The language of history

Closures of violence

> The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the mind of the living. Karl Marx[1]

There is a short drama in Kateb Yacine's cycle for theatre, *Le Cercle des représailles*,[2] whose title has become a lapidary phrase in writing on Algeria: *Les Ancêtres redoublent de férocité*, 'the ancestors redouble their ferocity'. A disturbing focus of the play, hovering insistently in the background, is the nightmarish presence of a vulture, 'the bird of death', messenger of the ancestors. At the play's end, Nedjma, the female embodiment of Algeria, lies dead, only to be (re-)'incarnated in war'.

Lifted from the playwright's astonishing poetic talent, his gift for haunting and – frequently, in its very resonant obscurity – eloquent expression, this title has become a recurrent theme in the depiction of Algeria's contemporary history. In few places is the temptation so strong to see a society and culture 'inhabited by violence',[3] a history composed of recurrent, inescapable cycles of terror. The tortured history of modern Algeria's dead generations, it might appear, does in a terribly active sense weigh 'like a nightmare on the mind of the living'. From the cataclysm of the forty years' war of conquest (1830–70) through the repressive, everyday violence of an exceptionally intense colonialism, to the atrocious seven years' war of liberation (1954–62), and then the civil turmoil of the twentieth century's bloody final decade, violence weighs so heavy in this history that it seems to repeat itself endlessly, with past tragedies on perpetual, grotesque replay as each new moment unfolds. Nor is this perception limited to the easy racist stereotype of 'Algerian savagery' – long-lived and insidious though this is. Respectable

[1] *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.
[2] Paris, Seuil, 1959.
[3] Youssef Nacib, quoted in Remaoun, 'La Question de l'histoire', 32.

commentators have underscored the significance of a 'superabundance' of social memory, steeped in an epic national history of perennial revolt and revolution, as a significant force in the 1990s, shaping those conditions, not of their own choosing, under which 'men make their history'.[4] Thus, Algeria in the mid-1990s was said to be 'in the process of reinvoking its dreaded past'.[5]

This is not a study of Algeria's supposedly 'dreaded past'. Monolithic and endlessly reinvoked ancestral violence is much too superficial an image of Algeria's rich and complex history. Too often related, by colonialists and nationalists alike, in mythical form, whether as the miraculous progress of divine revelation or the patient process of natural evolution, the cyclical repetition of rising hope (colonial or revolutionary hubris) and spiralling, catastrophic nemesis, Algerian history has been ill-served by the closures of violent destiny imposed upon it, whether these have been heroic, as in the halcyon, revolutionary 1950s and 1960s, or dreadful, in the disenchanted and distraught 1990s. An alternative approach to the presence of the past, to the meaning of the 'nightmarish weight' of history in Algeria, is possible. If Algerians' histories have been filled with the closures imposed by violence – 'civilising' violence and its 'maintenance of order', 'redeeming' violence and the martyrology of each new order – it is emphatically not the task of historiography to naturalise these murderous tropologies in the violence of new closures, in writing the Algerian past as if all of this were somehow inevitable, thus doing new abuse to the past in its very inscription. On the contrary, historical writing must endeavour both to uncover the ways in which this trope of 'destiny', this image of a unitary and undifferentiated, linear and epic or cyclical and tragic, history came to appear as such, and to see beyond it, to the deeper social, political and cultural processes at work in shaping Algerian history, and perceptions of that history.

The ends of history

This book examines the place of historical imagination and cultural authority in the making of nationalism. Focusing on the role of Islamic teachers and writers through whom a new vision of Algeria's history and

[4] Remaoun, 'La Question de l'histoire'; Stora, 'Algérie: absence et surabondance de mémoire'; Ained-Tabet, 'Manuels d'histoire et discours idéologique'; Carlier, *Entre nation et jihad*, 25–6, 393, 399; Martinez, *La Guerre civile en Algérie*, 14–15, 28, 376. A careful discussion is Carlier, 'D'une guerre à l'autre'.

[5] Entelis, 'Islam, democracy and the state', 248.

culture coalesced in the first half of the twentieth century, I trace the history of the articulation of a modernist discourse which would come to define Algeria's history and 'national identity'. I examine some of the transformations wrought in Algerian culture by the ascendancy of this reimagined history, and show how those who articulated it, in a series of struggles for the power to represent their community's past and future, became the spokesmen of a sovereign vision of national 'authenticity', but were reduced, along with that vision, to an instrumental status in a revolutionary political order whose emergence, through the resort to arms, they had hoped to avoid. At the same time, however, they had themselves unwittingly ensured the cultural legitimisation of the unitary, undifferentiated and exalted model of community upon which the revolutionary order would come to rest; and in doing so they had also, as it would turn out, begun to prepare the ground for a much later, religiously imagined revolt against that order. Their success and their failures were constitutive of the modern culture of nationalism in Algeria. Their visions of history provide a particularly good ground on which to trace the development of both.

