

Reconsidering the History of Algerian Independence: a review essay

Algérie: Une autre histoire de l'indépendance. Trajectoires révolutionnaires des partisans de Messali Hadj, by Nedjib Sidi Moussa, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2019, 336 pp., €22 (softcover), ISBN 978-2-13-081604-1

A breath of fresh air, a welcome gust of the innovative: that is what this book brings to the field of studies of contemporary Algeria and, in particular, to the realm of historiography about the political currents that animated Algerian nationalism before, during, and after the war for liberation. This work by Nedjib Sidi Moussa is the product of a vast doctoral project defended at the Sorbonne in 2013. Now it is finally published: simultaneously by PUF in France and Éditions Barzakh in Algeria, following a tendency to circulate scholarly works on both sides of the Mediterranean which has happily intensified in recent years. The novelty of the work is at least tripartite since, as befits every ambitious project, it has to do as much with the subject of study as with the method chosen and the sources selected.

If this is, then, ‘une *autre* histoire de l’indépendance,’ as the title announces (emphasis added), it is because it deals not with the already well-known case of the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) but that of its defeated rival, the Mouvement National Algérien (MNA), about which studies are still relatively scarce, after the pioneering ones by Harbi (1980), Stora (1982), and Meynier (2002). In independent Algeria, the MNA has indeed been the target of a fierce *damnatio memoriae*: its matters have been erased from textbooks and its militants accused of ‘treason’, if not collusion with the French. A process of Orwellian-like erasure has been in flavour, as the book’s epigraph reminds us: ‘This day-to-day falsification of the past, carried out by the Ministry of Truth, is as necessary to the stability of the régime as the work of repression and espionage carried out by the Ministry of Love’ (Orwell 2008, 243). Sidi Moussa’s book, then, is all the more welcome since the ‘fabuleux réveil de la mémoire’ (Siari Tengour & Soufi 2004, 267) which, beginning in the early 1990s, has hit the sequence of the war for liberation and given rise to a host of publications largely biographical in nature, has instead pushed to the margins (if not to the catacombs) the memories of the militants of the MNA.

Founded by Messali Hadj in December 1954 following the conference that summer which had witnessed the consummation of the scission of the Mouvement pour le Triomphe des Libertés Démocratiques (MTLD), the MNA had quickly begun to lose ground to the rival, and much better-armed, FLN, and, by 1958, could already be considered ‘comme un acteur de second plan’ (13). Of the impasse into which the MNA slowly falls, Sidi Moussa offers a detailed analysis, which strikes a balance of judgment and synthesis, bringing clearly into focus the ‘triple paradox’ that characterizes Messalists (as the supporters of Messali Hadj were called). The first element of this paradox is their stubborn attachment to an organizational form tied to the long history of the independence movement and, in particular, to that glorious ‘décennie des partis’ (Rahal 2017, 24) that began immediately following the end of the Second World War and had seen the interaction in the political sphere of the MTLD, the Parti Communiste Algérien, and the Union Démocratique du Manifeste Algérien led by Ferhat Abbas. The bursting onto the scene of

a handful of young and even younger militants convinced of the necessity of progressing to armed conflict and the subsequent birth of the FLN, ‘conçu non pas comme un cartel d’organisations mais comme un mouvement agrégeant des individualités’ (16), will mark a point of no return. The second element that, for the author, characterizes the paradox in which the MNA struggles is constituted by the overbearing weight exerted over the party by Messali, pioneer of nationalism and charismatic leader for three decades by then. The FLN had an easy time in attacking without restraint this ‘personalized leadership’ which had already led to the breakup of the MTLN. Lastly, the third paradoxical element analyzed by the author is the relationship with the history of the independence movement, which, upon a closer look, is perhaps the feature that worked most deeply in the mentality and political culture of the militants and, in this sense, also encompassed the previous elements: the Messalists indeed remained crushed by the weight of the past, anchored as they are to a ‘regime of historicity’ (Hartog **2003**) that found its own legitimation in the past and, in particular, in the ‘récit de l’âge d’or du nationalisme qui ne fait pourtant plus sens pour la plupart des indépendantistes’ (16). As Sidi Moussa correctly points out, the new generation of militants often had no experience with the organizations led by Messali Hadj, from the Étoile Nord-Africaine (ENA), founded in France in communist circles, to its successor, the Parti du Peuple Algérien (PPA). What for Messalist militants was the source of legitimacy was for others instead the mark of a tradition that was inadequate and, when all was said and done, defeated.

