

Postsocialist Algeria and the Politics of the Future

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Introduction

The experience of colonialism and the war of independence (1954-1962) that followed have often been assumed by historians to be the only valid keys to understanding present-day Algeria. Over fifty years after independence, the war cannot be called on as the total meaning of history for much longer. Building on doctoral research on memories of nation-building during Algeria's socialist experiment during the 1970s, based on a year of ethnographic fieldwork in the low-income Algiers neighbourhood of Bab el-Oued, this article aims to assess the possibility of using a postsocialist lens as a new framework of analysis, in conjunction with postcolonial approaches.

Of course, the aim here is not to undermine the importance of decolonisation, both for Algeria and beyond. Algeria's war of independence (1954-1962) remains one of the most emblematic conflicts of the 20th century. As the only country in Africa and the Arab World to win independence through armed struggle, Algeria's decolonisation produced shock waves that were felt all over the world. In the 1960s and 1970s, Algeria became the model for other developing countries, embodying the idea that colonized nations could meet the world on their own terms and build a brighter future without owing anything to anyone. At the same time, it forced France to question

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the universalism of its own political values, contributing directly to the emergence of a new generation of postmodernist thought that helped to shape the world in which we all now live.

However, there is a desperate need to move beyond the colonial period and focus on what has happened in Algeria *since* 1962. This necessarily involves asking questions about how Algerians see their own recent past. A shift in focus to the history of post-independence Algeria opens the door to fresh approaches that may shed new light on the past and the present. This article seeks to explore one such possible avenue, by arguing for a comparative analysis between Algeria and other countries that have transitioned from socialist political systems.

The silent past

An image published in late December 2012 by satirical cartoonist Ali Dilem in the Algerian newspaper *Liberté* entitled “Algerians get ready to celebrate New Year” depicts an exasperated looking Algerian standing in front of a calendar that perpetually reads “1962”, the year in which the country won its independence from France. This image of a truncated history with no future translates the difficulties involved in thinking about the past in Algeria, to say nothing of undertaking post-1962 history.² The monumental nature of the independence struggle in nationalist historiography and the unanimist narrative on the past created by the state after 1962³ conspire to utterly crush any discussion of events that have transpired in Algeria since independence. If the history of modern Algeria is that of the colonial period and the war of independence, 5 July 1962 becomes the end – rather than the beginning – of something. With little left to do, historians can pack away their tools: the story has ended. This goes some way to explaining the surreal atmosphere in Algiers in July 2012, when the country was supposed to be celebrating 50 years of independence, but managed to do so without mentioning anything that

² For more on this, see Malika Rahal, “Comment faire l’histoire de l’Algérie indépendante?”, *La Vie des Idées*, 13 March 2012, <http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Comment-faire-l-histoire-de-l.html?lang=fr>, consulted 1 April 2012.

³ See James McDougall, *History and the Culture of Nationalism in Algeria* (Cambridge, 2006); and Omar Carlier, “Mémoire, mythe et doxa de l’État en Algérie. L’Étoile Nord-Africaine et la religion du Watan”, in *Vingtième Siècle. Revue de l’Histoire*, 30 (1991), pp. 82-92.

had happened since 1962.⁴ However, officially sanctioned historical narratives are far from having a monopoly on representations of the past and the press regularly discusses the silences and gaps in the state's version of the past, signalling high levels of public interest. Indeed, the use of the past as an instrument of power incites a generalized mistrust of history and a particular focus on the vested interests of those who lay claim to historical knowledge, contributing to a keenly felt public awareness of the hidden motivations behind political action. Scheele has rightly pointed to a widespread conception that 'true' history has been hijacked, held under lock and key and manipulated by specific social groups or the political elite. This absence of historical 'truth' is often used to explain the moral defects of the system and the inequalities it produces.⁵

The deafening silence on the post-independence period is largely a generational problem, both in politics and academia. Most significant here is that the generation that led Algeria to independence remains in power, though the deaths in 2012 of such imposing figures as Abdelhamid Mehri, Ahmed Ben Bella, Pierre Chaulet and Chadli Bendjedid points to its rapid passing. Algerian media and academia also imposes a sort of self-censorship, through a reticence to discuss events not yet perceived to have fully passed into history and a reverence for the war generation that still exists among the post-independence generation, which has been used to executing the decisions taken by its elders, and has little meaningful experience of political initiative or leadership.⁶

Mirroring this dominance of the war generation within Algerian politics, academic focus on Algeria remains largely the preserve of a generation of scholars for whom the war of independence was both a personally and politically defining moment. As a result, the experience of colonialism and the war of independence that followed have often been assumed by historians to be the only valid keys to understanding present-day Algeria. Reinforcing this trend is the fact that French scholars continue to dominate the study of Algeria, which has meant a focus on events and periods that

⁴ Edward McAllister, "The Past in the Present: Algeria at Fifty", in *Mediterranean Politics*, 17:3 (2012), pp. 1-19.

⁵ For one example of this translated into contemporary Algerian hip hop, see the song *Il était une fois l'Algérie* (Once upon a time there was an Algeria) by the group Intik, from their 2001 album, *La Victoire*.

