

## GLOBAL CRISIS IN MEMORY

# Cultural Insecurities and the Desire for Separation: Political Articulations of the Memory of the Algerian War in France

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French colonization and the consequent War of Independence in Algeria have marked contemporary French society deeply in numerous ways. For decades, the history and memories of these events have been described as ‘padlocked’ by the state. Since the 2000s, academics have observed an increase in the political use of memory. While the literature has often employed psychoanalytical concepts to interpret this resurgence of the repressed, I argue that these readings are in fact designed to be present incursions into the past, serving to legitimate contemporary political projects. This is because new political actors and projects have emerged defending certain visions of the past in order to bolster present ambitions. In recent years, France has also experienced a rise of both far-right nationalist movements and Islamism. These radical formations continue to instrumentalize the history and memories of colonization and the war in Algeria to legitimate their discourses. In a fast-changing world, radical groups promote the rehabilitation of a reassuring past in which racial hierarchies and endogamy are associated with prestige and stability.

I contend that while radical elements develop discourses bearing on the past, they thrive on the cultural insecurities of today’s youth and thereby contribute to the reification of identities. Thus, while trying to come to terms with the past, memory policies might actually contribute to its resurgence, as they tend to focus on discourses rather than social frustrations.

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## Introduction

More than 130 years of colonization in Algeria, a violent war of independence (1954–62) as well as consecutive waves of exile and migration have marked contemporary French society deeply in numerous ways. Scholars have for some time noted how in France contemporary institutions and the political system as a whole (Stora, *La Gangrène et l’oubli*), national identity (Shepard, 1962: *Comment l’indépendance*), Republican laws along with immigration and security policies (Blévis; Hajjat; Spire et al.; Spire) or indeed sexualities (Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire*; Shepard *Sex, France, and Arab Men*; Blanchard et al., *Sexe, Race et Colonies*) have been shaped in the wake of Algerian independence.

The demographic record speaks for itself. In 1962, 2 million soldiers, 1.2 million *pieds-noirs*,<sup>1</sup> 150,000 *harkis*<sup>2</sup> and their families as well as 500,000 Algerian immigrants (reaching a million in the early 1980s) were spread across the French metropole, bringing with them their own experiences and narratives. These people have had children and grandchildren. Today, we estimate that about 15 per cent of the French population has a direct link with this history.<sup>3</sup> Many more have an indirect affiliation and have inherited representations and subjectivities shaped in the colonial period (Saada).

### The occultation of Algerian memories as a political issue

For decades, the history and memories of colonization and the war in Algeria have been described as 'padlocked' by the state. Amnesties<sup>4</sup>—and the absence of public commemorations,<sup>5</sup> discourses or acts of recognition—have constituted a highly effective politics of forgetting, one enabling France to lay down a 'pillow of silence' (Vidal-Naquet in Stora *La Gangrène* p17).

However, the various groups affected by the war,<sup>6</sup> each with its own interests, actors and social frameworks, have created a rich undergrowth of non-official narratives (Eldridge). Far from forgetting, the social fabric of France is actually criss-crossed by vivid and multiple manifestations of memory. Charles-Robert Ageron has thus described a 'kaleidoscope of divided memories' (p520) in which narratives are elaborated and transmitted by different groups without interacting with the Other (Amiri & Stora).

These groups created associations that aimed to exert pressure on the state and obtain, in the first instance, material gains.<sup>7</sup> However, they quickly turned to developing memory discourses in order to promote their own views of the past.<sup>8</sup> In this process, an inability to enter into dialogue with the Other and to influence or penetrate the national narrative has shaped the actors' strategies and discourses. Associations of veterans, *pieds-noirs*, *harkis* and children of Algerian immigrants all presented themselves as the forgotten victims of the past, despised by the state and French society alike.<sup>9</sup> They elaborated discourses that repeatedly expressed their need to be heard and to defend their conviction of being right about both the past and the present. Consequently, the occultation of the war has become a political issue. Political actors looking for support have integrated the defence of memory into their agendas. Readings of the past have become a clear source of political division. In the name of national unity, Gaullist governments avoided the issue and contributed to its occultation. The Communist Party was chiefly concerned with a campaign for official recognition that Maurice Audin had indeed been assassinated. The Socialist Party took part in the commemorations of the massacres of 17 October 1961 in Paris. The Front National, on the other hand, integrated both men and ideas from various French-Algerian movements (OAS) and latched

<sup>1</sup> *Pied-noir* is the generic term that emerged at the time of Algerian Independence (1962) to refer to French settlers leaving the soon-to-be-independent Algeria to the French metropolis.

