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

The article, "No Fixed Values: A Reinterpretation of the Theory of *Guerre Révolutionnaire* and the Battle of Algiers, 1956-1957," which appeared in the Fall 2007 edition of the *Journal of Cold War Studies*, sought to explore whether this curious, and still somewhat mysterious doctrine, accounted for the actions of the French army during the so-called Battle of Algiers, as a number of authors have claimed. Our endeavor was a discrete exercise that, no less and no more, attempted to address this question. The intention was to clarify as definitively as we could the nature of the relationship between *guerre révolutionnaire* ideas and French actions, thereby increasing knowledge about the behavior of the French army in this period.

In so doing, our undertaking also enabled a full operational picture of French actions to be established in terms of the military context: something that had not been attempted before. These issues, we believe, are of historical interest and warrant analysis in their own right, but the article also has contemporary validity as a case study of one attempt to solve the legal and military problems posed by urban terrorism to democratic states who, in theory at least, try to base their actions on the rule of law. This assuredly does not mean that we necessarily agree with the actions taken by the French authorities in the Battle of Algiers. However, an assessment of French operations can help to clarify, define, and illustrate some of the problems involved in combating urban terrorism generally, and, as such, demands an objective analytical method that avoids moral stigmatizing and an intemperate rush to premature teleological judgement.

In this task we were open in our approach. It was stated that we were concerned primarily with the French perspective. This governed our focus and selection of material. We were not embarking on an all-embracing study of the Battle of Algiers or the Algerian war as a whole. Merely, we were seeking to examine how the French army conceived its role during this phase of the war in order to determine the extent to which its operations could be said to be permeated by *guerre révolutionnaire* thinking. Given this doctrine's indistinct origins it was logical to explore the evolution of this mode of thought in some

detail before evaluating the influence it may have had on the operational conduct of the French army.

Equally, in order to accomplish this study, we were resolute in wishing to avoid becoming trapped in discussions over torture and atrocity. Echoing other scholars, we reiterated the requirement to get beyond the idea of analyzing the war simply as a “lived experience,” or as traumatic memory framed by the scale and brutality of the conflict.ⁱ The emotional scars left by the war on Algeria and France have often formed a mental cage from which it is difficult to escape. The pervasive influence of national trauma still acts to circumscribe academic debate, affecting what can and cannot be said about the conflict. But escape from the cage we must if scholarship is to follow its vocation and expand analytical horizons, evaluate truth claims, reveal complexity, and deepen understanding.

The Perils of Psychologizing the Argument

It is unfortunate, then, that James McDougall's review of our article reflects much that is regressive about certain kinds of contemporary scholarship in the humanities and social sciences. McDougall seems to suggest that analytical detachment from the cruelties and trauma of the war is not a legitimate intellectual position for the purpose of academic investigation, but rather functions as an endorsement of the actions of the French army. Our “main objective,” he declares, is to provide a “vindication” of “the effectiveness of torture in counter-insurgency.” He discerns this not through what we say our main objective is (evaluating whether *guerre révolutionnaire* impacted to any significant extent on the French army during the Battle of Algiers) but through the deconstructionist technique of textual counter-reading: that is, through psychologizing the argument, which claims to detect concealed and malevolent agendas through the “unspoken suppositions underlying [our] presentation.”

The practice of psychologizing the argument – accusing people with whom you disagree of having hidden and malign motives – serves to avoid “the often intellectually and emotionally difficult task of engaging with their actual arguments.”ⁱⁱⁱ Thus, McDougall manages to miss the point of our analysis, thereby committing the logical fallacy of *ignoratio elenchi* throughout his review. For example, he maintains that the “crux” of our analysis is our alleged assertion that the role of the army was to “re-establish order” in Algiers. This phrase extends from a quotation by the Algeria war veteran Captain Jacques Allaire as to what the French army felt it had accomplished in the city. It was not the crux of our study, which was clearly about the theories of *guerre révolutionnaire* and their possible influence on the French during the fighting. Yet this does not stop McDougall from trying to refute an argument that we are not making.