⁶ Nacer Jabi, "The Impasse of Political Generation in Algeria: Three Generations and Two Scenarios", Case Analysis Series (April 2012), Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Doha.
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have marked France, most notably the colonial period and the war of independence. Postcolonial approaches to Algeria are clearly still of use, however, such approaches are problematic in two ways. Firstly, the postcolonial lens paradoxically seems to continually recast Algeria as eternally tied to France. Secondly, focus on these periods – as well as the civil war of the 1990s – has contributed to Algerian history being pathologised as inherently violent and has given rise to overly psychological depictions of a ‘traumatised society’.⁷ With this in mind, it is possible to see how a continued focus on the war and the colonial period in both Algerian official historiography and French academia – despite coming from opposing nationalist and post-nationalist positions that intend to maintain or deconstruct unanimist discourses on the past – unintentionally and uncomfortably work together to shut down any focus on other periods of Algerian history, particularly those following independence.⁸

Despite the obvious significance of colonialism and the war of independence, it would seem odd not to recognise that Algerians today are making judgements about their own society over a time span that includes not only periods of instability and violence, such as decolonisation and the 1990s, but also Algeria’s longest period of stability: that which coincided with the presidency of Houari Boumediene (1965-1978) and the construction of state institutions within an avowedly socialist framework. During the 1970s, Algerian society experienced far-reaching changes: employment and salaries rose, urbanisation increased and population rocketed. My research in Bab el-Oued showed that the post-independence socialist past was one of the prime reference points, along with decolonisation, in peoples’ assessments about their own past and its relationship to the present. Socialism in Algeria was clearly a postcolonial product, but that it is

⁷ See Natalya Vince, “In Amenas – a history of silence, not a history of violence”, on Textures du Temps, 20 January 2013 at <http://texturesdutemps.hypotheses.org/576>, consulted 20 January 2013; see also her forthcoming monograph, *Our fighting sisters: nation, memory and gender in Algeria 1954-2012*, Manchester University Press.

⁸ There is now a recent and growing body of work seeking to push scholarship into the forbidden territory of post-1962 Algeria as a subject of enquiry in its own right. See Malika Rahal, “Le temps arrêté. Un pays sans histoire. Algérie 1962-2013”, in *Écrire l’histoire*, n°12, 2013, pp. 27-36; and “Fused Together and Torn Apart. Stories and Violence in Contemporary Algeria”, in *History and Memory*, 24: 1 (March 2012), pp. 118-151; Natalya Vince, *Our Fighting Sisters: Nation, Memory and Gender in Algeria 1954-2012* (Manchester, 2015); Muriam Haleh Davis, “Restaging *Mise en Valeur*: ‘Postwar Imperialism’ and The Plan de Constantine”, in *Review of Middle East Studies*, 44/2 (2010), p. 176-186; Thomas Serres, “Give Us Back Our Oil: Claims for Justice in Light of Algeria’s Colonial Past”, at www.jadaliyya.com, consulted 3 January 2014.

now absent from the rhetoric of Algerian politics raises questions about whether analyses of contemporary Algeria might be approached from a postsocialist – as well as a postcolonial – perspective. Perhaps even more importantly, a postsocialist approach would necessarily place the emphasis on the first decades of independence and their legacies as worthy of study in their own right, rather than as a series of inter-war years offering some respite in an otherwise violent history, or as a period whose interest lies only in tracing the run-up to the 1990s.

Can Algeria be approached as postsocialist?

As an academic approach, postsocialism grew out of the need to understand the changes taking place after 1989, particularly in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Despite an early west-centric tendency toward transitology, much serious interdisciplinary work has been done on postsocialist transformations.⁹ Postsocialist work posits that from the mid-1950s, socialist institutions and the logic of bureaucratic centralism spawned a system characterised by plan bargaining, over-investment, soft budget constraints, endemic shortages, wealth redistribution and the neglect of consumption.¹⁰ These features fostered a set of common experiences that created a sort of family resemblance across a wide geographical area. Despite this, postsocialist approaches have been sufficiently flexible to recognise obvious diversities between regions spanning Mongolia and East Germany. They have also taken into account very different experiences of socialism, for example between the Soviet centre and Eastern Europe, where shorter-lived, less orthodox socialist systems came to be associated with Soviet imperialism.¹¹ With this in mind, approaching Algeria as a postsocialist society is not unproblematic not least because comparisons with postsocialist states in Europe are tricky. Post-independence Algeria has

⁹ Unlike Algeria, in the former Eastern Bloc access to state archives has been easier since the fall of the Berlin Wall and much more anthropological research has been carried out on the ground.

¹⁰ Katherine Verdery, *What was Socialism and What Comes Next?* (Princeton, 1996).

¹¹ Deniz Kandiyoti, "How far do analyses of postsocialism travel? The case of Central Asia", in Hann, C. M. (ed.) *Postsocialism. Ideals, Ideologies and Practices in Eurasia* (London, 2002).

often been placed all too firmly within the socialist camp, but the country's experience of socialism and its relationship to other socialist countries was not straightforward.

Firstly, Algerian socialism was postcolonial. The grinding poverty created by settler colonialism in the Algerian countryside, the destruction of local elites and increasing urbanisation contributed to a levelling in Algerian society that, along with the emergence of a militant nationalist culture among Algerian industrial workers in France during the interwar period, predisposed Algerian nationalism towards socialism as a solution to the challenges of that lay beyond the horizon of independence. In this sense socialism in Algeria was a colonial product, making a postcolonial approach entirely appropriate. But 26 years of socialism in independent Algeria also produced its own institutional logics and forms of stratification. These have received precious little in the way of academic focus. Furthermore, Algeria's socialist experience was shorter and consciously less orthodox than that of the Eastern Bloc – as visible in the use of the term *socialisme spécifique*.¹² Socialism in Algeria was a pragmatic hybrid between nationalism, socialism and anti-imperialism geared toward pulling Algeria out of underdevelopment and propelling the country toward a more just society.

Secondly, although Algeria's relationship with the Soviet centre showed an obvious ideological affinity, this was always tempered by Algeria's strong wish to protect its own interests and chart its own course through the minefield of Cold War politics. Algeria had close ties to the Soviet Union. The USSR was the first country in the world to recognise the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic during the war of independence in 1960, and full diplomatic relations were established four months before independence in March 1962. A series of agreements on economic and technical cooperation followed, with the Soviet Union helping to clear the country's borders of mines laid by France, culminating in a large loan for the jewel in the crown of Algeria's industrialisation policy: the giant steelworks at El Hadjar. Boumediene's first official visit, shortly after his takeover in December 1965, was to Moscow. Military purchases and assistance from the Soviet Union increased as Algero-Moroccan relations worsened throughout the 1970s. However, these agreements also produced significant interpersonal exchange and affect, as thousands of

¹² See Jeffrey Byrne, "Our Own Special Brand of Socialism: Algeria and the Contest of Modernities in the 1960s", in *Diplomatic History* 33, 3(2009), pp. 427-447.