<sup>2</sup> While the term *harki* encompasses a large diversity of situations, it has become a generic term to refer to Algerians who were associated with colonial power and had to leave Independent Algeria for this specific reason in order to avoid retaliations.

<sup>3</sup> Self-evaluation. A national census to obtain more exact numbers is underway.

<sup>4</sup> 1962, 1964, 1966, 1968.

<sup>5</sup> The first official state commemorations took place on 5 December 2002.

<sup>6</sup> *Pieds-noirs*, soldiers, *harkis*, Algerian Jews and Algerian immigrants.

<sup>7</sup> Pensions and recognition of the status of veterans for soldiers, compensation and benefits for *pieds-noirs*, pensions and compensations for *harkis*.

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, they then campaigned to obtain official recognition of their experiences, suffering and specific demands from the state. From having recognized no commemorative dates whatsoever, France has now three different ones: 19 March to remember the ceasefire and respond to the demands of veterans, 25 September for the *harkis* and 5 December to respond to the requests of *pieds-noirs* associations.

<sup>9</sup> See the mobilization around the memory of 17 October 1961, *Au nom de la Mémoire*.

onto a number of pieds-noir and harki associations. However, all political actors shared the assessment that this war and its protagonists had been forgotten. Regardless of how much they talked about it, they helped to turn the occultation of the war into a political issue.

These views have also been supported by the academic literature. Indeed, historians have presented the war as a forgotten object. Using terms borrowed from the field of psychoanalysis, they have diagnosed France's memory lapses, amnesia, aphasia or gangrene (Stora, *La Gangrène et l'oubli*; Stoler, *Colonial Aphasia*). In so doing, they have also done much to promote an image of Algeria as a forgotten object and France as a sick body in need of a cure which only political actors could prescribe. Consequently, the political use of memories by such actors has often been described as a *return of the repressed* and an unstoppable resurgence of the past. They have thereby disregarded the political projects that were at stake when political actors used memories to legitimate themselves. I argue that these manifestations of the past are deliberate incursions of present political actors into the past with a view to serving their own interests.

### 2000s: The present of imperial memories

The decade of the 2000s best embodies this political articulation of the past in what has been described as a 'colonial boomerang' (Iveković p209). The arrival of a new generation in power, the opening of archives, the publication of works by historians and their dissemination among wider publics,<sup>10</sup> as well as national and international contexts (the trial of Maurice Papon,<sup>11</sup> debates on the use of torture by the French army, or on the civil war in Algeria) have all created a favourable setting for what has been described as 'the memory war' (Stora, *La Guerre des mémoires*).

The year 2005 is particularly interesting. On 23 February, a bill imposed a school curriculum that was to teach the positive role of the French *presence* (not 'colonization') overseas (Article 4). Its Article 13 also created a right to compensation for former OAS activists.<sup>12</sup> After an active mobilization by scholars and civil society, the Constitutional Council eventually vetoed Article 4 with the support of the government but against the will of parliament, creating a breach in the UMP (conservative) majority.<sup>13</sup> Former colonial ideology seemed to have returned and invaded the national narrative, with nostalgic views of the past and colonial readings of the present becoming prominent.

However, the historian Romain Bertrand (*Mémoires d'Empire*) has shown how this bill was the result of a disruptive move on the part of a fringe of the UMP party to take over the party both institutionally and ideologically. He has described the emergence of a 'southern right' composed of MPs from the South of France who either had close links with pieds-noirs associations nostalgic for the colonial past or were even children of pied-noir activists themselves.<sup>14</sup> These MPs deployed electoral manoeuvres in order to capture what they imagined to be the pied-noir vote and campaign on Front National terrain. Indeed, the Front National threatens their political hold upon the South. Consequently, they are disposed to promote and impose discourses relating to colonial rehabilitation upon the main centre-right Republican party. This tactic will have long-lasting effects as it constitutes a break with the Gaullist tradition of

<sup>10</sup> *La Guerre d'Algérie* (Peter Batty 1984), *Les Années algériennes* (Stora 1992), *Paroles de tortionnaires* (Jean-Charles Deniau 2001), *Le Viol des femmes algériennes* (Valérie Gajet 2002), *L'Ennemi intime* (Patrick Rotman, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Former senior civil servant during the Vichy regime but also head of police forces in Constantine (Algeria) and Paris during the Algerian War, Maurice Papon was in charge of the repression on 17 October 1961. His trial offered an opportunity to recall such events.

