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Dissident Algeria

Jean Daniel

"Dissident Algeria! Look no further than France!" This observation by a British writer living in northern France is no doubt unfair to all those Algerians who, in silence and in their own way, take a stand, at home, against the terror of the Islamists and the tyranny of the government. Indeed, from a certain point of view, all Algerians live in dissidence, that is to say, on the fringe of or against all powers.

It is a fact, however, that History has reserved for the French and the Algerians one of those surprises and artifices that always eludes the rationalists of prediction. Who could foresee, after the atrocious seven-year Algerian war (1954-62), that such a large number of Algerians would end up being ashamed of their independence and have no complex about seeking asylum in France?

There were a few prophets: two at least, with whom I kept close company and thanks to whom I did not fall prey to the errors of left-wing intellectuals, pro-Third World militants, and Anglo-Saxon observers. These visionaries were both born in Algeria. Both supported independence. Each, in his respective field, denounced French colonialism and became famous. Like poets, however, and more so than sociologists, they foresaw something exceptional.

The first, a French man, Jacques Berque, is one of the greatest Arabists in the world. He wrote authoritative works on the history and anthropology of the Maghreb and Egypt, before devoting the end of his life to a translation of the Quran. This is what he wrote during the Algerian war: "France and Algeria? We did not intertwine for 130 years without being profoundly implicated in our souls and bodies. The depth of the French impact has far exceeded here the habitual alienations of colonialism, colonial exploitation, and mercantilism. A great fortune and misfortune. Here, being was afflicted down to the marrow; hence the violence of this resentment, a frenzy leading to terrible adventures. But from there, perhaps, also originates the source of a solution that can only come from shared expiation." No one has ever better expressed the French-Algerian destiny.

The second prophet is an Algerian of Kabyle origin. This Berber writer of French expression is no doubt the greatest non-French prose writer of the entire francophone world. He is Kateb Yacine, the author of *Nedjma* and *Le cadavre encerclé*. He used the French language to write the most violent, powerful, and poetic pamphlets against colonialist France. Kateb, nonetheless, had foreseen an explosion of Algerian literature after the war of independence. He had also foreseen that this explosion would express itself in French. For Kateb, this explosion was due to the fact that the repressed had been a thousand times greater in Algeria than anywhere else. But why in French? "Good heavens!" replied Kateb, "because French is our primary cultural booty, because it is the best thing we stole from the colonizer, and we have transformed it in such a way that he does not think of complaining about it." [End Page 15]

Kateb, like Berque, was my friend. But he was more at ease with me than the great professor. Sometimes, he prophesied with the accents of a hallucinated being: "You will have a new Algerian literature of French expression, whose foremost advantage for me will be that Algeria cannot be locked either in Arabism or Berberism. There is a place for French. We are the country of three languages and three roots."

One could never get Kateb to hold his tongue on this subject. As for me, and to the great displeasure of Arabists and Islamists, I had dared to write one day, "The tragedy is that an Algerian is often an Arab who wants to or must

prove to himself every day that he is not French." Kateb laughed at this provocative pleasantry, which he found worthy of him, and which he declared belonged more in his mouth than mine. But he added that it was precisely because he wrote a baroque, dilated, reinvented, thus reappropriated French, that he knew he was not French: "A little Arab music, lots of Berber melopoeias in my French sentences."

As for Rachid Mimouni, the novelist of *La malédiction* who died four years ago in Paris, his response to my pleasantry was that it was possible to find an answer in the streets of Paris: Algeria had become part of the daily history of France and she spoke there also--in French.

Hardly a month, even a week, passes without a publication by a major Parisian publishing house of a novel, essay, or story by an Algerian male--and especially female--author. Never has *rai*, a music invented in Oran, a little like the blues were invented in New Orleans, had such success as in the huge concert halls where Algerian and French youth mingle. Women, who obviously have few freedoms in Algeria, "explode" in Marseille, Lyon, and Paris. An Algerian singer/songwriter "brings the roof down" when he ends his repertoire with the following remark: "Oh, you used to tell us that Algeria was France"; well, we have replied, "France is Algeria."

These observations can be qualified in many ways and I shall expand upon them. We must imagine, however, what this reversal of mentalities comprises. Indeed, let us suppose that Hitler lost the war but remained in power, somewhat like Saddam Hussein today. Could one imagine hundreds and hundreds of thousands of Jews having but one obsession: rushing toward Germany? This comparison is tenuous like all comparisons. One would have to imagine that these German Jews, for example, had been persecuted in Israel and that they therefore wished to seek asylum in formerly Nazi Germany. All this shows how colonialism, horrible as it may be, and God knows it was, is not the "absolute evil."

Clearly, the French colonization of Algeria did not just export or implant cynical military or racist *colons*. There were in Algeria, among the *pieds-noirs*, left-wing movements, supporters of integration and then federalism. Let us not forget that Albert Camus was expelled from the Algerian Communist party because the new Soviet politics had conceded to the French that it would no longer support the Algerian nationalists.

This said, the surprising survival of French-Algerian intimacy is miraculous given all the opposition to it. Since independence, the various Algerian governments have conducted an excessive Arabization, and most of the time even to the detriment of the educational level. This Arabization [End Page 16] supposedly claimed to be first and foremost against French in all its forms. Then, against Tamazight, the Berber language. But also against spoken Arabic, the Arabic of the common people. For it is in the name of the veneration of the Quranic language, as well as in the will to rival with countries of the Middle East, that Algerians, for a certain time, sought to impose classical Arabic, that is to say, to create a great gulf between diverse sectors of the population.

Furthermore, there was and there still is, of course, the phenomenon of nonintegration of the Beurs, that is, of the Algerian children who, in the name of *droit du sol* [citizenship by birthright], automatically obtain French citizenship for the mere fact of being born in France or being the children of parents born in France. Many of them are ghettoized, hoveled in impoverished outskirts, tempted by drugs and thus by delinquency, and endowed with all those characteristics known in the United States. Nevertheless, last year, one of them became a national hero: Zinedine Zidane, one of the stars of the French team that won the world soccer cup.

As for me, I'll venture even further. I consider France to be an opportunity for Algeria, for the Arabs and the Muslims. Why? *Because it is in France that one can freely debate the idea of whether one must modernize Islam or islamize modernity.* There were great eras in the history of Arabo-Muslim peoples, where it was possible to air this crucial question. It is discussed, to a certain degree, in the universities of London, in certain departments of American universities, and in certain Maghrebian, Egyptian, and Pakistani milieus. I contend that the great reformers of Islam will be born in France. But you have understood that I am partial ("partiel et partial") and partisan.

--trans. by Danielle Marx-Scouras

Jean Daniel founded the *Nouvel Observateur* in 1964 and is its editor. He is the author of twelve books, which include *L'erreur* (1953), *L'ère des ruptures* (1979), *De Gaulle et l'Algérie* (1986), *Dieu est-il fanatique?* (1996), and *Avec le temps* (1998).

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