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Algeria/France

Algeria as State and Nation

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Everyone knows about the “Zemmourian” fly that has stung French President Emmanuel Macron and pushed him to attack Algeria and its government on the theme of the “memorial rent” (founding myth). Everyone has also understood that the political issues related to the respective electoral situations on both shores of the Mediterranean feed the rhetoric on both sides.

The French right, in the midst of a crisis of representation, is moving further right in the wake of the fascistic far right. The latter has always built its programme on the danger of North African, and particularly Algerian, immigration. Zemmour has only upped the ante on an old discourse. Macron has followed him on the backs of Algerians. This gratuitous aggression runs counter to the history of both countries and to humanity.

The complexity of national construction

In search of a national unity programme against the *hirak* on the theme of an “external threat” to distract from “internal disorder,” the Algerian government is outbidding on the theme of Algeria’s sovereignty. The defence of sovereignty is just and legitimate, of course even if it is centred around a false debate. Algerians have sufficiently demonstrated throughout the *hirak* their attachment to the sovereignty of their country against any external aggression.

As a result, the debate on nation, history and origins puts the debate on identities back on the agenda abstracted from the issues of the present and the future.

Of course, the Algerian nation-state, with its current territory, is of recent formation, like all humanity.

Let’s take Italy as an example. Although Italian society, its territory and language began to emerge in the fifteenth century with the great cultural and aesthetic revolution called the “Renaissance”, its completion as a nation is a political fact linked to the dynamic led by Garibaldi in the 19th century. Visconti’s film *The Leopard* tells this well, with the integration of Sicily into the fold of the new Italian nation. Ancient Rome has only a distant and mythical relationship with today’s Italy. It is an ideological recovery, hence the term “Renaissance”. It is a kind of “memorial rent,” that is to say a founding myth. Even the Italian language is not a derivative of Latin. It is a conscious intellectual construction and a critical part of a vernacular of that time.

This is valid for Algeria, *mutatis-mutandis*. Of ancient origins, referred to by colonial historiography in the service of its memorial rent as the “Roman era” - understand under Roman occupation - three great empires structured the territories of the Berbers. Punic Carthage, the matrix of present-day Tunisia, Numidia for Algeria, and Mauritania for present-day Morocco. It was not the “Roman era.” They were often at war with Rome.

In the Middle Ages, called the “Arab period” in the service of another “memorial rent,” there were other empires built on the same matrix. The Almoravids and Almohads unified large Berber territories, from south to north, from east to west, occupying Andalusia. Then came the fifteenth century, the threshold of modernity today and the beginning of decadence.

Facing colonialism

Remembering these origins is not done for glory. There is obviously no direct and continuous relationship between this distant antiquity and the formation of today's nation, as we pointed out in the Italian example. It is an epistemological necessity to deconstruct this historiography of colonial and colonialist origin that presents Algeria as a series of "colonial periods" and erases any history of the Berbers. The latter are often presented as a people without history fleeing the enemy. Yet, it is enough to recall that Hannibal attacked Rome in its fiefdom and Tarek Ben Ziad gave his name to Gibraltar.

For Gilbert Meynier, it is from the fifteenth century that we can "speak of *Dawla Eldjazâ'ir* (the state-regime of Algiers), and the term was used in the same sense by Ibn Khaldun. In the seventeenth century, we begin to talk about *Watan Al-Djazâ'ir* (the Algerian homeland)."

For the British historian James McDougall, the foundations of Algerian society began to develop in the fifteenth century. "Society was very hierarchical, fairly fragmented between regions, linguistic and genealogical communities, but connected by markets, exchanges, membership of religious education networks, pilgrimages and so on. But it was by no means anarchic or kept in order by this oriental despotism that the stereotypes of the colonial era liked to imagine."

"If France undoubtedly invented 'its' (French) Algeria, Algeria as a territorial unit as it exists today is an older and deeper Algeria, that is to say an Algerian society which the colonists had tried to destroy but which escaped them, and which would eventually dislodge them."

The Hirak, builder of Algeria

On the other hand, the crucial question rarely asked concerns this historical stage of capitalist modernity opened by the fifteenth century. Over the long term, this Algerian fifteenth century, as is true for the Maghreb and the Berbers in general, opens on a period of slow decadence. There is no equivalent with the European fifteenth century. Here, there is no modern state foundation, no centralized administration and no decisive social, cultural and linguistic change either. Even if the periodization, fundamental trends and historical rhythms of development allow only vague rapprochements, this capitalist modernity caught up with us at the worst time: the nineteenth century in its colonial form by a West at the height of its power and industrial modernity.

In any case, it was nationalist Algerians who completed the creation of their nation, weapons in hand and under conditions they did not choose, by making their society, which already existed, a political community, against the will of colonial France, which had denied the right to sovereignty.

It is the defence of this sovereignty and its development, under new conditions, that the *hirak* has now introduced into society, with terms and objectives less reductive than those of the government.

PS:

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