Algerians travelled to Moscow and other cities for higher education, while endless Soviet technical experts visited and lived in Algeria. A generation of Soviet citizens remembers drinking cheap Algerian wine, after the Algerian government managed in 1969 to convince the USSR to buy large quantities of what was then the country's main export, after France introduced a ban on Algerian wine sales.¹³ These close links were underlined by the appointment of Valentina Tereshkova, a textile factory worker and amateur skydiver who became the first woman in space in 1963 and later a prominent Soviet public figure and politician, as president of the Soviet-Algerian Friendship Society.

However, Algeria's warm relations with the USSR have led to much overly simplistic analysis, particularly during the events of 1988-1992, a time when monumental changes seemed to be simultaneously sweeping both the Eastern Bloc and Algeria. This resulted in a West-centric narrative of hardliners versus reformers being used in commentary on Algeria throughout the late 1980s and facile comparisons between the FLN and the CPSU,¹⁴ with the riots of October 1988 that brought an end to one party rule being lumped in with the fall of the Berlin Wall. In fact, Algeria had never been a Soviet satellite. Algeria was always careful not to be drawn into Cold War geopolitics and compromise its own independence or harm its relations with France and the West. Despite repeated requests from the USSR in 1967-9, Algeria consistently refused to grant Soviet vessels access to its naval facilities. Boumediene famously declared that Algeria had not removed the French naval bases in 1968 to replace them with others.¹⁵ Far from falling within the Soviet orbit, post-independence Algeria formed its own centre, standing at the forefront of the Third World's dialogue with both the capitalist West and the socialist East, exemplified in Che Guevara's landmark 1965 speech to the Afro-Asian Summit in Algiers and the country's prominent role in the

¹³ Guilia Meloni and Johan Swinnen, "The Rise and Fall of the World's Largest Wine Exporter (and its institutional legacy)", LICOS Discussion Paper Series 327/2013, at <http://feb.kuleuven.be>, consulted 28 May, 2015.

¹⁴ In fact, the FLN and the CPSU had completely different roles. If in the USSR the party held real power and symbolic value, but the bureaucracy did not, the reverse was true in Algeria, where the party had symbolic value but no real power, and the bureaucracy held the real power but no symbolic value. See J. Jean Leca and Jean Claude Vatin, *L'Algérie politique, institutions et régime* (Paris, 1975), p. 30.

¹⁵ Walter Laqueur, "The Soviet Union and the Maghreb", in Cottrell, Alvin. J and Theberge, James. D (eds.) *The Western Mediterranean: its political, economic and strategic importance* (New York, 1974), p. 221.

Non-Aligned Movement. Any postsocialist approach to Algeria therefore requires adjustments for the country's special position in relation to the geopolitics of the time.

A further sticking point in a postsocialist for Algeria is the difficulty in pinpointing when the country became *post*-socialist. Did the socialist era end with Boumediene's untimely death in 1978, Chadli's liberalising reforms in the early 1980s or with the riots of October 1988? To make matters more complex, the state-centric nature of much of Algeria's economy and institutions continues to survive to this day. The old socialist motto of "By the People, For the People" may have been dropped, but the country still has over 2 million public sector workers and seems unlikely to break the 51% rule that gives Algerian interests a majority stake in any foreign investment, despite continual recommendations to the contrary from international financial institutions. Algeria's political elite still displays broad consensus on a social contract that hails from the socialist era, based on a series of "institutional arrangements, public policies, legitimating discourses, and modes of state-society relations that reflect, minimally, a preference for redistribution and social equity over growth; a preference for states over markets in the management of national economies; the protection of local markets from global competition, and a vision of the political arena as an expression of the organic unity of the nation rather than as a site of political contestation".¹⁶

These differences and problems aside, a postsocialist approach offers the possibility of opening up the study of Algeria, which academically has been regarded at worst as exclusively French 'territory' or at best as eternally linked to France, views which the postcolonial approach has perhaps reinforced. As mentioned above, such an approach would allow the post-independence period to be studied in its own right and on its own terms, helping the study of Algeria move more fully into forbidden post-1962 territory. Furthermore, after two decades of focus on Islamism,

¹⁶ Steven Heydemann, "Social Pacts and The persistence of authoritarianism in the Middle East" in Oliver Schlumberger (ed.) *Debating Arab Authoritarianism. Dynamics and Durability in Nondemocratic Regimes* (Stanford, 2007), p. 31.

looking afresh at Algeria through a postsocialist lens offers a welcome opportunity to take the country out of its usual Arabo-Islamic cultural zone of analysis.¹⁷

Remembering socialist politics

Despite differing views of socialist politics, citizens of socialist nations were exposed to an ideology that, even when collapsing politically, never abandoned its claim to ethical superiority. Since 1989, the utopian dream of industrial modernism and socialist equality has been discarded, replaced either by a reimagined authentic past, or a postmodern appeal to differences that splinters the masses either into individual consumers in search of their own personal utopias, often within a fragmented identity politics – a turn of events that has had particularly catastrophic effects in Algeria. In any case, it seems clear that in many postsocialist countries since 1989, “the market and liberal democracy have not, at the level of everyday practices, ushered in new moral forces comparable to those displaced”.¹⁸ As a result, postsocialist approaches often privilege memory and relationships to the socialist past through the changing realities generated by political and transitions to market-dominated liberal models of democracy.

Socially held narratives of the recent past in Russia offer interesting parallels to Algeria, especially in relation to perceptions of the periods presided over by Houari Boumediene (1965-1978) and Leonid Brezhnev (1964-1982) and the ensuing social and political realities. Although they represent very different forms of socialism, both periods are frequently couched as a golden age, despite the existence of strong narratives foregrounding the authoritarian politics of the time. In both countries, the 1970s has been remembered as a period of stability and relative prosperity, viewed through the hardships of reform in 1980s, the increased violence and corruption of the

¹⁷ However, it must be underlined that postsocialism cannot continue to be used indefinitely as a tool of analysis. As the generations brought up under socialism pass away, the usefulness of the category must be re-evaluated by looking at the effects of memories of the socialist past on the representations of younger generations. Researchers must constantly ask themselves to what extent these terms such as postcolonial and postsocialist are becoming constricting labels imposed from outside that limit people’s freedom to determine their own futures and close off alternative lines of enquiry.

