

# 2008

*h-diplo*

**H-Diplo Article REVIEWS**

**REPLY from the Reviewer**

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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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Stable URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/McDougall-reply.pdf>

Reply by **James McDougall** to the response from **Christopher Cradock and M.L.R. Smith**

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I thank C. Cradock and M.L.R. Smith for their response to my review of their article. I stand by the review, which was intended not as ‘moral posturing’ nor as a ‘regressive’ deconstructionist attempt to unearth ‘concealed and malevolent agendas’ in their work, but to address the principal arguments advanced and point out several elementary but significant errors of fact and interpretation.

In doing so it also seemed necessary to address what appeared, and still appears, to me as a fundamental inadequacy of analytical orientation in the article. I did not miss the point of their analysis, which was perfectly clear, but simply suggested that the ostensible argument was a straw man. I disagree with the authors’ argument that it is possible and desirable to understand events such as those under discussion through a supposedly ‘objective analytical method’ which attempts to avoid being ‘unduly swayed’ by such human actions and experiences as occur in war. I hope I might be allowed to maintain a position which happens to be opposed to that of the authors on the proper vocation of humane scholarship without being accused of self-indulgence. I do not believe that a ‘mental cage’ circumscribes academic debate on the Algerian war of independence, nor that taking the experience of atrocity seriously constitutes an abdication of scholarly analysis in favour of emotion or moralising . Far from increasing our understanding of this case beyond that which careful, robust and sensitive scholarship has already established, the authors’ contribution amounts to a restatement of a series of well-worn and relatively conservative theses.

As to specific points of contention: I had no intention of misrepresenting the authors’ views, and did not accuse them of being apologists for torture. I took issue with their uncritical acceptance of claims about the efficacy and necessity of torture, and with their reliance on a triptych of categories of violence in which ‘terrorism’ was opposed to ‘counter-terrorism’ and ‘anti-terrorism’. If their actual positions on these issues have been misrepresented, the error lies in their own original essay. I make no claim in the review that French soldiers were inherently predisposed to the practice of torture (in fact testimonies from those involved suggest the reverse); my point was about North Africa as a

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<sup>1</sup> Originally posted directly to the H-Diplo discussion list (network) on 31 March 2008.

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

space, and colonialism as a system, of institutionalised extra-legality. The authors' contention, with reference to the extent and significance of torture, that 'we do not know what the actual reality' was, is untenable in the face of recent scholarship on the question, references to some of which are to be found in my review. It is disingenuous (or methodologically naïve) of the authors to hold that, since we do not dispose of many similarly documented cases to that of Djamila Boupacha, we can understand her case as indicative of nothing more than her singular experience. As de Beauvoir and others (including Vidal-Naquet, an exemplary historian) observed, the importance of the rare testimonies to emerge at the time was precisely that they revealed the routinised scale of the 'scandal' and the efficacy of the system at covering it up: 'It is not the facts of the Boupacha affair that are exceptional, but their discovery.' (De Beauvoir, *Djamila Boupacha*: 2) Since I am also accused of incompetence in translation, let me remind the authors that 'literal translation', as any competent translator knows, is frequently more misleading than a free and idiomatic rendering, and when faced with the deliberately obfuscating acronyms of military institutions, it is sometimes best to call things by their real names.

—James McDougall, University of London

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