The Single Truth

It is difficult to identify a coherent line of thinking in McDougall's critique.ⁱⁱⁱ McDougall seems to be arguing that torture was endemic to French rule in Algeria, that this supplies

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the single truth as to why the French army acted as it did, and that consequently all further discussion on the matter is redundant. All that is left is to endlessly redescribe the cage of torture, trauma, and the evils of European colonialism.

Accordingly, McDougall casually dismisses any suggestion that a consideration of *guerre révolutionnaire* theory could possibly be of significance for our understanding of the conflict. "French military theorising," he proclaims without any further explanation, was "no more relevant to the conduct of the war in Algeria than were equally elegant, but equally fantastic, theories of 'civilising mission' or 'assimilation' to the actual practice of colonial rule."

This is the problem for McDougall's framework. It is crudely reductionist and lacks analytical subtlety. It immediately rules out any diversity of explanation. We can properly debate the extent to which theories of imperial expansion, like *mission civilisatrice*, or, as in the case of our article, military doctrines like *guerre révolutionnaire*, pervaded French institutions. However, to pronounce *ex cathedra* that they are of no relevance, and that we are wrong to try to discern their significance, underestimates the complexity of the impact of these ideas on and within important sections of French society. As such, it is a view that represents only an impoverished understanding of modern French history and its colonial experience.^{iv}

Facing the Torture Controversy

To be clear, we hold no brief for France's colonial rule in Algeria, let alone the actions of the *10^{ème} Division Parachutistes* in the city. Nor would we accept any of the justifications offered in their defense either during or after the event.^v What happened in Algiers was obscene. But scholars are under no obligation to make such undoubted obscenity the centerpiece of their analysis. We make no apology for our approach. Academics are entitled to investigate what the protagonists thought they were doing at the time, and in this instance, to examine whether the advocacy contained within the doctrine of *guerre révolutionnaire* can be held to explain what one set of combatants did.

Nevertheless, let us confront the issue of torture directly. If we had been engaged in an exercise to vindicate the use of torture, as McDougall alleges, we would have made it clear that this was our aim. The analytical background that informs our approach is that of strategic theory, which concerns itself with the study of the relationship between military means and political ends. It studies the instrumentality of violence without the ascription of moral value to either the means or the ends, and that would extend to torture, howsoever defined, as much as to any other form of coercion.^{vi} This may seem cold blooded, but it is a necessary assumption in order to separate personal opinion and emotional feeling about the role of violence from the task of analytical evaluation.

Through the employment of this approach McDougall suggests that we provide an implicit legitimization of French methods by, amongst other things, referring to FLN

violence as terrorism, as if it was a label of condemnation. Our understanding of the notion of terrorism, again, derives from strategic theory and focuses on its instrumentality (the creation of fear for political ends), without any moral valuation being attached.^{vii} This appreciation is not one that equates terrorism automatically with being bad. It is not a judgement we are making. It is one that McDougall is making. We have no problem with the idea that the FLN's violence, clearly designed in many instances to induce fear for political ends, can be seen in the context of a legitimate struggle for national liberation or that the French were equally adept at practising terror for their own purposes.^{viii} Nonetheless, to describe the strategy of the French forces in Algiers as only, "an overwhelming and untrammelled exercise in brute force" fails to allow space for analysis of French motivations, strategic intent, and tactical application that was sophisticated and nuanced. The conduct of both sides was undeniably brutal but that is not all that can be said about the Battle of Algiers. Indeed, in choosing to use the phrase "No Fixed Values" in the title of our article was to suggest that we do not necessarily endorse the actions of the French army but seek to understand the confusion of competing values, some immediate and some that have deeper roots, that led to the conduct of the French forces during the Battle of Algiers.^{ix}

That said, given how contentious the word "terrorism" is in public debate, we should have been unequivocal in how we were employing the term. In addition, we should have been more explicit about what the strategic approach entailed. If that had been McDougall's argument, we would have conceded its validity. But that is not his argument. His point is that we are guilty of being torture apologists. This is incorrect.^x