<sup>12</sup> OAS – Organisation de l'Armée Secrète: a far-right terrorist group fighting for French Algeria.

<sup>13</sup> UMP – Union pour un Mouvement Populaire, Gaullist, created by Jacques Chirac in 2002.

<sup>14</sup> Michèle Tabarot (daughter of an OAS activist), Kléber Mesquida (pied-noir), Jean-Pierre Soisson (veteran), Jean Léonetti, Lionnel Luca, Christian Vanneste.

the party, in which links with the far right as well as with colonial activists have always been rejected (Bertrand, “La Mise En Cause(s) Du « Fait Colonial »”).

The southern right's discourses involve the recycling of a traditional colonial ideology, one that presents the French presence on Algerian soil as consonant with Algeria's own essential nature. Colonial violence and inequalities are denied in favour of presenting colonial relations as a manifestation of a peaceful inter-ethnic solidarity. The very existence of indigenous cultures and civilizations is ignored and it is instead argued that France and French settlers actually brought modernity and ‘built Algeria and left it in pain in 1962’, to quote the inscription upon a monument erected in Nice. Furthermore, these discourses find concrete expression in the guise of many memorials and plaques paying homage to French Algeria, and in the organization of regular commemorations and ceremonies imparting a rhythm to French politics in the South of France (Ruscio *et al.*).<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, and as shown in the minutes of parliamentary debates, they link these attempts at rehabilitation with the need to integrate the children of immigrants. The latter's failure to integrate is viewed as an incapacity to love the Republic. A more ‘balanced or positive’ teaching of the past would, it has been argued, ease their integration into the social fabric (Bertrand, *Mémoires d'empire*). Nostalgic discourses do not merely serve to rehabilitate the past, but are indeed readings of the present. French people of foreign heritage are assumed to be the children of the colonized, locked in a homogeneous group and with a collective destiny. Like their parents or grandparents, the argument runs, they need to be taught about the intrinsic generosity of colonization and the Republic. The attempt to pass the 2005 law should not be seen as simply the return of *piets-noirs*’ nostalgic memories. Instead, we ought to have no hesitation in describing it as a political move to take over the UMP party ideologically. In so doing, it promotes certain views of French people with non-French origins and forges a discourse on contemporary national identity of which children of immigrants are not part, unless they acknowledge the greatness of the past and the masters of the present.

The ‘return’ of imperial memories did indeed coincide or overlap with another major event that, in its turn, reinforced this ideological shift. In November 2005, urban unrest spread through the French *banlieues* in a very rapid, unusual and spectacular fashion— an upheaval for which the national community had been wholly unprepared.<sup>16</sup> Although the rioters never actually mentioned any discourse on memory, debates raged in academia, in the media and among NGOs and politicians regarding the colonial or postcolonial relevance of these events. The legacies of colonial empire were put in question, and parallels between colonialism and contemporary France were drawn, concerning, for example, police violence or the architecture of control (the use, for instance, of state emergency for the first time since the Algerian War), but also the living conditions of young people in the *banlieue* (postcolonial origins, experiences marked by urban segregation, discrimination and racism) (Blanchard *et al.*, *La Fracture coloniale*). In academia, the linking of the 2005 riots with the colonial past has been of epistemological interest insofar as it has led to a questioning of the origins of contemporary policies and practices. As we will see, anti-racist activists have also used the parallel to underline the enduring presence of police violence and racism in French society. Conservative political actors mentioned above have also adopted this colonial reading of the events to present the children of immigrants and urban youth as the eternal Other. The former colonized

<sup>15</sup> Nostalgic monuments built in Aix-en-Provence, Nice, Marseilles, Toulon, Montpellier and Béziers, and even some that pay homage to OAS fighters, for example, in Toulon, Nice, Théoule-sur-mer, Perpignan, Marignane, Béziers and Montpellier.

<sup>16</sup> *Banlieue* refers to highly secluded urban spaces on the outskirts of the main French cities. These new towns were built in the 1960s as a response to the housing crisis. They suffer from severe economic and social deprivation, lack of public transport and territorial stigma.

seemed thus to have returned and invaded the outskirts of French cities and the nation's TV screens. Reshaping the national narrative on the French presence<sup>17</sup> in Algeria became central in the proposed political response to this social movement. It did so not to answer the demands from rioters, but rather to present them as the Other, and to recall that the effective integration of the rioters (and by extension, the children of immigrants) was only possible with the reiteration of past and present hierarchies.