¹⁸ Humphrey Hann “Farewell to the Socialist Other”, in Hann, C. M. (ed.) *Postsocialism. Ideals, Ideologies and Practices in Eurasia* (London, 2002).
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1990s and the reinforced authoritarian state power and oligarchies of the 2000s. Under Mikhail Gorbachev and Chadli Bendjedid, the political establishments of both Algeria and the USSR depicted the 1970s as a period of stagnation to legitimise reformist agendas. However, stigmatisation of the preceding period during the 1980s seems to have had little longitudinal effect. In both countries, political instability, economic restructuring, increasing corruption and widening wealth gaps contributed to the 1970s being viewed as a *belle époque* rather than as a period of stagnation. As a result, narratives on the 1970s highlight the economic and social certainties of socialism, as well as a sense of pride linked to both countries' positions on the world stage – roles that have been called into question during the 1990s.

Despite the lack of survey data on Algerian perceptions of the past, Russian research points to post-soviet nostalgia being rooted in economic decline and loss of social securities, increased crime, worsening community relations blamed on individualism as a cause of reduced social cohesion, the loss of influence in the world and the endurance of a strongly-held idea of collective good.¹⁹ All of these issues resonate with Algerians' complaints about the present and are recognisable in Algerian depictions of past-present disjuncture. While Russian nostalgia for the late-socialism of the Brezhnev era began only after the clear-cut rupture of 1991, nostalgia for the 1970s seems to have emerged in Algeria during the late-1980s, from the social inequalities produced by economic crisis and liberalising reforms under Chadli, developments that created a perceived rupture with the egalitarian promises of postcolonial nationalism that had guided Algeria since the sixties, even while the state continued to pay lip service to the slogans and achievements of the socialist past.²⁰ Despite the lack of a clear political rupture with socialist practices, legitimacy building in Bouteflika's Algeria is more akin to that of Putin's Russia, which has sought to create a seamless coexistence of old and new orders, successfully marrying Soviet and Russian identities, through measures such as the reintroduction of the Soviet national anthem. As one of Boumediene's closest allies, Abdelaziz Bouteflika attempts a similar, albeit

¹⁹ See Olena Nikolayenko, "Contextual effects on historical memory: Soviet nostalgia among post-Soviet adolescents", in *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 41(2008):243-259; and Otto Boele, "Remembering Brezhnev in the New Millennium: Post-Soviet Nostalgia and Local Identity in the City of Novorossiisk", in *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review*, 38(2011):3-29.

²⁰ See the book commemorating twenty years of independence, (1982) *'Ashrūn sana min al-injāzāt*. Algiers, Algerian Ministry of Information.

somewhat unconvincing, amalgam between past and present, not least in his much championed 're-industrialisation' policy.

In Bab el-Oued, the politics of the socialist period during the 1970s were overwhelmingly remembered as authoritarian. However, authoritarian politics was hardly ever talked about in terms of lack of political representation, almost as if this fact was self-evident. This is because memories of the past tended to highlight past-present contrasts, and since many saw the politics of the present as equally unrepresentative, albeit in a different format, there was little contrast on which to focus. Instead, people articulated the ways in which authoritarianism affected daily life, most commonly expressed through the absence of freedom of speech, especially in relation to the average citizens' right to criticise the ideology of the state,²¹ an area in which there is significant contrast with greater freedom of speech in the present. Major topics thus included freedom of the press and media, and particularly the inability to criticise the state in public settings such as cafés, due to constant awareness of the possible presence of the Sécurité Militaire. Because many had grown up during the 1970s and harboured fond memories associated with youth, authoritarianism was sometimes a delicate subject and caused the foregrounding of more neutral, less problematic memories. One way around this was to use humour, seemingly as a way of confronting uncomfortable memories.

"My father told me this story: back then before the film started at the cinema, they'd show the news. So, Boumediene disguises himself in a *qachābiyya*, and goes to the cinema with his bodyguards, to see how people react. At one point during the news, they mentioned Boumediene and everyone stood up. Confused, he stayed sitting down and the guy next to him nudges him and says quietly, "Come on, get up! Do you want them to arrest you, or what?" (Mehdi, 25).

²¹ Numerous articles and satirical cartoons in the press throughout the 1970s in Algeria reflected public concerns over administrative sluggishness, shortages of foodstuffs and medicines, or public hygiene. Much like other socialist countries, the key here is that constructive criticism of policy implementation and everyday realities – particularly if these involved any kind of exploitation – was permitted, but this was not to grow into dissent that questioned the appropriateness of the policies themselves.

A minority of those I spoke to in Bab el-Oued maintained that the political system had intense popular support that translated into an ideological adherence, again particularly those on the secular political left that made a clear opposition between the 1970s as representing a secular, peaceful, Mediterranean society and the Algeria that emerged from the 1980s as a more Islamised space from which they felt culturally estranged. In contrast, most people spoke of their lack of involvement in, the politics of the day, which was cast as a dangerous business. Score settling and assassinations of opposition figures throughout the 1960s and 1970s sent a clear message that politics could result in imprisonment or worse. It is important to stress that this estrangement from politics did not, however, necessarily imply implicit opposition to the state or socialist ideology per se. Rather, it expressed a gulf between those with power and those without, translating a range of positions from opposition, neutrality and tacit support. In this sense, ideological support must be differentiated from broad tacit support for a system seen by the majority as providing rising living standards. Indeed Algeria's brand of socialist politics generated broad social consensus around three key areas that, importantly, were seen as delivering improvements in daily life: a developmentalist domestic policy of massive state investment in industry and social welfare; the expropriation of foreign capital through the nationalisation of mines in 1966 and the oil and gas sector in 1971; thirdly, the decision to redistribute wealth through public sector employment, with government jobs providing 85% of wages and salaries by 1977.²²