***Guerre révolutionnaire* and Counterinsurgency Theory**

Not only does McDougall engage in misquotation, but also mistranslation. He maintains that *guerre révolutionnaire* translates as "counter-insurgency warfare." This is an elementary error. Not only is it not a literal translation, it is not even a close approximation. The literal meaning of *guerre révolutionnaire* is "revolutionary war," though rendered in English more commonly as "counter-revolutionary warfare." The one thing it definitively does not translate as is "counter-insurgency" (which would be *contre-insurrection* in French).^{xi} Yet McDougall conflates these two different terms into one in a way that few military theorists would recognize as coherent. Counter-insurgency is largely an abstract term unbounded by time and place, which refers to a set of general principles and operational techniques that, unlike *guerre révolutionnaire*, is largely devoid of overt political content, and may be a matter only of methodical application by the military and civil authorities.^{xii}

In contrast, *guerre révolutionnaire* was a specific doctrine bounded by time and place, reflecting a uniquely French view of the era of insurgent challenges in the 1950s and 1960s. The interesting aspect of *guerre révolutionnaire* was that, in the words of one commentator, it sought to give expression to a "counter-ideology that was strong enough to animate and unite national energies."^{xiii} As we elaborated in the article, this counter-

ideology was articulated within the context of saving “the West” from Communism. It may have been a particular theory of counter-insurgency, but it is not synonymous with it.

Arguments and Evidence

By conflating *guerre révolutionnaire* with counter-insurgency throughout his review, McDougall builds up an illogical thesis based on this erroneous assumption, itself the product of a fundamental mistake in translation. In this manner, he is almost guaranteed to confuse himself and the rest of us. For instance, he castigates us for a “badly chosen” focus, which he believes should have been on French military operations in the countryside, as opposed to the Battle of Algiers, where the main French “counter-insurgency” effort was being conducted.^{xiv} Given that he dismisses the relevance of *guerre révolutionnaire* as a motivating doctrine for the French counter-insurgency effort before we even get to this point in his review, it is difficult to know quite why he is even arguing this. For sure the French campaign in the rural hinterlands was where the majority of operations took place, and is in itself undoubtedly worthy of further study, but this argument completely misses the point of our analysis. McDougall does not go through the intellectual task of engaging with our central argument.

The focus on Algiers is obvious. For France, Algiers was the symbol of its power in the colony and the maintenance of authority in the city was essential to sustain the whole idea of *Algérie Française*. Likewise, for the FLN, Algiers was equally important both for its pivotal position as the locus of colonial administration and the fact that the movement had consciously chosen to move its struggle into the capital to boost its faltering rural campaign. If the French had been defeated in the battle for the city the Algerian war would have been lost much earlier, and therefore provides the crucial demonstration as to just how far they were prepared to go to cling on to their colony.^{xv} As we know, the French went to inordinate extremes. The question that we endeavored to address was, in particular, how far the doctrine of *guerre révolutionnaire* with its embedded counter-ideology inspired the army to the extremes of action as witnessed in Algiers between 1956 and 1957?

In addressing this question, we found little to suggest that the doctrine did influence significantly senior commanders or actions on the ground, arguing instead that other historically contingent experiences help explain why the army acted as it did. We thus provided a revision of some of the accounts given by authors in the past who have linked *guerre révolutionnaire* with French actions in Algiers. McDougall asserts that such findings are “neither new not [sic] very surprising.” We are interested to know of the other work, which McDougall implies is out there already, that has directly addressed this issue before. It is reasonable to expect that if he is making such a claim that he would at least indicate the evidence either in the text or in a footnote. He does not do this.

Conclusion

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In summary, we do not believe that McDougall's critique adds up to a reasoned rebuttal of the points we made in our article. It fails the tests of accuracy, evidence and argumentation. We also regret the disturbing tone of accusation that runs through his review. We do not deny Algeria's dark night under French rule, or that McDougall may feel emotionally engaged with the traumatic effects of that legacy. There may be a place somewhere in academia for emotive statements but, ultimately, we would maintain that moral posturing is a trivial and self-indulgent activity.

