

# 2008

*h-diplo*

H-Diplo Article REVIEWS

A Further Response<sup>1</sup>

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James McDougall on Christopher Cradock and M.L.R. Smith. "‘No fixed values’: A reinterpretation of the Influence of the Theory of guerre révolutionnaire and the Battle of Algiers, 1956-1957." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 9:4 (Fall 2007): 68-105. doi: 10.1162/jcws.2007.9.4.68. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/jcws.2007.9.4.68> .

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A Further Response by **Christopher Cradock and M.L.R. Smith**

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We concluded our response to James McDougall’s critique of our article, by pointing out that he had failed the tests of accuracy, evidence, and argumentation. It is unfortunate, then, that McDougall’s rejoinder merely confirms this opinion, for it adds very little to our overall understanding.

In general, McDougall appears content simply to stand by positions that have already been exposed. He could have provided elucidation to support his assertions that might have enhanced our overarching historical appreciation of the Battle of Algiers. That he does not represents a missed opportunity. For instance, he professes that he did not misunderstand the central tenets of our analysis, but singularly fails, yet again, to explain why he does not engage with our argument. To the extent that he acknowledges our key contentions at all he asserts, rather lamely, that they are a “straw man” but again supplies no arguments to justify this claim.

In our response, moreover, we challenged McDougall directly to provide the evidence as to why our findings were, in his words, “neither new nor very surprising [sic];” a position that he repeats in his rejoinder, declaring that our original article in the *Journal of Cold War Studies* amounts to no more than a “statement of well worn and relatively conservative theses.” Strangely, he still avoids giving, or is unable to provide, any evidence to support his criticism. The rejoinder presented him with a chance to validate his statement. It should have been the easiest thing to do to offer an example or two of published work in the text or a footnote. The fact that he fails again to support his contention places a question mark over the existence of this literature. McDougall’s position on this issue strikes us as evasive, and inexplicable.

Evasion, rather than explanation, also appears elsewhere in his remarks, including his response to the basic error in translation we pointed out in his review in which he

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<sup>1</sup> [Ed. Note] See <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/jcws/jcws2007.html> for earlier pieces in this exchange.

mistook *guerre révolutionnaire* to mean counter-insurgency. Rather than seek to address this mistake he falls back, quite testily we feel, on the irrelevant assertion that supposedly competent translators indulge in free and idiomatic translations. Well, some attempt at accuracy is required in translation if any worthwhile meaning is to be maintained, and, as we indicated in our response, McDougall's error was not simply one of literal translation, it was not even a "close approximation." It was a fundamental mistake on which his argument, to the extent that it is possible to discern one, rested.

Likewise, having shown in a footnote that the claims he makes about the predisposition of the French Army to torture are erroneous, he announces that his endeavor was not after all to suggest that the Army was predisposed to torture but rather that "North Africa as a space, and colonialism as a system" was a theater of "institutionalized extra-legality." We have re-read McDougall's review a number of times and while we have no doubt that he does indeed believe such things about "colonialism as a system" etc., we find it hard to believe, as would any other objective reader, that he was not using the example of the French Army to maintain that torture was endemic to French colonial rule. If he is back tracking on this claim then we would suggest that his original contention was opaque and poorly explained, and his illustration with reference to the French Army misleading.<sup>2</sup>

McDougall says that his review was neither a deconstructionist attempt to unmask concealed or malevolent agendas nor intended to accuse us of being torture apologists. We find it hard to take these statements seriously. Anyone who reads McDougall's review will readily discover numerous passages that will lead them to conclude the contrary. On page 1, for example, he denounces us because he decides our "main objective appears to be a rather unsubtle 'assessment' [and vindication]<sup>3</sup> of the effectiveness of torture in counter-insurgency." Elsewhere, on page 4, he states that the "unspoken suppositions underlying [our] presentation" indicated that "the 'values' of the authors overlap to a disturbing degree with those of their sources," that is, with the "self-justifying memoirs" of torture apologists. We shall leave it to readers of H-Diplo to decide for themselves what McDougall may or may not have meant in his various responses. For us his meaning, in this instance, is quite clear.

Finally, it is with some curiosity that we note that McDougall in his rejoinder wishes his views to be accorded with the stamp of "humane" and "sensitive" scholarship, while accusing us in his responses of being, *inter alia*, "disingenuous," "methodologically naïve," of vindicating the "effectiveness of torture," of "a gross and wilful misreading of the historical record," and of having "ethically dubious" assumptions. We are not entirely clear how such name-calling contributes to an intellectual appreciation of the Algerian

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<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, given that the definitions of what constitutes colonialism are contestable, and that the practice of colonialism has differed widely over the millennia, McDougall's statement that "colonialism as a system" *ipso facto* connotes "institutionalised extra-legality" is, we would argue, an even more crass generalization than his original contention about the French Army.

<sup>3</sup>. McDougall's own added parentheses.

## **H-Diplo Article Review- Author's Further Response**

War, but may be our understanding of what constitutes humane scholarship differs from his.

—*M .L.R. Smith, Christopher Cradock*

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