As a first step towards delineating this story, we need to dispense with the closed narrative of ancestral violence. 'The presence of the past' means something more complex than the persistence of atavistic memory, immutable laws or determining cultural structures of thought and action. It is not the ancestors who 'redouble their ferocity'; they are dead and gone. The injustice and suffering inflicted upon them can never be righted, revenged, or removed in any subsequent present. Only in the minds of their descendants do shades rise up and demand justice, or inspire retribution, and these ghosts, as Michel de Certeau reminds us, are faceless and silent. Their silence, indeed, is the necessary condition of their entry into History, their memorialisation in text.[6] Their form and voice are given them by historical imagination in the present. This, to be sure, is shaped and coloured by conditions which the past has produced, but historical understanding and imagination are never simply transmissions from the past. They are, rather, appropriations of it. As Ricoeur puts it, 'What does it mean [for a past event, or a historical person] to survive? Nothing . . . All that is finally meaningful is *the current possession of* the activity of the past . . . Survival and inheritance are

[6] 'The dear departed enter the text because they can neither hurt nor speak. These ghosts find a welcome in writing only on condition that they *are silent* forever . . . The People, too, is the silent object of the poem which speaks of it. Certainly, only the People can "authorise" the historian's writing – but even this is on condition of its being *absent*': de Certeau, *L'Ecriture de l'histoire*, 7–8, original emphasis.

natural processes. Historical knowledge begins with the way in which we enter into possession of them.'[7]

The formulation of historical knowledge is an active production of meaning in which, at every new historical moment, a conception of the past is continually reconnected to the constantly vanishing present. This production of meaning is itself a complex social process, answering certain social needs. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs on the mind of the living, not as a *dead* weight, predetermining the present in a closed, unidirectional path (the Salvation of Man or Manifest Destiny), but rather because meaningful self-location in, and interpretation of, the world, and the possibility of acting in and upon that world, requires that a certain sense be made of the past.[8] I emphasise that it must be *made*: history (as socially institutionalised knowledge of the past) is not of itself immanent in the practical structures of social life, nor in people's minds. 'Social memory' is not simply spontaneously 'shared' memory, but a cultural artefact, constructed through a creative project, a certain kind of socio-cultural work. Systematised and articulated in speech and writing, historical knowledge is above all a particular *language* of the past, a discourse on the past in which events are systematically ordered in knowable form and in which that order is expressed as meaningful – as the *sens de l'histoire*, the meaning, and direction, of history.

Under the modern political conditions of nationalism, the formation of 'national' states and of 'national' culture, the public definition of such meaning is, as we know, of considerable importance. Historical discourse, as a constitutive part of the culture of nationalism, is a cultural product which itself, in a very material way, 'makes sense' (that is, produces meaning and explanation) in the present. Historical discourse constitutes an ordering representation of past and present social reality that has its own conceptual, textual and, ultimately, institutionalised ideological weight in society.[9] Narratives of the true order and meaning of the past, informing the social world of the present and pointing the way to the future, claim a particular kind of social authority, both for themselves as statements of the truth and for their speakers, as those who authoritatively represent that truth.

In any attempt at writing a critical history, such discourses need to be interrogated as to their own social and political meanings, not faithfully transcribed as the truths they claim to be. In accounting for the

[7] Ricoeur, *Reality of the Historical Past*, 11, emphasis added.
[8] Duby, 'Histoire sociale et idéologies des sociétés'.
[9] De Certeau, 'L'Opération historique', 7ff., for 'the historical institution'.

particular form of a community's historical self-conception, we cannot assume simply that it speaks the truth because we (think we) detect some unexamined 'emotive resonance' that it seems to excite among 'the people'.[10] This would amount merely to accepting and re-transcribing a particular worldview, and self-view, on and in its own terms. We must, instead, investigate the social–historical location of such claims. This, in turn, is found in social conflicts expressed as struggles over the cultural and political power of authoritative representation, i.e. to speak the past and, through it, the present, of community and culture with legitimate authority – to produce a dominant definition of social reality.