Both events, the promulgation of the 2005 law and the riots, have permitted the emergence of new political actors, who will in the future profoundly influence French politics and the capacity of French society to address memories of French Algeria.

### **The colonial rehabilitation strategy: source of the unification and radicalization of the right**

To start with, the supporters of the 2005 law successfully managed to break with the Gaullist tradition. By promoting the rehabilitation of the colonial era and the identity debate, they imposed transformations in ideology and language in right-wing politics. This created a base on which Nicolas Sarkozy managed to unify the right, conquer the party and, subsequently, secure the French presidency.<sup>18</sup> Adopting a similar disruptive strategy, he embraced this ideological move and campaigned with the support of the southern right, also called the popular right or *droite décomplexée* (disinhibited right). The rehabilitation of the colonial past was coupled with a strong refusal of 'repentance'. During his 2007 campaign, Sarkozy used this term twenty-seven times. His famous 2007 Toulon speech contains all the elements of colonial glorification: history was presented as if it were somehow tarnished by the professionals of repentance; France and former settlers should not be ashamed of the past; France has a moral duty towards *pieds-noirs*. We also find here a similar discourse on the children of immigrants: they have a duty to adapt to and respect France's history and values; they are associated with 'polygamy, excision, forced marriage and the law of older brothers and sisters'.<sup>19</sup> Sarkozy built up his political strength through this ideological and discursive move, famously calling urban youth 'scum' and promising 'to clean them out with a Kärcher'.<sup>20</sup>

The refusal of repentance was likewise not just about the past. It was also deeply linked with Sarkozy's political project of redefining French national identity. In his view, repentance threatened the vitality of national identity. French people could not fully achieve their potential if they were disabled by guilt (Blanchard, "Colonisation: commémorations et mémoriaux"). Reinforced by constant reiteration, the refusal of repentance was later integrated into the agendas of most political actors. To gain a hearing, political leaders, including Emmanuel Macron or, indeed, left-wing leaders, must first refuse repentance before elaborating on the past. Many intellectuals have followed this trend and avoided or obstructed critical readings of the past (Pascal Bruckner, Max Gallo, Jean Sevilla). The political and intellectual influence of Patrick Buisson best embodies the presence of colonial ideology at the heart of the Republic. A former far-right activist and supporter of French Algeria in the 1960s, Buisson became Sarkozy's main political advisor at the Elysée Palace. He is the architect of

<sup>17</sup> The term French presence rather than colonization is often preferred by groups that cultivate certain nostalgia of the empire.

<sup>18</sup> He supported MPs promoting the 2005 law, in December 2005 and on French National TV. At that time, Sarkozy was challenging the prime minister and heir designate of Jacques Chirac, Dominique de Villepin, for the leadership of the right. He later used this momentum to differentiate himself from the traditional Gaullist line.

<sup>19</sup> My own translation, see: <https://www.nouvelobs.com/politique/elections-2007/20070208.OBS1258/a-toulon-nicolas-sarkozy-parle-aux-electeurs-du-fn.html>.

<sup>20</sup> On 19 June 2005, while visiting La cité des 4000 in La Courneuve (the embodiment of a *banlieue*), Sarkozy promised to clean this area with a Kärcher (power washer). Sarkozy's stance on security and immigration is considered by many to be summed up by this comment.

the ideological radicalization of the right, with colonial rehabilitation being at the core of this strategy. Moreover, we do not necessarily observe a return of memories but rather the presence of a new ideology based on the reification of identity and values, using the colonial past as a way in as well as a point of reference. In addition, this strategy had massive collateral impact in preventing French political actors, institutions and society from engaging in a critical discussion of the colonial past.

