

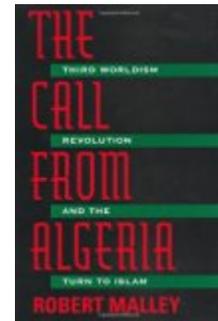
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Robert Malley. *The Call From Algeria: Third Worldism, Revolution, and the Turn to Islam.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. x + 323 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-20300-6; \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-20301-3.

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As anyone who has taught the subject knows, defining the Third World is not as straightforward as it seems. Are the Third World's parameters merely economic? Are they largely regional, ideological, or a combination of all three?

Robert Malley's stimulating book proposes a novel approach to understanding the significance of the Third World. He charts the emergence, rise and fall of what he calls "Third Worldism," an ideology *about* and *of* the Third World. "About" and "of" because, he believes, European left-wing activists and intellectuals were as implicated in its development as were the Third World revolutionaries and leaders themselves. In this respect Malley views Third Worldism as an outgrowth of Orientalism, as defined by Edward Said. Indeed Said's influence is evident throughout the book.

According to Malley, Third Worldism can be schematically summed up as "the belief in the revolutionary aspirations of the Third World masses, in the inevitability of their fulfillment and in the role of strong, centralized states in this undertaking" (p. 2). It arose from the confluence of ideological, sociological and political forces. It was a natural dynamic which, Malley suggests, can only be understood in the context of the territorial, human and cultural intrusion of colonialism.

Although Malley tells his tale from the perspective of Algeria he sets out to formulate his questions and draw his conclusions in such a way as to make them applicable to the system of thought as a whole, as well as to "the individuals who produced it, believed in it or were simply caught up in its web" (p. 4). He looks at its origins and traces its rise by analysing the reasons for its widespread success, in particular its ability to overcome disciplinary

and geographic barriers, and its appeal to both holders and claimants of power. Finally, he examines the reasons for its demise. Malley believes that the modification in the balance of power resulting from recent international events hastened the decline of Third Worldism, by making Third World revolutionary discourse largely redundant.

Three main themes shape this book. The principle theme is the Third Worldist ideology and politics of Algeria, embodied in the FLN (Front de Liberation Nationale). The second is that of Third Worldism in its global context. The third is that of discourses or "systems of thought" and the way in which they are constructed, maintained and eventually eclipsed. On the latter theme, Malley demonstrates how constructions of Third Worldism provided the ideological, political and rhetorical tools of both domination and resistance, of power and dissent.

The structure of the book mirrors these themes. Its three main parts, "Gestation," "Apogee" and "Demise" are subdivided into three or four sections. These comprise a brief introduction, a chapter on the global aspects of the problem, a chapter on the Algerian aspect of the problem and, in the case of the first two parts, a conclusion. The book ends with a short chapter entitled Afterthoughts. There is a good bibliography and each chapter is well documented.

Malley's sources are diverse. He has read widely and quotes extensively. From Third World leaders, activists and scholars to European academics, politicians and journalists, the range is impressive but the diversity distracting. This, coupled with his discursive style, gives the book a nebulous quality that leaves the reader wishing for tighter analysis, particularly in the areas dealing with

Third Worldism as a global phenomenon.

The strongest passages of the book are those dealing with Algeria; the weakest those about Third Worldism generally. Malley sees Third Worldism as a cross-breed of assimilationism, traditionalism and socialism. These three forces, he believes, “offered potential systems of representation to colonial subjects located at the various points of intersection between Europe and the Third World” (p. 24). This analysis is valid for Algeria, and indeed at a stretch for most other French colonies.

It becomes problematic, however, when dealing with ex-British colonies where assimilation was never a considered policy and where the colonized, however Anglofied, never crossed over into the colonizing camp in the same way some of them did in the French territories. Even in the case of ex French colonies Algeria was a case, *sui generis*. For 114 of the 132 years of French rule it was administered and treated as a part of France. (A fact Malley does, of course, point out.) Inevitably, this shaped and colored the indigenous response to the colonizing power in unique ways. (This Malley does not pick up on.)

Extrapolating from the Algerian experience and applying it to Third Worldism generally is misleading. Even in the case of the French colonies questions arise, especially when it comes to the movement’s leaders. Sekou Toure makes a regular appearance but what about Houphouet Boigny and Senghor? Houphouet is ignored completely and Senghor’s only contribution to the phenomenon of Third Worldism, if one relies chapter and verse on this book, is his declaration that the Bandung Conference was the most important event since the Renaissance (pp. 89-90). Certainly a Houphouet or a Senghor were of a different mould to a Ben Bella or a Boumediene to say nothing of a Nkrumah or even a Nehru (who only gets one mention as a participant at the Bandung). It would have been useful, nonetheless, to have some sort of explanation as to the ways in which these leading figures of the Third Worldist era slotted into the overall picture.