This paradox, carefully analyzed in the introductory pages of the book, is nonetheless not followed by an analysis aimed at demonstrating the mechanical transience of the ‘old’ (the MNA) in the face of the ‘new’ (the FLN). With a very convincing theoretical gesture, the author instead takes up the objective of deactivating this deterministic apparatus that still too often goes unidentified in so many works of historiography. As Walter Benjamin writes in the *Theses on the Concept of History*, for the historical materialist the task is instead to ‘brush history against the grain’ (Thesis VII), rupturing the ‘homogenous’, ‘linear’, and ‘empty’ time of a history that implicitly celebrates the winners according to the implacable logic of the Hegelian philosophy of history, which holds that what is real is rational. Sidi Moussa’s charge, then, is to radically revise the matter of the independence movement, breaking free of a retrospective view prisoner to an attitude incapable of appreciating those ‘possible futures’ but not for this reason any less real and concrete in the different historical circumstances in which they presented themselves as alternatives, like effectively available historical bifurcations (in this theoretical twisting becomes evident the influx of an idea from Koselleck, recently taken up again by the French historians Deluermoz & Singaravélou **2012**).

This, then, is the novelty of the method – beyond that of the subject – mentioned above. Still, Sidi Moussa does not adopt a counterfactual approach but instead productively takes inspiration from the work of Frederick Cooper, one of the greatest historians of colonialism, who made decisive contributions in equal parts to the expansion of our knowledge and to the refinement of our epistemological toolkit. The theoretical nucleus around which this book is built indeed explicitly recalls one of the key arguments of the influential *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Cooper **2005**), which is that ‘range of possibilities’ that the historian must always seek to bring into focus, resisting the siren call of ulterior developments (‘leapfrogging

legacies', Cooper calls them) to restore dignity to the 'political imagination' (another key concept of Cooper's).

I have argued throughout this book for telling a story about colonialism with full attention to the *shifting trajectories* of historical interaction, to the *range of possibilities* that people at any time could imagine for themselves and the constraints on their imaginations and on their possibilities of realizing their imaginations (Cooper **2005**, 231; emphasis mine).

The 'Cooperian' matrix in which the work of Sidi Moussa inscribes itself thus appears even with the subtitle of the book, where it is made clear that the focus is not so much the organization (the MNA or the other structures presided over by Messali) as much as the *trajectories* of the militants. Borrowing amply, too, from the historical sociology of Pierre Bourdieu (the most-cited source in the volume), Sidi Moussa aims precisely to restore the becoming-revolutionary of, all things considered, ordinary subjects, 'entre histoire objectivée et histoire incorporée, entre positions et dispositions, entre postes et habitus' (17). Said another way, the reconsideration of the Messalist movement cannot but begin with an approach that puts itself at the level of the actors, since 'Les parcours révolutionnaires nous permettent de réfléchir à la formation, l'entretien et l'actualisation d'un habitus messaliste' (23). More than the examination of political plans or supervisory organizational charts, this work thus takes on with clarity and efficaciousness the traits of a study 'au ras du sol.' Sidi Moussa writes:

Cet ouvrage se propose de saisir les propriétés du milieu messaliste et de comprendre comment ces colonisés deviennent révolutionnaires, comment ils qualifient de révolution ce qu'ils font, comment ils mettent en pratique la révolution et comment, leur défaite consommée, ils cherchent à rester fidèles à cet engagement. Car il y eut bien une révolution en Algérie, ne serait-ce que par 'rupture du système colonial français' (Gallissot **1987**, 167) même si ce processus ne se limite pas à la séquence de 1954-1962. (21)

Focusing on the revolutionary experience of individuals, the author thus also releases himself from conventional periodizing frameworks, opening up the chronology at both ends of the date range that traditionally identify the sequence of the war of national liberation (1954–1962). The stakes, more complex than ever, amount indeed to the articulation between the short and syncopated time of the event and the long and drawn-out time of the biographical parabola (Gobille **2008**).

