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Benjamin Stora. *Algeria, 1830-2000: A Short History.* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001. xv + 283 pp. $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8014-8916-7; $52.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-3715-1.

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Deconstructing the Algerian "Nation"

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There was a time, about a generation ago, when Algeria played a role in American political and intellectual discourse. Most famously, in 1957 John F. Kennedy, then a senator from Massachusetts, gave a bold speech calling for the United States to support Algerian independence from France. More broadly, for academics and intellectuals with even a passing interest in "Third World" national liberation movements, the case of Algeria was a critical reference point to be studied and debated.

By the late 1980s, however, the decline of "Third Worldism" as an intellectual approach in the United States combined with economic crisis in Algeria to mark the fading away of general interest in the Algerian case. Thus, in the early 1990s, when Algeria embarked on a path-breaking experiment with democratic elections, only a narrow group of specialists within the United States took note that Algeria was on the cusp of establishing a new model for political change in the Arab and Islamic world with the election of an Islamist party to power. The Algerian military, however, stepped in to abort the experiment and soon Algeria found itself engulfed in what would turn into a brutal, seemingly unending civil war.

As the years passed and the dynamics of the civil conflict grew more mysterious and opaque to outside observers, Algeria drifted further to the margins of American social science. Good information on Algerian society grew more scarce, fieldwork became nearly impossible, and intellectual fashion discouraged scholars from committing to the specialization needed to study contemporary Algeria. To the degree that the case of Algeria was mentioned at all by non-specialists it was to suggest the incompatability of Islam and democracy or as an illustration of Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis.[1]

This marginalization of the case of Algeria within the Anglo-American academy stands in contrast to the ongoing historical and contemporary research being conducted by French scholars (and to a lesser degree by U.S.-based francophone scholars). French scholars obviously have closer ties to Algeria and its history, but American scholars could profit from engaging this literature and the case of Algeria. The study of Algeria offers critical lessons about some of today's most pressing intellectual and political issues, including the relationship between Islam and "the West," the connections between political identity and violence, and the difficulties of promoting political pluralism and national identity formation in multicultural societies.

With this in mind, the publication of *Algeria, 1830-2000: A Short History* is a welcome effort to begin to bridge the Atlantic divide. It represents the first English translation of the work of Benjamin Stora, a leading French scholar of Algerian history and French-North African relations. Stora was born in Constantine, Algeria, and has excavated the themes of nationalism, war, and historical memory in his numerous books. He has also helped produce television documentaries and museum expositions in France addressing the Algerian war and the French experience of it. Both his research and his publicly engaged model of scholarship should interest American scholars.

*Algeria, 1830-2000_* is a translated compilation of three short introductory-level historical surveys Stora wrote in the early 1990s for the French publishing house La Decouverte. As such, most scholars of Algeria and French colonial history will likely have little use for this unfortunately inelegant translation. For the general reader or comparativist seeking an introduction to the Algerian case, however, the volume provides an engaging survey of Algerian history laced with critical themes developed further in Stora's other work.

The volume is a brisk read consisting of seventeen brief chapters carrying the reader through the Alge-

rian war (1954-62) and the years since independence. Notwithstanding the promise of the book's title, the 1830-1954 period (the subject of one of the three French publications) is condensed into a twenty-seven-page introduction which gives scant attention to the pre-colonial period. This nevertheless serves as an excellent summary of the period outlining French colonial policies which created French Algeria and led to the dislocation of indigenous political, economic, and cultural formations.

In the introduction and throughout the book, Stora gives fair coverage to socio-economic transformations and various forms of violent conflict, but his overarching narrative focuses on the struggles to form, suppress, and redefine the "Algerian nation." The book's plot, and its inherent problems, is suggested in the introduction, where Stora writes "after the French conquest, Islam ... remained the only ideological 'nation' of reference for the majority of Muslim Algerians" (p. 11). Stora's focus on national identities highlights both the strengths and weaknesses of his scholarship. It gives him a powerful lens with which to view the struggles over collective memory in both Algeria and France at the national level, but it washes out the diverse vital processes of political identity formation going on at the micro and transnational levels.

Part 1 covers the events of the "civil war" beginning in 1954 when Muslim Algerians, under the direction of the Front de Liberation National (FLN), launched their effort to gain independence from France. Almost half the book is spent recounting the eight-year conflict which ended in 1962 with General De Gaulle granting the FLN's wish, but not before violence tore apart both societies. Stora portrays the Franco-Algerian experience, with the war at its center, as the product of three interconnected tragedies which have left unhealed scars on both nations.

One tragedy can broadly be viewed as the failure of the French colonial project in Algeria to live up to the universalism of French republican ideals. French Algeria was, as Stora notes, a "false model of a republic" (p. xii) in which "nine million Muslim Algerians were sham citizens" (p. 30), never fully and equally incorporated into social, political, and economic life. While some Muslim Algerians (called *harkis*) did find a place in French-Algerian society by serving in the military or bureaucracy, the vast majority came to view independence as the only means to realize the political rights of their national community. Meanwhile, for the French, "it seemed out of the question to abandon a territory attached to France for the past one hundred and thirty years" (p. 30).

