challenging political and generational transformation, its society remains 'robust and resilient' as illustrated by 'a system of functional, if episodic and informal, engagement between



society and the more local instances of the state – the provincial governates (*wilayas*), the municipal assemblies (APCs [*Assemblées populaires communales*]), even the local political parties (*kasmas*)’ (334).

McDougall concludes appreciating the ‘landscape that Algerians inhabit, have always inhabited, and have re-appropriated for themselves, less in the end, through the sound and fury of war and revolution than through the quiet endurance of a resilient society’ (342). It is this subtle, empathetic appraisal (complemented by fieldwork and engaging research) that particularly distinguishes this book, an outstanding addition to Cambridge University Press’s country history series. McDougall invites the reader to render a different regard concerning Algerians’ modern historical experience. By so doing, he immeasurably enriches Algerian studies.

The depth and detail of the narrative evoke the historiography of Charles-Robert Ageron, Charles-André Julien, Jean-Claude Vatin, Ahmad Tawfiq al-Madani, Mahfoud Kaddache, Julia Clancy-Smith, and John Ruedy, all of whom are included in the bibliography. Besides using an array of primary and secondary sources, the bibliography cites interviews with notable Algerians, e.g. Mouloud Hamrouche, Mostefa Lacheraf, Redha Malek, Abdelhamid Mehri, Hocine Zehouane, among others. The interviews enhance the work, especially the latter part of the book. The author provides a helpful list of abbreviations and acronyms. There are also three maps and 33 figures.

James McDougall has generously gifted a superb historical survey to students and scholars of modern Algerian history – and for that we are thankful.