Rather than being couched ideologically then, the political system of the day was very clearly assessed moral terms. This was still true in Bab el-Oued during my field research: people very seldom referred to the lack of political representation or to socialism's incompatibility with Algerian culture or religion. Instead, politics was evaluated on a moral scale, based on strongly held beliefs in integrity, equality and social justice that defined worldviews in Bab el-Oued, crossing boundaries of age and gender. Such principles bear the hallmark of the egalitarian claims that underpinned Algerian socialism and continue to define expectations of present politics. Such values were often associated with the characteristics ascribed to Boumediene himself. Indeed, descriptions of Boumediene's character and those of Algeria during the 1970s seemed to become

²² Mahfoud Bennoune, *The Making of Contemporary Algeria, 1830-1988* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 252-3.

intertwined in a narrative of both economic and personal austerity. The political integrity of the past was defined in two main ways that were used to highlight what was missing from present politics: firstly, as straightforward honesty and a lack of corruption; secondly in the concept, closely associated with masculinity, of remaining true to one's word and following up these words with concrete actions that improved the lot of the average Algerian.

Those socialist systems were authoritarian, and produced great repression and suffering is evident. People in postsocialist countries may look back on the lack of political freedoms under socialism, and feel glad to see it gone. However, there are still many who believed in the system at the time, despite the fact that daily actions transgressed or refused aspects of official ideology. At the same time, many of the values associated with socialist life, such as equality, community, altruism, ethical relations, education, work and concern for the future were – and continue to be – of great importance for those that lived in socialist systems.²³ Perhaps because of this, postsocialist countries have witnessed an unpredictable refusal among sectors of the population to abandon moral values and expectations associated with the socialist past. Many seem to have tolerated authoritarianism in Algeria during the 1970s, because the state was seen as embodying the moral politics society expected, judged using the yardstick of political integrity and lack of corruption, a sense of seriousness in the management of public affairs and wealth redistribution that allowed much desired social mobility. That the Algerian polity is still judged by its citizens using the same yardstick of substantive democracy, based on the equal distribution of social goods, is perhaps the most lasting and significant legacy of Algeria's socialist period.

Everyday life in socialist systems

At this point, it is important to highlight that the political should not be the only lens used to look at postsocialist societies. Views of postsocialist countries often rest on a set of assumptions about socialism that are reproduced in much academic work and other writing – both in the West and postsocialist countries – according to which socialism is inherently “bad” or “immoral”, and

²³ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More. The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, 2005), p. 8.
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that these latent tendencies ultimately led to its demise. This is evident in the frequent use of phrases such as “Soviet regime” or “life under socialism”. As a result, such assumptions usually describe life in socialist systems using a series of binaries: oppression and resistance, state and people, official economy and black market, private self and public self.²⁴ To look solely at the political side of the coin through such binaries is to miss the complexity of everyday life and peoples’ relationships with the lifeworlds they once inhabited.

A further problem with such reductive views of socialist life is that they tend to assume that nostalgia for the past expresses a wish to turn back the clock. The view of Easterners as nostalgic for socialism confirms Western views of postsocialist countries as inherently authoritarian, uncivilised and needing Western political and cultural intervention.²⁵ In this vein, Berdhal interprets West German characterisations of ‘incomprehensible’ or ‘reprehensible’ displays of nostalgia by former GDR citizens as a way in which Westerners imbue Easterners with inherently authoritarian tendencies. This process also allows the West to project insecurities about its own authoritarian past onto the East.²⁶ With this in mind, it is important to recognise that nostalgia is not a unitary language: nostalgic acts do not have a single meaning, and are not necessarily political.²⁷ As my own research in Bab el-Oued shows, while some nostalgic acts may indeed express grief for a faded past and critique present realities, others are intended to shore up political legitimacy by mobilising support for a present or future oriented project, whereas some serve simply to cultivate intimacy between individuals while commiserating over the trials of life.

Memories of life in socialist Algeria did not focus solely on authoritarian politics. In fact, the most common representations were those describing daily life. Across generations, the 1970s stood for dignity, expressed through memories of a world with rising living standards and job opportunities,

²⁴ For more on these binaries, see Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, pp. 4-8.

²⁵ For a general discussion of the power relations behind assumptions on the content of nostalgia, see Dominic Boyer, “From Algos to Autonomos: Nostalgia Eastern Europe as Postimperial Mania”, in Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille (eds.) *Post-Communist Nostalgia* (New York, 2012), pp. 17-29.

²⁶ Daphne Berdhal, “(N)Ostalgie for the Present: Memory, Longing and East German Things”, in *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology*, 64:2 (1999), pp. 192-211.

²⁷ Maya Nadkarni and Olga Shevchenko, “The Politics of Nostalgia: A Case for Comparative Analysis of Post-Socialist Paractices”, in *Ab Imperio* 2, (2004), pp. 489-519.

as well as few socio-economic disparities. By far the single most common narrative encountered on the period, crossing generational and ideological divides, was that of low prices in relation to wages and general ease of living standards. While this is clearly a matter of perception; economic data does bear out memories of the 1970s as a period of rapid social mobility, especially in relation to the poverty experienced during the colonial period and the privations of the immediate post-war years. The effects of centralised economic planning began to be felt in the early 1970s, especially after the nationalisation of hydrocarbons in 1971. By the end of the seventies, the economy had grown by 483%, household incomes had tripled and real purchasing power had increased by 48%.²⁸ State enforced austerity meant that few consumer goods produced outside Algeria were readily available, forcing a sort of saving programme on households, many of which had more money than they could actually spend. Under the socialist system, Algerians gained access for the first time to universal education and free healthcare. By the end of the decade, 71% of Bab el-Oued residents had secondary level or lower schooling, and 53% middle school level or lower.²⁹ These memories had a generational impact, with young people routinely saying of their parents' generation, "*kānū 3āychīn bien*" (they used to live well) and comparing the much tougher circumstances of their own lives and reduced opportunities in comparison to those experienced by their parents.