The institution of particular narratives, particular patterns and figures of history giving 'authentic' meaning to the social world – ancestry, community, destiny; past, present and future – highlights certain conceptions and effaces others. When these authoritative definitions are reproduced in later scholarship (as, in the case of Algeria, they generally have been) the complexities and alternatives that were effaced in the course of the inscription of 'the nation and its truth' are left uninterrogated. But things could always have been different. As Algerian sociologist Fanny Colonna rightly insists, one could always 'have imagined a history quite other than that which is related here'.[11] Part of the task of dismantling the linear certainties of foundational master-narratives[12] must be the attempt to reveal the suppressed alternatives effaced or condemned by authoritative histories, in attempting to offer an equitable account of those who are shouted down in the courts of Final Judgement, abusively condemned in terms of, or equally abusively 'rehabilitated' into, ineluctable schemes in whose construction they had no part. It is just as necessary to do this as it is to examine and account for those forces that coalesced to make the actual outcomes that *have* occurred, without falling again into the determinist mode of thinking that creates the necessity of 'what really happened' while purporting merely to describe it.

The history investigated here, then, is not the closed narrative of Algeria's 'national destiny', but the still unfinished history of how such a notion has come to have particular meaning, of what that meaning has been, and what were, and might remain, its suppressed and potential alternatives. By investigating the ends – the purposes and consequences –

[10] *Pace*, most notably, the work of Anthony D. Smith.
[11] Colonna, *Versets de l'invincibilité*, 357.
[12] That is, the 'grand narratives' of colonialism and nationalism, which, as Edmund Burke has pointed out, the historiography of the Maghrib has yet to 'go beyond' in a sustained and serious way (Burke, 'Theorizing the histories of colonialism and nationalism'); cf. Prakash, 'Writing post-Orientalist histories'.

of transformations in historical imagination, the role they have played in the production of meaning in Algeria, and how they have shaped the dominant meanings *of* 'Algeria', I hope to move beyond the closed, univocal images of destiny, however imagined, that have consistently plagued our understanding of this part of the world. The mode of the presence of the past in Algeria, that mythologised place which came to stand, in the latter half of the twentieth century, as the epitome of both hope and horror, was not predestined to be that of a nightmare, an endless recurrence of the same hard, oppressive realities, the same impoverishment, the same convulsive extremes of atrocity. It could have been otherwise, and can be again.

Colonial modernity, culture and the nation

The colonial encounter, in Algeria as elsewhere, was constitutively marked by violence. But far from being a simple matter of the 'monologic' imposition of an unchanging European will on similarly unchanging, perennially passive or unyieldingly resisting others, colonialism was a relationship within which new, dialogical discursive practices of self-fashioning emerged.[13] A brief detour through the meanings of colonial modernity elsewhere in the world should elucidate this point.

Studying China, Mark Elvin suggested that 'modernity' be located in a distinctively new 'ability to create power', where power is understood, firstly as 'a capacity to direct energy' (in thermodynamics, factories, bureaucracy or the military), and, through the application of that power, as 'the capacity to change the structure of systems' – in nature, social organisation, economic production, or the worlds of thought and belief.[14] As recent work on colonialism and empire has shown, the process of generating and applying this power played out, not within an internal 'great transformation' of European societies, from which Europe would emerge as the torchbearer of civilisation throughout the world, but rather from the worldwide expansion and uneven impact of capitalism itself, to which all the barbarisms of empire, from slave-ships to napalm, as well as steam engines and rational-bureaucratic 'good government', were integral. Rather than being 'native' to Europe, and (more or less unsuccessfully) transplanted elsewhere, modernity was *inherently* colonial, the product of the uneven development of capitalist penetration, extraction, production and circulation right across the globe. Correlatively, in the

[13] Wolfe, 'History and imperialism', on 'monologic' accounts; for 'dialogic', Washbrook, 'Orients and Occidents'.
[14] Elvin, 'A working definition of "modernity"?'.

cultural as well as in the economic sphere, and in Algeria as throughout the Middle East, North Africa and elsewhere, the development of nationalism and contemporary forms of Islam cannot be understood as integrally oppositional resistance to the imposition of 'modern, Western civilisation'. On the contrary, contemporary cultures of nationalism and Islam are themselves the products of the profound, global transformations effected in the imperial interrelationships of societies and cultures throughout the modern world.