While Stora notes that the conflict was engendered by the attachment of the French state (and to some degree the public) to the territory of Algeria, he never explores in this text the different ways in which the Algerian-born French (called *pied noirs*) and the Algerian Muslims developed their own territorially rooted attachments. Stora's account assumes collective attachments to "Algeria" and views these national attachments in terms of how they fail in practice to embrace pluralism and democracy, but the text never explores how these attachments are rooted in lived experiences at the local and communal levels. In other words, he could have better specified how pluralism and democracy not only are about expanding access to political rights but also require embracing rival–often contradictory–attachments to territory. I introduce this comment not to highlight a failing of the book, but to suggest an aspect of the Algerian case ripe for comparative analysis and likely to hold lessons for other cases such as Israel/Palestine.[2]

The second tragic storyline driving the narrative is the fate of Algerian nationalism under an authoritarian FLN eventually dominated by the military who concluded that "the pursuit of the pluralist traditions of Algerian nationalism prior to 1954 appeared too feeble a means for breaking free of the onerous weight of French tutelage" (p. 61). This storyline caries us into part 2 covering the period since independence, dominated by the efforts of the authoritarian one-party state to promote a "socialist" industrialization model and enforce an exclusively Muslim Arab national identity.

While Stora provides a fine overview of the limits of the statist economic model–emphasizing that it resulted in distorted industrialization, hyper-urbanization, and a high rate of emigration–Stora's more interesting details include his recounting of the state efforts to legitimate its power through (re)writing Algerian national history and claiming state control over Islam. History writing workshops, language policy, and control over the media allowed the state to induce what Stora condemns as a "forgetting" of the diverse pluralist roots of Algerian nationalism and broad societal elements which fought in the war of independence.

The third tragedy begins with the political and economic crises of the late 1980s and the rise of the Islamist movement led by the Islamic Salvation Front. Unfortunately, at this point in the book most readers will either find the events hard to follow or Stora's effort at explanation not fully satisfying.

Stora views this period as a struggle between two poles. The first one is the democratic pole emerging

out of the demonstrations and social movements of the late 1980s which demanded Berber cultural rights, increased political freedoms and human rights, and an end to the single-party system. With the legitimacy of the FLN drained by political authoritarianism and economic crisis, in the wake of the 1988 demonstrations President Chadli Benjadid set Algeria on a course towards political reform and free elections. As noted above, these efforts came to a crashing halt when the military stepped in to avert an Islamist victory in national elections. Soon public order broke down and civil war broke out between the military and armed Islamists.

While discussing the second pole, Islam, Stora's narrative seems to come full circle, representing the third tragedy as a legacy of the previous two. Stora argues that "the Islamists rejected democracy as a product of French colonial history and a value imported by the West, which was permanently demonized" (p. 203). Likewise, its "conception of the national" is "exclusively Muslim and rid of all colonial influence" (p. 203). Rather than embracing the pluralism of the early nationalist movement the Islamists "placed themselves outside the classic trajectory of Algerian nationalism" (p. 204). They have sought, Stora argues, to define their national identity, not as rooted in a territorial nationalism embracing Algeria's Mediterranean cultural diversity, but along a narrow line connected instead to the community of the wider Islamic world. In doing so the Islamists have "denied the dimensions of that Algerian revolution that was indebted to the French notion of 'insurrection,' that is, the use of the universal principles of 1789 as a tool against colonial France" (p. 206).

Whatever one makes of this reading, many readers will feel that Stora has failed to give us the explanation he has promised (p. 231), but rather has given us a thoughtful interpretation. Considering the difficulty of researching Algeria few scholars are in a position to complain.[3] Nevertheless, Stora's discussion of Islam lacks depth and detail, and fails to fully explore how Islam is specifically experienced in Algeria. The text provides no background about Islam for the general reader nor does it present an understanding of the broader history of Islam in which many Algerians might view themselves. Moreover, some might complain that Stora fails to consider exploring Islam as a (rival) universal system of thought, belief, and justice.

In any case, one crucial lesson of Stora's narrative is that "France and Algeria have something in common" (p. 238) and their histories through time are best viewed as two sides of a single, diverse transnational society. As a scholar immersed in both sides of this community Stora brings both intellectual courage and great knowledge to this task.

For this reason his work should be read and one hopes more of it will be translated. But sadly, *Algeria, 1830-2000* is a poor model for future publications. While certainly a product of excellent scholarship, the translation is so literal, bilingual readers might find themselves unconsciously translating the awkward text back into French. Moreover, the text has not been carefully edited to serve the general American reader by explaining unfamiliar events and terms and deleting extraneous details. Thus, even though Cornell has just published a paperback edition, instructors seeking material for undergraduate reading lists might find themselves better served by John Ruedy's *Modern Algeria: The Origins and Development of a Nation* (1992), supplemented with recent journal articles or monographs covering the period since 1992 such as Hugh Roberts, *The Battlefield: Algeria, 1988-2002: Studies in a Broken Polity* (2003).

Notes

[1]. One exception, by a scholar who worked on the National Security Council, is Robert Malley, *The Call from Algeria: Third Worldism, Revolution, and the Turn to Islam* (Berkeley: Uniniversity of California Press, 1996). Reviewed for H-Africa by Patricia M. E. Lorcin, Florida International University, August, 1997, at http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=8280877113832.

[2]. For one such effort, see Ian S. Lustick, *Unsettled States, Disputed Lands: Britain and Ireland, France and Algeria, Israel and the West Bank-Gaza* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

[3]. For one effort at explanation, but not without its own limits, see Luis Martinez, *The Algerian Civil War, 1990-1998* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000). Reviewed for H-Africa by John Calvert, Department of History, Creighton University, March, 2003, at http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=180391051388618.

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