The third novelty that characterizes this book concerns its sources. The analysis concentrates fundamentally on the members of the Conseil National Révolutionnaire (CNR), considered not as a homogeneous entity but instead privileging the study of the trajectories of the thirty-nine militants identified as its constituents (the number is uncertain because of the clandestine dimension of this transitory institution). Seeking to 'restituer l'événement dans son épaisseur sociologique et dépasser les vulgates journalistique ou militante, en prêtant attention à l'histoire en train de se faire' (46), the author draws upon Messalist sources as well as classical ones of the French state. But most of all – and herein lies the novelty – he avails himself of unpublished material belonging to a few private archives, principally those of Messali Hadj and Moulay

Merbah. To highlight this bottom-up dimension – perfectly aligned with the choice to center the study on revolutionary trajectories – it is no surprise that the book meaningfully begins and ends with a letter. The first is written by ‘Gérard’ (Mohammed Saadoun), in London, on 3 May 1958 to Moulay Merbah, secretary general of the MNA who had fled to Cologne. The other, also from London, was written by Saadoun to Messali Hadj, dated 19 October 1963. But the real gem that illuminates some of the densest pages of Sidi Moussa’s book are the unpublished and unfinished memoirs of Moulay Merbah himself, analyzed with great subtlety and clear compassion. When Merbah writes his memoirs, in an Algeria newly self-liberated from the colonial yoke, he actually finds himself in the gendarmerie in Boghari, an aspect that – as the author unironically notes – clearly illustrates ‘la continuité de la repression coloniale et postcoloniale’ (81). But, beyond this and beyond

sa valeur inestimable pour l’étude du mouvement nationaliste – notamment de ses tensions internes jusqu’alors peu renseignées –, le témoignage inachevé de Moulay Merbah nous éclaire sur la politisation dans l’Algérie colonisée, la perméabilité entre des courants distincts et la radicalisation nationaliste au début du siècle dernier. En cela, il constitue une source essentielle afin d’appréhender la pluralité des devenirs messalistes souvent masquée par la trajectoire de Messali Hadj – marquée par l’émigration en France et le mouvement ouvrier – ou celles des martyrs du MNA. (96)

This aspect is clearly the one that most demands to be underscored here, according to the analysis offered by the author, who insists upon how the anticolonial nationalism of Merbah – and along with his, that of many other militants – cannot be reduced to the binary opposition between colonizer and colonized, but must instead be woven as well back into that fabric of ‘conversations mille fois recommencées entre des groupes de statut indigènes’ about which Romain Bertrand (2008, 36) wrote. In this sense, of particular interest in Merbah’s process of socialization into politics is passage through the Jam’iyyat al-’Ulama before joining the PPA, an aspect not present in the studies of Stora (1985) and Gallissot (2006), because the reports of the Service des Liaisons Nord-Africaines do not mention it.

In this epistemological framework, the examples and moments analyzed in the book are numerous, grouped not chronologically but thematically, a choice that in turn contributes to liberating the argument from the ironclad logic of inevitability. Given the impossibility of listing all the examples chapter by chapter, one may pause on some of those that seem most meaningful. First of all, of particular significance is the MTLN conference in Hornu, Belgium, in the summer of 1954 (chapters 1 and 2), where the CNR was created. Through the close consultation of Merbah’s archives, which include reports from during and after the event, emerges an account as different from that of the French historians Droz and Lever (1982) as it is from that of the Algerian historian Kaddache (2000), which share a rediscovery of ‘une explication aux luttes fratricides durant la révolution’ between MNA and FLN (33). On the other hand, Sidi Moussa concludes,

Délimiter de manière arbitraire et définitive les contours de ce que l’on a nommé activistes, centralistes et messalistes, sans prendre en considération la plasticité, les tractations et les

revirements constatés au cours de la période étudiée, reviendrait à relire la crise à l'aune de son issue pourtant mal connue dans le détail. La confrontation des récits reconstitués à partir des sources diverses invite à insister sur l'incertitude des acteurs au moment où ils font l'histoire autant qu'elle les fait. (77–78)

Studying history as it is made and not beginning with its outcomes, the author not only rightly rejects the thesis of the inevitability of the scission of the MTLD; he also shows how the bloody conflict between MNA and FLN during the war for liberation absolutely cannot be attributed to a one-issue explanation that makes everything follow on from the conference in Hornu. But most of all, he offers us a perspective from which to appreciate the 'revirements' and 'incertitude' as privileged moments where the bifurcations of history still present themselves as open possibilities on an undetermined future.