### Colonized forever?

The decade of the 2000s also saw the emergence of an opposing bloc of actors who similarly found legitimacy and a niche in the mobilization of the colonial past. The 2005 riots created an opportunity for a group of postcolonial activists to propose a politicization of history and a colonial reading of the present. Best represented by Les Indigènes de la République,<sup>21</sup> these activists made links between past experiences of the colonized and present experiences of the children of postcolonial immigrants in contemporary France. Their main argument was that France is still a colonial state in need of decolonization. They associated commemorations of colonial massacres (such as Sétif on 8 May 1945) with the denunciation of contemporary discrimination, racism and police violence against French people of foreign origin. With the assertion that France is still a colonial state, they pointed out the existence of a state system based on racism, functioning as a social ideology. They perceived children of immigrants and urban youth as children of the colonized or even as still being colonized themselves (Bertrand, “La Mise En Cause(s) Du « Fait Colonial »”; Lotem). While reclaiming the identity of Indigènes, they inscribed urban youth in a colonial line of descent, even if the claim was not strictly accurate from a historical or sociological point of view.

As with the southern right, these activists thus created a triple rupture – ideological, partisan and linguistic. First and foremost, they offered an ethnic reading of social relationships. While French anti-racist groups have mainly struggled for equality of French citizens regardless of ethnicity, Les Indigènes de la République have fought for the recognition of racial particularities as determined by the historical experiences of the colonized and the contemporary experiences of racialized bodies.<sup>22</sup> Although indubitably helping to raise awareness of colonial history, they also presented colonial continuities as over-determining factors in the shaping of individual and collective identities, regardless of the complexity and hybridity of postcolonial societies. While traditional anti-racist NGOs or left-wing parties and unions have campaigned for the Republic to honour its promises of equality, Les Indigènes de la République reject the Republican system and its support by left-wing actors. Left-wing parties are labelled as collaborators in a racist system in which Republicanism and universalism are a ploy to maintain the domination of white French people (*souchiens*) over racialized bodies. While refusing the current boundaries of the Republic, they have broken with the established anti-imperialist, anti-colonial and anti-racist tradition in France (Bertrand “La Mise En Cause(s) Du « Fait Colonial »”; Lotem).

Indeed, the leaders of Les Indigènes de la République, Houria Bouteldja, Youssef Boussoumah and Sadri Khiari, mainly originate from the autonomous fringe of the immigration and pro-headscarf,<sup>23</sup> pro-Palestinian and third-worldist movements. Holding university degrees, they possess strong cultural capital with a good knowledge of academic and media codes. Although they present themselves as voicing the demands of the 2005 rioters, they

<sup>21</sup> Les Indigènes de la République started out as a group of activists and intellectuals trying to influence the public debate after the 2005 riots. They are now structured as a party but their presence is mainly in the media rather than electoral.

<sup>22</sup> See: <http://indigenes-republique.fr/le-p-i-r/appele-des-indigenes-de-la-republique/>.

<sup>23</sup> They were already active in 2004 when mobilizing against the law to ban religious signs in public schools.



clearly have different experiences and agendas. Yet by presenting these rioters as voiceless, they actually contribute to the silencing of political and social demands emerging from the riots, and have helped to build discourses that present urban youth as deprived of agency or cultural capital and locked into the collective destiny of the Other.

The strong ideological choices they have made have prevented them from penetrating existing NGOs, unions or parties. However, even if their impact on French civil society is relatively minor, Les Indigènes de la République have nevertheless imposed a linguistic turn on the debate. The disruption involved in the deployment of concepts and words such as *indigènes*, *Musulmans*, *souchiens*, *blanchité*, *racisés* has allowed this movement to actually exist in the media and occupy the niche it created itself.<sup>24</sup> Imposed by reiteration, these terms have become mainstream and contributed to the polarization of the debate.

Here again, evocations of the past are not just a return of the colonized and their memories. As with the right-wingers, they serve as an entry point for new actors and new readings of the present in which race becomes the benchmark used to analyse French society. All this fuels a political project that identifies racial identities and boundaries, and it promotes racial separation and endogamy.

While the first decade of the twenty-first century began with what appeared to be a collective moment for the critical analysis of the past (recognition by the French of the Algerian War of Independence as a war in its own right in 1999, debates on torture in 2002, the erection of a memorial and the first commemorations in 2002), debates were quickly overshadowed by controversies. New political projects and actors reifying identity used the past to legitimate their own discourses and accelerate their political progress. Evocations of the past then became the source of highly polarised discourses, whereby its critical analysis was excluded from the public sphere. This left the whole political stage to actors thriving on the disruptive strategies described above. In recent years, France has also experienced a rise in both far-right nationalist movements and Islamist terrorist attacks. These radicalized formations continue to instrumentalize the history and memories of colonization, and the war in Algeria, in order to legitimate their own discourses.