The socialist system was also remembered for having offered stability in terms of guaranteed employment, represented in depictions of expected life trajectories from school to military service to a public sector job. A common trope used to illustrate full employment was the image of three, four or even five people doing a job intended for one person. While often expressed with bemused disbelief due to the contrast with today's competitive job market and high unemployment, there was little indication that this kind of full employment was necessarily considered negative – rather the successful policy of a state that saw itself as responsible for the nation's welfare.

²⁸ The figures compare economic growth over the first three plan periods, from 1967 to 1977. See Mahfoud Bennoune, *The Making of Contemporary Algeria*, p. 254-6.

²⁹ *Recensement Générale de la Population 1977*, Office Nationale des Statistiques.
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As in other socialist countries, urban Algeria in the 1970s was a place where the trappings of middle class life were becoming widespread. By the end of the decade Algerians owned more fridges, cars and televisions than ever before and subsidised holidays in state-run tourist complexes were available at affordable prices. However, like in other socialist countries, these material goods were often in short supply. Industrial output in Algeria tripled from 1967-1977, but low productivity meant that production lagged behind growing consumer demand.³⁰ Furthermore, state protection of nascent domestic industry through tight import controls meant that consumers were forced to buy Algerian. Officially, people could only buy clothes made by SONITEX,³¹ which are remembered for their poor quality and synthetic fibres. Since desirable consumer items were hard to come by in Algeria, migrant workers or visitors to Europe often brought back small goods as gifts. While clothes could be brought from abroad, importing larger items such as cars was much more complex and costly. Purchasing a car in Algeria required compiling a weighty dossier and submitting it to the local SONACOME³² office. Consumer choice was restricted to the limited range of models imported by the state. Since there was no credit, the entire sum had to be pre-paid in cash and customers would wait a year or more to take delivery of their vehicle.

Standardisation of nationally produced goods meant little consumer choice and variety, meaning that many Algerian homes would contain similar products. Shared aesthetic references thus link people of the same generation that grew up with readily identifiable stylistic references. Furthermore, as has been noted in other socialist systems, the slower pace of obsolescence of socialist era goods meant that generations from the late-1960s to the early-1980s often shared the same references, in contrast to today, where a few years can mark significant generational differences.³³ Memories of the standardisation of socialist-era aesthetics also reinforce

³⁰ J. Ruedy, *Modern Algeria. The Origins and Development of a Nation* (Bloomington, 2005), pp. 219-20.

³¹ Société Nationale des Industries Textiles.

³² Société Nationale des Constructions Mécaniques.

³³ Nadkarni and Shevchenko, "The Politics of Nostalgia", pp. 489-519.

perceptions of the absence of class differences and locate the 1970s before the onset of the more individualised consumerism that emerged in the 2000s.³⁴

While many Bab el-Oued residents preferred imported products during the 1970s, there was also a conflicting perception that the private sector cannot be trusted to provide quality. Thus, there remained a strong narrative on the quality – even superiority – of Algerian manufactured products, such as ENIEM³⁵ fridges or SONACOME trucks. Such items were routinely referred to as *hāja šhīha* (tough, well-made). This narrative translates extremely positive memories and attitudes toward the industrialisation policy of the 1970s. Representations of the durability of socialist-era industrial products evoked images of a strong state attempting economic independence through industrialisation, political and economic austerity, and a sense of technical skill, in which industrial prowess was closely linked to masculinity.³⁶

In parallel with representations of increasing wellbeing, an enduring image of the 1970s was one of intermittent *pénuries* (shortages) of basic goods, from foodstuffs to medicine. Paradoxically therefore, as well as standing for rising living standards, the 1970s was also remembered as a decade of endless queues outside state-run supermarkets, memories with which others in postsocialist countries would surely identify. In contrast young people that had grown up in the consumer society of the 2000s found these depictions of shortage and austerity amusing and slightly incomprehensible. Depictions of shortages caused some young people to question their parents' nostalgia for the 1970s. For these young people, their parents' experience of the war of independence made any kind of stability seem like a golden age, despite the authoritarianism and austerity that characterised everyday realities in the 1970s. Indeed, after the structural inequalities and poverty produced by the colonial system, it seems reasonable to assume that even small improvements in living standards would have been seen in a positive light. To a generation used to colonialism and exhausted by 7 years of war, intermittent shortages of oil or potatoes probably did not seem so bad.

³⁴ For more on socialist aesthetics, see Susan Reid and David Crowley (eds.) *Style and Socialism. Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe* (Oxford, 2000).

³⁵ Entreprise Nationale des Industries de l'Électroménager.

³⁶ Algerians are, of course, not alone in making this association.

As a result, the seventies stood for austerity and drabness for many young people. Many in the older generation sought to dignify what must have been far from ideal circumstances with a narrative of ‘we didn’t have much, but we were happy’. Depictions of stoicism in the face of shortages also frequently articulated criticism of today’s society as being excessively materialistic. This sense of *qinē3a* (satisfaction with what one has) also translates the emergence of socio-economic disparities often associated with the mid-1980s, which was almost always closely linked with increasing individualism and the breakdown of traditional social relationships. Against this, living through shortages was used as a badge of honour; proof that one did not belong to the “soft” new society represented by *ṣḥāb l medda* (those obsessed with material wealth), but had the strength to endure austerity. The transition to a system of social stratification in which material wealth is increasingly important, in contrast to the relative social equality of the 1970s was also seen as having harmed community cohesion. If during the socialist period, Algerians were certainly rushing to acquire the trappings of modern life, this was perceived as being offset by strong family and community ties, portrayed in strong memories of warm relations between citizens, strong feelings of neighbourhood solidarity and being considerate of others. This is akin to comparisons drawn between socialist principles of equality and liberal consumerism in postsocialist countries elsewhere.³⁷ The phrase often used to describe this, *kunnā gā3 3āychīn kīf kīf* means both ‘we used to live together’ and ‘we used to live on the same level’, translating the importance of both social equality and spatial proximity in social relations.