—M .L.R. Smith, Christopher Cradock

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ⁱ. Martin Alexander and J.F.V. Keiger, "France and the Algerian War: Strategy, Operations and Diplomacy," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2002), p. 3; Neil McMaster, "The Torture Controversy (1998-2002): Towards a 'New History' of the Algerian War?" *Modern and Contemporary France*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (2002), p. 449.

ⁱⁱ. Anthony Browne, *The Retreat of Reason* (London: Civitas, 2006), p. 21.

ⁱⁱⁱ. A case in point is the opening and closing yarn about Marshal Soult's communication in 1845 to the Governor of Algeria. McDougall apparently argues that because harsh punishments were a feature of life in the French army of the nineteenth century that it had already institutionalized abuse within its ranks, thereby predisposing it towards the use of torture. In and of itself, this proves nothing. Vicious and cruel military discipline was replete in all European armies and navies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including – and most notoriously – those of the British, but whose armies have often been held to practise high degrees of restraint in many colonial campaigns. McDougall's example thus cannot be used to either demonstrate or extrapolate a valid path dependency to explain the conduct of the French army from the 1840s to the 1950s, because it is immediately falsifiable against the historical evidence and arguments. In this context see for example, Peter Burroughs, "Crime and Punishment in the British Army, 1815-1870," *English Historical Review*, Vol. 100, No. 396 (July 1985), pp. 545-571; John D. Byrn, *Crime and Punishment in the Royal Navy: Discipline in the Leeward Islands Station, 1784-1812* (Aldershot: Gower/Scolar, 1989); Sylvia R. Frey, "Courts and Cats: British Military Justice in the Eighteenth Century," *Military Affairs*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (1979), pp. 5-11; A.N. Gilbert, "The Changing Face of British Military Justice," *Military Journal*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (1985), pp. 80-84.

^{iv}. See for example, Alice L. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

^v. Various arguments of a utilitarian character were advanced by those like General Massu who maintained that what happened in Algiers saved the lives of many innocents, and therefore can be justified

as the lesser evil. Given that an estimated 30-40 percent of Algerian men in the Casbah district were detained and tortured by the French in order to get to, at most, 1,500 FLN operatives in the city, then, evidently, the army had to go through the innocents to get to the guilty. Accordingly, one had to go through the greater evil to get to the lesser evil. Clearly, an untenable argument.

^{vi}. See John Garnett, "Strategic Studies and Its Assumptions," in John Baylis, Ken Booth, John Garnett and Phil Williams, *Contemporary Strategy: Theories and Policies* (London: Croom Helm, 1975), pp. 12-14.

^{vii}. In popular discussion the word terrorism has come to denote the immorality of a political actor's ends and means, even though such connotations have no intrinsic etymological foundations. See in this context Jörg Freidrichs and Raphael Muturi, "Anything New from Under the Sun? The Political Struggle Behind the Legal Debate on International Terrorism," in *From Government to Governance: 2003 Hague Joint Conference on Contemporary Issues of Law* (The Hague and Cambridge: Asser/Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 463-471; Peter Neumann and M.L.R. Smith, *The Strategy of Terrorism: How It Works and Why It Fails* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 2-5.

^{viii}. Indeed, this is an argument that we as authors have made in the past: See M.L.R. Smith, "Holding Fire: Strategic Theory and the Missing Dimension in the Academic Study of Northern Ireland," in Alan O'Day (ed.), *Terrorism's Laboratory: The Case of Northern Ireland* (Aldershot: Dartmouth Press, 1995), pp. 225-240.

^{ix}. Interestingly, McDougall accuses us of over reliance on French sources, which he believes makes us susceptible to arguments about the utility of torture. This is not the case at all. We emphasize throughout that our objective is to examine the French perspective on the fighting and not to examine the torture debate in any great detail. Yet in making his criticism McDougall makes great play of the testimony of Djamilia Boupacha, suggesting that her harrowing account of her experience of torture can be taken as "unexceptional," which in itself exhibits an over-reliance on a single testimony to validate a general statement. The fact of the matter is that we do not know what the actual reality was. As Alistair Horne rightly argued: "one of the most difficult things in this world [is] to establish the truth about torture; whether it did or did not take place, and the nature and scale of it. The plaintiff is unlikely to tell the unadorned truth as his oppressor; for it so superlative a propaganda weapon given into his hands." Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria, 1954-1962* (London: Papermac, 1987), p. 196.