### ***Déclassement*, *Grand remplacement* and victimhood: when the nationalist and populist right invert the victim/perpetrator stigma**

Following the breach opened in the 2000s, the nationalist party, Front National, but also other right-wing populist leaders, continued to block any critical reflection by refusing 'repentance' and promoting positive views of the colonial past. However, we should acknowledge how recent developments in the strategy of colonial rehabilitation have witnessed an attempt to link it to the feeling of *déclassement*.

The elaboration of a discourse on the past not only relates to the defence of a heritage. It may also (and does in fact now) form part of a larger attempt to formulate answers to the frustrations felt by the white working class with respect to its social being and identity. The social and economic crisis afflicting Europe, the emergence of powerful non-Western countries, the greater visibility of postcolonial migrations in the former metropolises, the creation since the *ancien régime* of a more equal society, the need to share power and resources, have all challenged European identities. In this fast-changing world, the fear of losing a formerly dominant status has been identified and cunningly exploited by populist and nationalist movements.

<sup>24</sup> *Indigènes* and *musulmans* refer to colonial categories, while *souchiens* refers to French people with roots from non-foreign origins (if such a thing can actually be said to exist); *blanchité* means whiteness and *racisés* refers to individuals with racialized bodies, experiencing past or present racial domination. All in all, these terms belong to a racialized, ethnic lexicon that is foreign to Republicanism.

In the populists' and nationalists' so-called defence of the status of the white working class, the deployment of an imagined identity and history is central. These are presented as being undermined by the global elite and the invasion of the Other. First coined by Renaud Camus, the *Grand remplacement* (great replacement) has become a commonplace. Marine Le Pen, as well as more mainstream figures such as Éric Zemmour or leaders of right-wing party Les Républicains, have contributed to the popularization of the concept.<sup>25</sup> In this theory, the global elite is facilitating postcolonial migration in order to undermine the white working class. The presence of the Other is seen as evidence of a reversed colonization, a continuation of the war in Algeria. Recent Islamist attacks have provided many opportunities to comment on the colonial continuum, the violence of the Other or the need for revenge.

In so doing, these ideologues invert the victim/perpetrator relationship. The victim is no longer the former colonized but rather the contemporary white French worker. Their identity is under siege, physically (by dint of being surrounded by the Other), but also as part of a narrative whereby the greatness of European history is challenged by critical readings of colonialism and slavery. The latter, these ideologues hold, is now only to be considered as the history of the Other. In a fast-changing world, they promote a reassuring past in which racial (and gender) hierarchies are associated with stability and greatness. However, references to the past should not be perceived as only flattering white identity; they are instead the manifestation of a present political project aiming at future transformations of French society. In this project, identities are once again reified and redistributed. It is not the former masters but the newly identified victims who grant themselves the right to fight back.

### Violence as a legitimate defence

One could argue that these theories remain confined to xenophobic thinkers. Nonetheless, they actually find other, more concrete manifestations. Adopting the status of victim has a powerful impact, as it redefines our relationships to violence. If provoked by external or internal threats, violence can be justified and legitimized to defend a territory and an identity. For instance, the radical far-right group Génération Identitaire offers its activists training in (purportedly) legitimate defence, whereby aggression towards the Other is presented as self-defence mechanism rather than an attack. In 2018, the operation 'Defend Europe' consisted of militants arresting migrants in the Alps. In doing so they question the monopoly of the state on violence and effectively authorized citizens to use violence against the Other as a form of defence. In the same way, in September 2018 a group of far-right activists named OAS –thereby assuming a direct filiation with militants of French Algeria – planned the assassination of the left-wing opposition leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Home affairs Minister Christophe Castaner. Although they failed, this is an alarming sign that far-right terrorism can thrive on the manipulation of a colonial sense of revenge.

### Colonial frustrations and Islamism

In a different context, the surge in Islamism also forces us to question discourses on the past elaborated by promoters of this ideology. Islamism in France emerged at the end of the 1990s as a combination of international trends with those more specific to France. It originally mirrored the spread of this ideology worldwide since the Iranian Revolution and the growth in the influence of Salafism and Wahhabism. The civil war in Algeria (1992–2001) also led to the arrival of Islamist activists in France, who immersed themselves in French society and established a political platform by creating Islamist parties and movements.<sup>26</sup> However, the success

<sup>25</sup> See Éric Zemmour, "La guerre d'Algérie n'est pas terminée", Figaro, 2008 or his bestseller, *Destin Français*, 2018.