The *vivre ensemble* was a reality back then. There were no differences between us. Now, it feels like there’s been a rupture, the relationships have changed. It’s a society that’s trying to find its way; it’s no longer the ideal society we once dreamed of. It’s all about profit... that’s what I see. We’re not as united as we were. The measure of success for a young person now is to have a nice car, to have money. (Daho, 52).

Postsocialist societies also share widespread lack of confidence in state institutions and highly personalised networks of contacts that often deemed more reliable and effective than reliance on the state. The precariousness of legal power, the prevalence of personalised protection structures and the system of representations and strategies actors have to follow when the state repeatedly

³⁷ Boele, “Remembering Brezhnev in the New Millennium, p.11.

fails its duties have created a culture of mistrust, a gulf between *pays légal* and *pays réel*.³⁸ This is of course true of other Arab and North African countries that have never had socialist systems. But in the Algerian case at least, such practices seems to have originated in the forms of social stratification produced by the socialist system, based not on displays of material wealth, but on access to the state and its resources. This spawned networks of patronage that aimed to manipulate the system for personal advantage. *Ma3rifa* (using personal connections to get ahead) seems to have developed from the coping mechanisms developed to survive in an era of state control over the economy, endemic shortages and low levels of monetarisation.

Connections to the state even dictated issues such as where one lived. Many public sector workers had the right to a comfortable *logement de fonction*, on well-planned modernist housing estates such as Les Sources, while those with no access to state resources could – at best – hope to be housed in tightly packed, poorly built blocks of flats like those in Bachdjarrah, still known as one of Algiers' toughest neighbourhoods. The very different logics that lay behind the housing in Bachdjarrah and Les Sources reveals a two-tier system that reflected new forms of social stratification and inequalities based on access to bountiful state resources, especially through public sector employment, that emerged from the socialist system. Furthermore, high-end housing complexes also had their own internal hierarchies, with more desirable apartments assigned to higher-level state employees. The fact that housing estates like Les Sources continue to maintain a high level of social desirability today is testament to the positive evaluations attached to the modernist urbanism chosen by the state to represent an egalitarian socialist society. At the same time, the difference in social values attached to spaces such as Les Sources and Bachdjarrah testifies to the enduring memory of the inequalities produced by socialist planning in Algeria.

Despite widespread nostalgia for the sociability and solidarities of the socialist-era, the country has not developed a highly commoditised nostalgia industry. Though hip young Algiers urbanites make their own aesthetic amalgams, combining retro clothing with other references to *Dzayer*

³⁸ Giordano, C. and Kostova, D. "The Social Production of Mistrust", in Hann, C. M. (ed.) *Postsocialism. Ideals, Ideologies and Practices in Eurasia* (London, 2002). For Algeria, see al-Kenz, A. *Algeria: The Challenge of Modernity* (London, 1991).

leqdim (old Algiers) or to the daily life and cultural production of the 1960s and 1970s, this sense of underground pastiche is not commercialised in the ways found in most postsocialist countries, particularly in Eastern Europe and Russia. Nostalgia for the 1970s in Algeria is thus perhaps less immediately visible, precisely because it is less commoditised. This is perhaps because of Algeria's lack of generational change at the top of the political system, meaning that there has been no official political break with the past that has sought to erase an entire lifeworld of experience. Significantly, Algeria has not fully transitioned to a capitalist economy in which nostalgia would be commoditised.

Postsocialist countries have more in common than their relationships to politics and everyday life. They also share an imaginary of time. Whereas space has been the all-important concept for the liberal nation-state systems of the West, which have emphasised a frontier-based geopolitics in which victory is understood in terms of territorial sovereignty and spatially delimited enemies, socialist political systems have placed the emphasis on time, with victory imagined in terms of historical progress towards an ideal society. In socialist systems then, time becomes a teleological concept whose key role in legitimacy building means its control by the state and recalibration into a series of five-year plans. If time in the West was specialised as a vacant place waiting to be filled by political events, space in the East was temporalized by the construction of the Berlin Wall, understood not as a spatial barrier, but a temporal one that would allow young socialist states to retain their ideological purity while catching up with the West.³⁹

The imaginary of Algeria's anti-colonial struggle had been eminently spatial, with the goal being the physical dislodging of the colonial system and gaining national sovereignty over a territory with established borders. But after 1962, it was *time* that was of the essence. With Boumediene holding absolute power over both material and temporal resources, Algeria's meta-narrative of modernisation now undertook the effective nationalisation of time,⁴⁰ willing development to take place and decreeing the speeding up of time. The rapid pace of industrialisation was literally a race against the clock, in which Algeria was set to achieve economic independence, and create a

³⁹ Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe. The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), p. 23-25.

⁴⁰ M. Heller, *La Machine et les rouages : La formation de l'homme soviétique* (Paris, 1985), p. 65.

modern, egalitarian society that would not only match, but also morally surpass the developed capitalist nations across the Mediterranean.

Building the future meant equating revolutionary time with modernisation, transforming time into *the* field for the exercise of discursive power. The political legitimacy of the Algerian polity in the 1960s and 1970s rested not only on the liberation struggle – but like other socialist systems – on a powerful imaginary of time predicated on the paradigm of industrial modernisation in which the state would deliver progress towards a better tomorrow. Given this strong logic of social transformation, the legitimacy of the state as supreme sovereign power rested not on the liberal claim of formal democracy based on universal suffrage, but on the socialist claim of substantive democracy based on the egalitarian distribution of social goods. Political power was to be judged in terms of historical progress towards social justice and equality, in an imaginary of time that, as long as it remained victorious, legitimated its own rule.