Modernity, then, is unevenly played out in different settings. Examining its impact on structures of thought and belief in the dominated majority of the world, Donald Donham, an anthropologist of east Africa, writes of the ways in which 'vernacular modernisms' emerged among the colonised and dominated themselves – how the dislocating impact of modern power produced, in the minds of Ethiopians as of others, judgements on their own society and culture which articulated, in locally specific cultural terms, visions of that culture as being, or as having become, 'backward'.[15] Donham writes: 'By "modernism", I mean a local, culturally encoded stance toward history, one that yearns to bring things "up to date".'[16] What the onset of such locally conceived modernism effects is not the appearance of globally homogeneous, universally 'modernised' societies in the sense classically given that term by Huntington or Lerner, or by more recent apostles of triumphant global capitalism,[17] but the transformation of peoples' views of themselves and their histories, the consequences of which are unpredictable: 'In a phrase, what has been altered are people's imaginations – their sense of their place in the world and the shape of their pasts and their futures.' From this profound change emerge complex local struggles over the meaning and direction of the past and future, and 'what is needed to follow them is . . . an ethnography of local historical imaginations'.[18]

This book traces just such a struggle over local historical imaginations, engaged in by an Algerian 'vernacular modernism' articulated in the

[15] It should be emphasised that European experiences and expressions of modernity too are, in this sense, 'vernacular'. In the relatively privileged zone of imperial interaction (including the metropolitan working classes), of course, the forms taken by the vernacular-modern historical imaginary were quite different. I am grateful to Gyan Prakash for discussion of this point.

[16] Donham, *Marxist Modern*, 185.

[17] Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*; Lerner, *Passing of Traditional Society*. Universal modernisation narratives of the left, too, are rightly criticised for ignoring indigenous agency and the culturally specific forms taken by processes such as commodification, or the reification of value in cash. (See Feierman, 'Africa in history', commenting on Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History*.)

[18] Donham, *Marxist Modern*, xviii.

interrelated (indeed, indissociable) fields of culture, religion and history. The new visions of Algerian history and culture played a substantial, though never straightforward, part in the shaping of Algerian nationalism, endowing it with a particular cultural doctrine and thus framing what would become the dominant, newly legitimate definition of Algerian social reality, denoting the 'truth' of Algerian history and the meaning of 'national identity' – of what it meant to *be* 'Algerian'. In accounts of twentieth-century Algeria, this process has generally been considered simply in the terms in which its proponents themselves conceived it, as the 'recovery' and 'reassertion' of national selfhood. But like other, similar movements elsewhere in the colonial world, Algerian nationalism's social and cultural project did not, contrary to its own self-view, constitute a rebirth or recovery, the 'renaissance' of a self-contained civilisational character, an original 'national genius'. Its dominant historical imagination was not the simple restitution of a glorious national past freed from the falsifications of colonial ideology. Nor, contrary to certain scholars' views on nationalisms in Arab and Islamic societies, was it a 'failed modernism' or an 'anti-modernism', an inappropriately derivative effort crippled by its own ideological prejudice and 'resentment' of the dominant West. In Foucault's terms, nationalist discourse in colonial Algeria was a new kind of 'practice imposed on things', a new disciplinary order, changing the structures of thought about and practice of Islam and 'Algerian' culture and history, and imposing on them a new 'principle of their regularity'. This practice was also, both symbolically and physically, 'a violence'.[19] In this, though, it was not the expression (again) of some Algerian pathology, but rather the repercussion, mediated through and taken up in the self-fashioning practices of Algerians themselves, of the impact of colonialism's own relentless modernity.

This process involved nothing less than a seizure of symbolic power in the cultural realm, an attempt to reinvent Algerians' historical imaginations. In a much-quoted and influential passage, Partha Chatterjee observes what he calls a 'fundamental feature of anticolonial nationalisms in Asia and Africa': the division of the social world into two separate domains, the material and the spiritual, 'outside' and 'inside'. In the material realm of statecraft, economy, science and technology, the West reigns supreme and must be emulated; in the spiritual domain lie language, religion, the practices of family and communal life, 'the

[19] 'We must conceive of discourse as a violence that we do to things, or at least as a practice that we impose upon them; it is in this practice that the events of a discourse find the principle of their regularity': Foucault, *L'Ordre du discours*, 55.