<sup>26</sup> See La Fraternité Algérienne en France in 1980 or Le Parti des musulmans de France of 1997.



of Islamist ideology in the French political landscape is mainly due to the failure of previous social mobilizations. The disintegration of the workers' movement as well as the failure in the 1980s of the attempted mobilization of children of immigrants seeking concrete improvements in the suburbs left a political void in which the Islamist programme could thrive (Sidi Moussa).<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Islamist activists invested in local associations and the educational and social fields with the aim of spreading their ideas and establishing a stronger religious order in the *banlieue*. Thriving on social frustrations, they worked to unify, channel and represent the voice (singular) of the Muslim community (singular). Singular indeed, in the sense that the Islamist organizations promote the unification of all French Muslims,<sup>28</sup> or those who are supposedly Muslims,<sup>29</sup> under the aegis of the Ummah. The religious idiom here is not a choice but something that is assigned. All children of Algerian immigrants, for instance, are held to belong to this imagined community, which is meant to be distant, if not separated from the rest of the social fabric. In that sense, the Islamists offer a reading of the present that is similar to those described above. Individuals are trapped in a self-reinforcing collective identity impervious to other segments of society.

While promoting a vision of the present, Islamist organizations in France have also developed discourses on the past. Individuals are thereby inscribed in a long history of failures, which reflect both a collective and an intimate genealogy: failures to resist colonization in the nineteenth century, the failure to build a successful, independent Algeria, the failure to resist state racism today. They are presented as the last link in a chain which failed because of their misunderstanding of Islam. Completely disregarding the many achievements of anti-imperialist figures, they promote an imagined past in which nothing glorious has happened since the Caliphate. Young members of the imagined Muslim community thus have a duty to avenge the past and change their fate. The failure of the elders calls for the mobilization of the young.

These powerful representations are also bolstered by the sheer difficulty in France of gaining critical access to the past. The collective incapacity to address the complexity of the colonial past, to access family histories and to raise awareness creates a void, a series of black holes in which sets of questions remain unanswered and leave room for fantasies and manipulations. Histories of emancipation featuring celebrated anti-imperialist figures (Frantz Fanon, Ferhat Abbas, Messali Hadj or the leaders of the National Liberation Front in Algeria) are little known in France. So too are the secular figures, the various political leaders and the achievements of Algerian immigration since 1962. Consequently, when facing discrimination, racism or humiliation in everyday life, young people find it hard to gain access to the past and thereby to select secular, universal figures to whom they could refer and use to bolster their own resistance and putative liberation. Islamist discourses can thrive on this ignorance while at the same time promoting the emancipatory role of orthodox religiosity.

Again, this ideological move may well lead to radicalization, as recent Islamist terrorist attacks in France indicate. There is today a rich, diverse and fruitful literature describing the causes and processes of local Islamist radicalization. Recapitulating all of the relevant debates would require a whole paper dedicated to the topic. However, scholars tend to develop a series of complementary arguments, which can be summarized as follows.

Hafez and Mullins identify four main factors predicting extremism: injustice suffered or perceived, the weight of ideology, the importance of networks, and favourable environments.

<sup>27</sup> Marche pour l'Egalité 1983, 1984.

<sup>28</sup> See Coordination des musulmans unis pour la dignité, Collectif contre l'islamophobie en France, Collectif des musulmans de France, Mouvement Islamique de Libération.

<sup>29</sup> They tend to have an ethnic understanding of Muslim identity, whereby all people of Arab origin, for example, are assumed to be Muslim.

This also coincides with Xavier Crettiez's proposals to explain radicalization processes in terms of a combination of *macro* (ideologies, views on global politics etc.), *meso* (existing frameworks) and *micro* factors (psychological dispositions, socio-economic factors, family dynamics etc.). The academic debate in France tends to be polarized on whether we are witnessing a radicalization of Islam (Kepel) or an Islamization of what is radical (Roy), that is, whether we consider the successful influence of the Salafist ideology worldwide *per se* or if we assume that individuals might find in Salafism a framework to express their potential radicalism.