Conclusion

Postsocialist approaches to Algeria offer a number of advantages. Firstly, they provide a framework within which the study of Algeria might move beyond decolonisation as the sum total of history, placing the emphasis on the post-independence period. Clearly, Algerians are making judgements about their own past and present in relation to the post-independence period. One would normally expect this to be reflected in research agendas. As has been mentioned, a postsocialist approach would require specific adjustments for the postcolonial nature of Algerian socialism. Given that postsocialist approaches often rely on ethnographic or social history methodologies, making them supple enough to be context-driven rather than drawing on a one-size-fits-all model, these adjustments seem entirely possible. Moreover, there seems no reason why postsocialist and postcolonial approaches could not mutually inform and benefit each other on a broader scale: postcolonial thought could provide deeper understandings of the relationship between the Soviet Union and other socialist countries in Eastern Europe and beyond, while postsocialism could help to understand political and social change in colonised countries that

adopted socialism both as an ideology of liberation and as the basis for the construction of new states.

Comparative approaches to Algeria using a postsocialist lens have obvious points of comparison and similarities in terms of the timeframe of transitions from socialism and subsequent political realities; a rejection of the authoritarianism of the past mixed with hankerings for the solidarities and moral values associated with the socialist period; within present climates of continued insecurity, consumerism and the accrual of spectacular illicit wealth. However, the most illuminating overlap is that relating to time and expectation.

Algeria's political and social experiences since the mid-1980s – and the current memories of the preceding nation-building period – reflect the breakdown of the powerful imaginary of time on which socialist polities were based. This conception of time, in which “all relationships can be explained in terms of a common horizon”,⁴¹ produced a rationalised consciousness that sought to transcend the injustices of the present through developmental historical thinking and the elaboration of a dialectical method for arriving at the destination of a better world, with clearly defined indicators of progress showing the way. The sense of shrinking temporal horizons is associated with a “retreat from transformative politics” that marks the “end of the capacity to found collective institutions that rest on aspirations for the future”.⁴² The breakdown of this imaginary of time has ruptured the nevertheless still expected movement of progress from the past through the present to the future enunciated by modernism, replacing it with a frozen present characterised by routine, boredom, socio-economic hardships and an overwhelming cynicism about the possibility of positive change for the future, in which the temporal defeat of progress leaves only the desperate spatial act of clandestine migration. Algerians even have a phrase expressing this complete temporal derailment: *avansīnā lel-arriere* (we've advanced backwards). In contrast to their parents' recollections of a dignified past, to the young people that form the majority of Bab el Oued's population the present seemed to be anything but dignified; offering only the meagre prospect of endless daily struggles and humiliations. Sitting in the

⁴¹ Elizabeth Ermath, *Sequel to History, Postmodernism and the Crisis of Representational Time* (Princeton, 1992), p. 27.

⁴² Charles Maier, “A Surfeit of Memory? Reflections on History, melancholy and denial”, *History and Memory* 5:2, 1993, p. 147-50.

neighbourhood's stadium drawing heavily on a cigarette, 20-year-old Yacine compared the future once imagined by his parents with the uncertainty faced by his own generation:

"In their time, they never imagined it would turn out like this. My Mum never wanted to emigrate back then. She said Algeria was better, that it was going to become something. They loved this place... they never thought it would turn out like this. They had lots of hope. That's why we young people are nostalgic for a time we never even lived through. For the moment, I'm surviving. Nothing is stable here. Overnight, things could explode. They tell me to keep studying, get my diploma, to be someone. But the future is much more uncertain, compared to the optimism they felt. We're always between optimism and pessimism. *Mqawda wal ḥamdulillāh!*"⁴³

Because of this derailment of modernist time, postsocialist societies share a gap between horizons of expectation – based on temporal progress towards a better future – and the realities of everyday experience⁴⁴ to which Algeria is certainly no exception. This was exactly the site of remembering in Bab el-Oued, where memories of the 1970s articulated the breakdown of this imaginary of time, and exposed the gap between the retreat of the state from its redistributive goals and the continued existence of once created expectations of social justice and progress in society at large. The gap between socio-economic expectations and reality is arguably what motivates the daily round of riots, sit-ins and protests that daily fill the headlines of Algerian newspapers. Continually high levels of civil unrest in Algeria point to the fact that people still expect the state to deliver and are willing to hold it to its larger economic and social commitments.⁴⁵

Importantly, the contradiction between the notions of progress towards a more just social order promised by socialist politics and the everyday reality of stalled social mobility and corruption has

⁴³ This sarcastic and frequently used phrase perfectly translated the sense of pessimism tinged with black humour used by the younger generation to describe the unsatisfactory state of the present, and might be translated as 'It's fucked, but thank God anyway'.

⁴⁴ Reinhardt Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York, 2004).

⁴⁵ For more on memory and riots in Algeria, see Edward McAllister, "Immunity to the Arab Spring? Fear, Fatigue and Fragmentation in Algeria", in *New Middle East Studies* 3 (2013), available at <http://www.brismes.ac.uk/nmes/archives/1048>.

implications beyond Algeria. The radical republics of the Arab World during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s – most of which were guided by variants of socialist ideology – have clearly not lived up to their promise to deliver a moral economy.⁴⁶ However, millions of people in the Middle East and North Africa were brought up to believe in radical equality and social transformation by the state.⁴⁷ Expectations have been created, but left unfulfilled. Claims of social justice and equality, once made, do not disappear so easily. Like in Algeria, the socialist principle of substantive democracy, underpinned by the belief that the nation's wealth is commonly owned and should be distributed accordingly, continues to be a major yardstick used to judge the polities of the present and forms the backbone of societies' expectations of their states. It is no coincidence that the revolutions and uprisings of 2010-2011 were motivated by socio-economic issues and articulated claims of social justice and wealth distribution before calling for political change. It is also no coincidence that the most significant uprisings have taken place in what were, once upon a time, the socialist-nationalist republics of the Arab world that promised radical social equality.

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⁴⁶ For more on the concept of moral economy in the context of Algeria, see Hugh Roberts, *Moral economy or moral polity? The political anthropology of Algerian riots*. Crisis States Research Centre working papers series 1, 17. Crisis States Research Centre, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK.

⁴⁷ See Juan Cole, *The New Arabs. How the Millennial Generation is Changing the Middle East* (New York, 2014), p. 28.

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