Among the more interesting points Malley makes is the way in which the present is intricately connected to the past. Third Worldism was not created out of a vacuum; nor was it something new and different, as many of its protagonists claimed. Its foundations were anchored in its historical experience. In the case of Algeria, not only was the “imperial project and emblematic figure of the *colon*” central to understanding the emergence of the movement“ (p. 19) but the dual heritage of Ottoman rule and rural Islam also played a part in the development of

attitudes toward politics and authority. Even the mythology of the FLN reflected the style of its colonial predecessors. The FLN’s attempts at trying to expunge the immediate (French) past were little different from French attempts to ignore the importance of Algeria’s Arab past by looking back to that of Roman Africa. Malley’s insistence that authenticity is not the prerogative of any ideology, past or present, is salutary.

Equally salutary is Malley’s eschewal of the notion of a “return to Islam.” As he rightly points out the Islamic movement in Algeria is neither a resurgence nor a return, but rather an evolution. He believes the notion of a “turn to Islam” erroneously implies that the country has returned to “the core characteristics of the faith, namely intolerance, fanaticism, and reactionary opposition to modernity and hence to the West” (p. 234). He chooses the term *Islamism* to describe what is going on and is adamant that in essence the phenomenon is not essentially about fundamentalism for its political, economic and social dimensions far outweigh its moral. Also stressed is the multiplicity of Islam, a fact the West has failed to come to terms with, preferring to view it, especially in its “fundamentalist” guise, as a monolith.

With regard to the FIS (Front Islamique du Salut), he views this as a populist movement whose motivating force is rebellious rather than religious. This interpretation implies that the movement has been one of violent opposition throughout its existence. To be sure it has always been anti-Western but prior to its successes in the 1990 and 1991 elections, after which the electoral process was put on hold, it had tried to broker a covert alliance with Chadli and his supporters. Furthermore, Malley suggests that the relentless Western, and in particular French, attacks on the FIS exacerbated their political alienation (p. 239).

At this stage, however, the French were not indulging in outright demonization of the FIS. There were tentative, but of course unofficial, contacts between the French and the FIS. As for the French media, although it no way endorsed the FIS, it did take the view that an opposition to the FLN was necessary and if the FIS was the only alternative then that was better than nothing. It was only when Chadli proved unequal to the task of co-opting the FIS electorate and curbing the movement’s excesses that the “relentless attacks” began.

Finally, there is the question of the demise of Third Worldism and “the concurrent escalation of tribal, religious and ethnic strife, together with the consensus around free-market values” (p. 191). When the state dis-

engages from society, Malley writes, society disconnects from the state and people seek refuge in alternative structures, be they political, economic and even cultural (p. 200). This is a valid enough observation but to imply, in the context of this book, that it is a result of the demise of Third Worldism is inadequate.

Economic side-stepping in the form of the parallel economy of black-marketing, which Malley gives as an example of such a refuge, has always been a lively feature of Third World economies and if it has escalated in recent times it is more to do with the economic slump of the eighties than with the demise of Third Worldism. To take but one example, Nigeria in the early seventies, when Third Worldism was still riding high, had one of the liveliest black market economies on the Continent. Access to it, furthermore, was enjoyed by a wider range of people than now because the country was booming economically.

Similar misgivings arise on the question of religious strife. If Islamism is moving in to fill an ideological vacuum in Algeria this is certainly not the case in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa with large Muslim populations. Islam in West Africa has always been a potentially divisive force in countries with large Muslim populations. Again, to take the example of Nigeria, the Islamic north has been

a significant political presence in the country for decades. Any resurgence in recent years has more to do with disillusionment in a series of corrupt regimes and politicians, who have been more adept at enriching themselves than tackling the welfare of their people, than in the demise of Third Worldism.

As for ethnic strife as an alternative structure, here again it has been an ever-present feature in many countries: India, Kenya, Rwanda and Burundi in the early seventies, to name but a few. These and others have had to cope with ethnicity and its concomitant tensions throughout the hey-day of Third Worldism. It is not enough to suggest that the resurgence of economic, religious and ethnic alternatives result, in large measure, from the demise of Third Worldism. The picture is more nuanced than that.

It would be churlish, however, to end on a negative note. This is an interesting and provocative book which reads well and raises questions that need to be addressed. It should prompt the sort of debate all good scholars seek to produce.

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