"essential" marks of cultural identity', which must be preserved. Nationalism must create 'its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society well before it begins its political battle with the imperial power'. The colonial state

> is kept out of the 'inner' domain of national culture; but it is not as though this so-called spiritual domain is left unchanged. In fact, here nationalism launches its most powerful, creative, and historically significant project: to fashion a 'modern', national culture that is nevertheless not Western . . . *In this, its true and essential domain, the nation is already sovereign*, even when the state is in the hands of the colonial power.[20]

This 'inner domain', however, is neither impervious to assault from the 'outside' realm of new political, economic and scientific technologies of power[21] nor, within its own confines, is it the domain of sovereign selfhood that cultural nationalists themselves see in it. It too is a field of social struggle. Like any historically occurring form of human community, its boundaries and bonds created in the social imaginary,[22] a 'nation' is never an entity that can be positively, 'objectively' identified and defined, its 'natural' boundaries and internal characteristics fixedly described, but a field of rival representations, each claiming to articulate its 'authenticity'. This does not imply that 'nation' has no meaning, nor that it is somehow capable of 'an infinity of meanings'. The suggestion is rather that, in that it exists meaningfully at all, 'nation' *exists in the contests over meaning* engaged in by specifiable social actors, in particular historical conjunctures, with specific symbolic, linguistic and material resources present in the social world at a given moment in time. The nation only exists meaningfully in the struggle to 'hegemonise' its meaning; in contests over the symbolic power to name and represent the community. Nationalism, as Prasenjit Duara writes of China, 'is rarely the nationalism *of the nation* [hypostatised], but rather marks the site where different representations of the nation contest and negotiate with each other'.[23]

[20] Chatterjee, *Nation and its Fragments*, 6, emphasis added.
[21] Prakash, *Another Reason*, 201–3.
[22] Clearly conceiving of the locus of community in social meaning, i.e. as a social imaginary, obviates the sterile recent argument in nationalism studies, centred on the non-question of whether 'nations' are 'real or imagined'. The point is that *only* imagined communities *are* 'real'; the only 'reality' – the only possible mode of existence – of any 'community' is *as* an imaginary (e.g. Cohen, *Symbolic Construction of Community*).
[23] Duara, *Rescuing History*, 27. Recent historiography of the Maghrib has lagged, in this respect, far behind that of areas such as South Asia or China. Recent work on Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Yemen, Iraq and Israel has also been more consistently engaged with these questions.

Such contests may be more or less democratic, or they may not be democratic at all. What is certain is that they are part of a broader field of social struggles, since, throughout the world, the politics of nationalism have, since the late eighteenth century, condensed both powerful discourses of emancipation and powerful systems of subjection. Like 'the state', in fact, I would argue that 'the nation', even in colonial contexts where it most clearly vehicled an ostensible project of liberation, 'never emerges except as a claim to domination'[24] – even 'national liberation' can only occur (or at least, in the Middle East and elsewhere in Africa and Asia, has in general only yet actually occurred) through the transformation of a subjugated 'native'-colonial society into a differently subjugated 'national' one. Sartre's apothegm is particularly relevant to the Algerian revolutionary and post-revolutionary experience: 'Never has *homo faber* better understood that he has made history – and never has he felt so powerless before history.'[25]

The thrust of this line of thinking is to insist on the social–historical embeddedness of the national imaginary; 'the nation-itself' does not exist separately, transhistorically, in any ontological sense, from these contests over representation and the actual socially and historically located people who engage in them. Nations, in short, exist only in their naming. Like other products of ideology, they *are real* only because they are *invoked* – called into existence and believed in – by human actors who order their lives, their sentiments and their sense of themselves and their pasts around them. 'The priest, says Nietzsche, is the one who "calls his own will God." The same could be said of the politician when he calls his own will "people", "opinion" or "nation." . . . The "people" is used these days just as in other times God was used – to settle accounts between clerics.'[26] 'Nations' (and 'Peoples') neither act nor speak; people do, and their acts of speaking are always grounded in the very practical, actual social life of struggles over production, appropriation,

[24] Abrams, 'Difficulty of studying the state', 77. 'The nation', in late eighteenth-century bourgeois liberal thought, marked the bourgeoisie's claim to domination over the popular masses, even as they were supposedly incorporated into the body of the self-manifesting sovereign People. In the colonial New World, late eighteenth-century nationalism is more visible as a mode of domination in the racialised divisions it drew between incorporated and subject populations. The new American nation as 'bearer of the rights of man' was conceived within the same process as the expansion of black slavery, and the decline of white indentured labour (Wolfe, 'Land, labor, and difference', 874ff.). In the 'pioneer' nationalisms of Latin America, creole élites were motivated to independence from Spain by 'the fear of "lower-class" political mobilizations: . . . Indian or Negro-slave uprisings' (Anderson, *Imagined Communities*: 48).

[25] *What is Literature?* quoted in Young, *White Mythologies*, 31.

[26] Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 210, 214.