This same *modus operandi* resurfaces in the pages dedicated to the turbulent relationship between the Algerian independence forces – Messalists in particular – and French revolutionaries in the period between the two wars (chapter 4) and later during the fight for liberation (chapter 5). Sidi Moussa introduces at this point the useful concept of 'transactions anticoloniales', which he defines as 'transferts de capitaux, notamment culturels, économiques ou politiques, qui s'opèrent entre ces protagonistes concernés par la cause' (103). It proves a very fertile approach, which brings to mind the pioneering work of Young (2001), aimed at taking into consideration together the western revolutionary left alongside fights for decolonization, with the affinities and asymmetries that demarcate the relationship between them. The rapports and exchanges between these two universes were indeed very substantial, finding common ground first and foremost in the opposition to the Front Populaire government of Léon Blum and to Stalinism. Later, the Algerian war for liberation constitutes a powerful catalyst in the process of politicization of the young French (and European) militants of the global 1960s, even if the distinctiveness of the conflict gradually fades and becomes 'le plus souvent un support ou un reflet des compétitions spécifiques au champ politique français par positionnement algérien interposé' (155–156). In this framework, in particular for Trotskyists, support for the MNA becomes a 'stigmaté à gérer,' with embarrassment or (less commonly) with pride, as in the case of Edgard Morin, for whom the Messalists were to be considered 'résistants [...] qui ont été exterminés physiquement et psychiquement par le FLN comme les trotskistes avaient été liquidés par le stalinisme' (157).

In the sixth chapter, Sidi Moussa confronts the question that he measuredly calls 'antifascisme et tentation antisémite.' The testing ground is offered by the anti-Jewish 'émeutes' that broke out in Constantine in August 1934 and by the ephemeral parabola of the Comité d'Action et de Solidarité in favor of the Algerian Muslims, victims of the repression that sees a tactical convergence between MNA and PCF. In this case, too, it is through the trajectory of a militant – Foudil Larabi, who, in 1938, moved from the managing committee of the ENA to the fascist-leaning French Parti Populaire – that the author asks us to consider the complexity of the socio-historical dynamics in the colonial reality and in particular of the 'antisemitic temptation' in the independence movement: 'cette conjuncture permet de rendre compte de la sensibilité de la question juive dans le courant indépendantiste et invite à tester la perméabilité plutôt que la collusion massive entre mouvements fascistes et indépendantistes' (162).

Nor is the book missing an attempt to sketch a ‘gender’ analysis of a political experience in which the sacralization of the leader (Messali *is* the party, and vice versa) supports the intrinsically patriarchal character of the nationalist movement (chapters 7 and 8): indeed, if Messali is the patriarch, ‘le parti est un enfant confié à la famille algérienne’ (186). But here, too, through the study of correspondence and surveillance reports, the author succeeds in decentering the gaze: going beyond the obsession with the figure of the charismatic leader there emerges a much more complex framework than one might expect. Bypassing to the left of the MNA, the French federation of the Union des Syndicats des Travailleurs Algériens indeed becomes the setting for an effective contestation of the masculine monopoly on representation. The women want to participate in the meetings and write to Messali (‘cher père’) to get his opinion: ‘car à chaque occasion qui se présente, nous sommes toujours chassées par nos hommes!!’ (223). The female militants, concludes Sidi Moussa, ‘ont exprimé un nationalisme d’exil, inscrit dans un réformisme ouvrier et un féminisme arabo-islamique’ (234).

The final chapters (9 and 10) are dedicated to the memory of the MNA, to its erasure, stigmatization, and finally its slow but gradual reemergence. As a participating observer of contemporary Algerian society, the author brings to this issue as well an original take, which does not cede to the ease of a top-down approach but instead focuses on forms of collective resistance and of social appropriation of memory. Contrary to a popular trend that has established itself in recent decades, the reemergence in the public sphere of the figure of Messali and of the ‘question messaliste’ indeed should not be ascribed to the end of the 1990s, when the Tlemcen airport takes the name of Messali Hadj (5 July 1999), nor during civil war of the so-called ‘décennie noire,’ when some episodes from the civil war between MNA and FLN, like the Melouza-Beni Illemane massacre, reenter the conversation. Even though these events are important, for Sidi-Moussa the reemergence of this ‘objet médiatique controversé’ must be reconnected to the forms of resistance and of counterculture persistently carried out first by those who opposed the single party, and later by the women and men who, beginning in October 1988, fight daily against a regime of ‘pluralisme administré’. Thinking of the three nonconforming authors from the anarchic-liberation tradition placed in the epigraph of this book (George Orwell, Albert Camus, and Günther Anders), I’d like to close with the words of Frederick Cooper (2005, 231, 234) that precede and follow the quotation I included at the beginning: ‘*How* one does history shapes how one thinks about politics, and how one does politics affects how one thinks about history. (...) An ahistorical approach to the past reflects and encourages an apolitical approach to the present’.

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Andrea Brazzoduro
 University of Oxford & Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy
 andrea.brazzoduro@history.ox.ac.uk