Most scholars agree on the prevalence of a perceived or enduring sense of injustice in the radicalization process. Indeed, in a recent large-scale study of French youth, Anne Muxel has shown that socio-economic factors have little relevance in explaining the tolerance for radicalism. Instead, together with other scholars, she underlines the importance of the feeling of humiliation or alienation suffered by individuals (Khosrokhavar; Galland & Muxel). In this process, perceived or actual discrimination, racism and frustrations (a gap between aspirations and what can actually be achieved or obtained) are central (Galland & Muxel; Lardeux). Narratives presenting the past as a succession of eternal injustices and failures are then the necessary and fertile ground on which radical behaviours can thrive. The experience of the 2012 Toulouse terrorist Mohamed Merah illustrates this specific combination of factors. He perpetrated the attacks on 19 March 2012, the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Algerian war of Independence. His first victims were French soldiers, and it is known that the army had rejected him. The past here coagulates with his personal experience of rejection.

### **Can we cure France of radical ideologies? The politics of memory in a cul-de-sac**

The far right and Islamist radicalization of the fringes of French society are perceived to be a serious threat to national security and cohesion. In response, the French state has sought to build a common national narrative that would allow for the coexistence of different memories. More recently, the Ministries of Defence and Home Affairs have specifically designed and implemented policies to raise young people's awareness of the Algerian War of Independence, and by the same token to combat radicalization.<sup>30</sup>

Traditionally, the politics of memory apropos colonization and the war in Algeria have simply been responding to pressure exerted by a number of different memory groups, namely, *pied-noirs*, veterans, *harkis* and, to a lesser extent, Algerian immigrants. As explained above, attempts to address critically the history and memories of the past were already made in the early 2000s. However, political articulations of the past by the right and the far right, but also by postcolonial activists, stopped this movement in its tracks. Since then, accessing the complexity and density of history in a dispassionate debate has been a complicated affair.

Emmanuel Macron adopted a strategy of 'pick & mix memory', his notion being to appeal to all sides. He thus acknowledged the use of torture by the French army and the assassination of Maurice Audin,<sup>31</sup> perpetuated the traditional *harki*-specific policy of homage and tutelage, but also refused to address the fact of colonialism as a system.

Nevertheless, there is an unchallenged assumption that the national narrative is the framework that allows memories to become reconciled. The national narrative is indeed unique in its essence. It cannot be Pétain *and* De Gaulle but only Pétain *or* De Gaulle. It is the final result of a competition between different narratives and political projects. The national narrative

<sup>30</sup> The former ministry is responsible, among other things, for memory issues and veterans; the latter is responsible for combating radicalization, which therefore develops counter narratives on colonization, targeting young people at risk.

<sup>31</sup> A paper by Giorgos Nourissis in this volume is dedicated to Maurice Audin and the admission that he was indeed assassinated.

is a unique reflection of a political project that managed to impose its views on society at large. These new readings of the past now presented as the national narrative then descend through the scaffolding of the state (institutions, schools, localities) to influence the sense of citizenship.

While trying to come to terms with the past, the coexistence of memories rather than their critical analysis might actually contribute to the resurgence of the past. Memory entrepreneurs know they compete in order to influence the unique national framework. Yet the national narrative cannot include Raoul Salan *and* Frantz Fanon, but only Salan *or* Fanon.<sup>32</sup> A peaceful memory is not about giving room to everyone, but about producing narratives that allow one and all to identify responsibilities and to understand the socio-political context in which choices are made. It is also about offering individuals opportunities to get over the past, to identify emancipatory figures or references, to deconstruct former colonial structures and ways of thinking, and to address contemporary social frustrations.

Moreover, memory is not about the past but about the present. Since 2000, various political actors have attempted to hijack the French-Algerian past. As they actually had not experienced the events in question, what they have done is to seize colonial history and memories in a partial and biased fashion. While referring to the past, they thrive on people's cultural insecurities in the present. They thereby contribute to the reification of identities, promoting a disjointed society in which the general population is divided. At the heart of this division lies the construction of different and exclusive imaginaries. Representations of the past coagulate with experiences in the present and promises of a reassuring future. They call for the establishment of strong and impervious categories in which people are separated by essence. This stable immobility is reassuring and suppresses the challenges associated with emancipation and circulation.

National discourses and policies about the past are central to the rebuilding of shared imaginaries. However, they need to go hand in hand with social and educational policies which target social frustrations and help individuals to come to terms with the past by drawing up emancipatory perspectives for the present and the future.

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<sup>32</sup> A dozen streets or squares in the South of France are named after the former putschist and OAS leader, Raoul Salan, whereas a recent bid to name a street in Bordeaux after Frantz Fanon ended in failure.

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