^x. What we actually say is that in the context of how the French army understood its position, if the turmoil continued in Algiers that "harsh counterterrorist [i.e. terrorism committed as a response to terror] measures by the *piéd noir* ultras" was likely to have been the outcome. Given the predilection for *piéd noir* extremists to commit atrocities and terror (which they did throughout the Battle of Algiers, and, notably, reintroduced terrorism to the city in 1960) this is not an unreasonable supposition. But this is not at all the same thing as suggesting that 10e. DP actions were morally defensible. Of course it is obvious in hindsight that *Algérie Française* was a lost cause and that the French should have evacuated Algeria sooner, sparing its people further suffering, but that was not the military goal set for army during this period of the fighting. Therefore, analysts are entitled for the purposes of historical investigation to examine what the army thought it was doing at the time and what it felt it had accomplished.

^{xi}. McDougall's questionable translation skills also appear elsewhere when "DOP" is deemed to mean "torture squad." Undoubtedly this shadowy group was responsible for many murderous activities. For the record, and just in case McDougall requires clarification, DOP stands for *Dispositif Opérationnel de Protection*, a phrase difficult to translate directly into English because *Dispositif* is akin to "device." An approximate rendering would be something like Operational Protection Unit.

^{xii}. “The central notion of counter-insurgency strategy,” McDougall writes, is “correctly identified by the authors, as ‘control of the population’.” Actually, this is a simplification. The primary concern of counterinsurgency is not necessarily always control of the population, and many debates take place even today over what the “center of gravity” of counterinsurgency should be. The central notion may be many other things depending on the situation and the viewpoint of the counterinsurgent: it may be “control” of the population, equally, it may be about gaining influence among specific groups; defeating the enemy’s propaganda, cause, military operations, intelligence, or a host of other possible variables. See for example, Major Mark P. Krieger, “We the People Are Not the Center of Gravity in an Insurgency,” *Military Review*, July-August 2007, pp. 96-100.

^{xiii}. Robert M. Cassidy, “MR Classics Revisited,” *Military Review*, May-June 2007, p. 113.

^{xiv}. McDougall implies strongly here that in terms of influencing “the practice of military operations” *guerre révolutionnaire* as a doctrine was more significant in the rural areas. Such a viewpoint is contestable if we consider the statement of someone like David Galula, who served as captain in the Colonial Infantry in Kabylia district to the East of Algiers. He stated: “In my zone, as everywhere in Algeria, the order was to ‘pacify.’ But exactly how? The sad truth was that, in spite of all our past experience, we had no single, official doctrine for counterinsurgency warfare.” David Galula, *Pacification in Algeria, 1956-1958* (Arlington, VA: RAND), p. 64. This suggests that the situation is more complex than McDougall portrays. *Guerre révolutionnaire*’s influence over military operations in the countryside may therefore have been only slight. Even if it can be established conclusively that *guerre révolutionnaire* played no role at all in French actions in the Algerian war this would still not mean that the French simply fell back on some ingrained tradition of torture. Other explanations for the French army’s conduct may equally reside in the possibility that in the absence of an official pacification strategy the army reverted to standard military doctrines to which all the major armies of twentieth century Europe adhered, which demanded that the enemy be rendered defenceless, the logic of which was to push towards the extremes of total war.

^{xv}. In Colonel Roger Trinquier’s words: ‘without the massive intervention of the army... the entire city would have fallen into the hands of the FLN, the loss carrying the immediate abandonment of Algeria.’ Roger Trinquier, *Modern Warfare: A French View of Counter-insurgency* (London: Pall Mall, 1964), p. 18. This is a very basic historical point about the situation of French rule in Algeria at the time.