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Forgetting of Morality, Morality of Forgetting: Reconciliation in Algeria and the Official Erasure of the Political Subject

The official politics of forgetting involved in Algeria's post–Civil War reconciliation process poses important moral and political questions about the constitution of the political subject and of citizenship.

- While, as many authors have noted, the choice to forget is not unique to Algeria, the Algerian case is specific in its reliance on a forced collective silence that disregards the victims, their relatives, and thus the general population.

- After the Algerian Civil War, which saw 200,000 deaths and more than 20,000 disappearances, the return to peace was effected by a political decision to forget, in order that "civil concord" could be re-established. This official stance, however, has served to fix positions and interpretations, leaving the present frozen in the past.

- To what extent can this morality of forgetting – as initiated by the Algerian regime – be understood and justified as fundamentally necessary for the continuity of social life? Or, conversely, should this forgetting ordered from above be considered amoral rather than moral, and therefore in need of reconsideration and criticism in the light of collective and individual memory? Does this pointillistic and very selective view of the past offered by official Algerian history serve to complicate the Algerian reconciliation process?

CONTEXT

Even if the political decision to forget can be justified pragmatically within the reconciliation process, it is morally problematic in the non-democratic context in which monumental history is imposed. Besides the fact that in this reconciliation process some pay more dearly than others for "the return to peace," forgetting may silently perpetuate the problems that led to the Civil War. A policy of forgetting also has the effect of erasing the plurality of political subjects by establishing a singular official subject in their place.

RECONCILIATION AND THE ALGERIAN CIVIL WAR

After the Algerian army interrupted the electoral process in 1992 that had seen the Islamic Front of Salvation (Front Islamique du Salut, FIS) emerge victorious, a civil war broke out between armed Islamist groups and the state. The FIS was eventually banned; this led to the formation of the Islamic Army of Salvation (Armée Islamique du Salut, AIS) (approximately 300,000 members) and the Islamic Armed Group (Groupe Islamique Armé, GIA) (20,000 to 40,000 members), alongside smaller Islamist groups with various affiliations and orientations. These groups initially targeted state institutions, schools, and factories. Then they turned to civilians, among them youth, intellectuals, women, and entire families and neighbourhoods. In parallel, state forces fought these armed groups and targeted any person suspected of being affiliated, even loosely, to the FIS party. The population found itself subjected to the violence of both Islamist armed groups and state forces. The Algerian Civil War, which wrought 200,000 deaths and more than 20,000 disappearances, lasted 10 years, officially coming to an end in 1999, but carrying substantial residual damage into the early years of the 2000s.

From the first years of the conflict, the Algerian regime tried to stop the war, decreeing the Rahma, or "Forgiveness," Law on 25 February 1995, followed by the Civil Concord Law (CCL) enacted on 13 July 1999 and approved by referendum in September 1999. For strategic reasons, both the CCL and other attempts at conflict appeasement were directed essentially towards the AIS. The CCL was followed by a decree of amnesty in January 2000; this was aimed, though indirectly, towards the members of the GIA, which was particularly feared because of its fragmentation and relative dearth of acknowledged leaders. In 2005, after the security situation had somewhat improved, Algerians were asked to vote, in a second referendum, on a Charter for Peace and Reconciliation meant to put an official end to the conflict between armed Islamist groups and the state.

Overall, discourse on the devastating effects of the Civil War has been suppressed and silenced in the name of preventing a return to conflict. Unlike Morocco and Tunisia, Algeria does not have a public reconciliation body, but instead specialised and closed juridical commissions dominated by state actors that silence victims and act without regard for the population's suffering. These commissions have relied on referenda that give the impression of engaging public debate; yet, reconciliation has in fact been dominated by a juridical approach that erases accounts of experiences of that suffering.

Of course, memories of the Civil War have not vanished from the public sphere. Today, this fact prominently manifests itself as people's mobilisation around the memories of disappeared loved ones whom they declaratively refuse to forget. Political action around the question of *the disappeared* is treated by the Algerian authorities in a paradoxical way: the Civil War – and, more so, the issue of the disappeared – is at once hidden and silenced; simultaneously, it is constantly emphasised in the official celebrations of the Peace and Reconciliation Charter. Such a dissimulation, where the regime performs an act of "taking responsibility" for the disappeared, is also supposed to preempt the public testimonies of actual loved ones, as if this were no longer necessary. In opposition to this suppression of the topic in the public sphere, the families of the disappeared – whether affiliated with the Islamists, their victims, or victims of state forces – and those who hope for the creation of a Truth Commission, argue that publicising wrongs from both sides would lead to recognition of the victims and provide collective catharsis.

THINKING THE MORALITY OF FORGETTING

By privileging amnesty and a judicial approach to the conflict, the Algerian regime constructed a particular type of political forgetting, what Paul Connerton (2008: 62) calls "prescriptive forgetting," meaning a forgetting that is dictated by the state as if recognised to be equally beneficial to all parties involved. Is it moral to forget? Should

political reasoning win out over a more complex, less self-serving, moral reflection? In Algeria, where history has been monumentalised and whole sections of the precolonial and colonial past have been erased, the general tendency of the regime to police and repress and suppress public memory has been criticised with regard to the Civil War of the 1990s, with many observers and authors viewing it as a bad political choice.

While the literature on memory and forgetting in post-conflict situations is complex, two major contrasting positions can be described. The first argues for a duty to remember and considers forgetting to be a denial of justice. The second, which I find more helpful in addressing "the uses of forgetting" (Yerushalmi et al. 1988), holds that memory generates abuses if its usage deviates from morality and, I would add, has important consequences for the integrity of social life and the subject. I situate the works of both David Rieff and Avichai Margalit in this latter camp.

David Rieff (2016) argues that the injunction to remember is detrimental to peace, and feeds war. The same is true of "the truth," a trope strongly associated with memorialising projects, often conducted by a conflict's victors. For Rieff, forgetting is an ethical necessity, especially when each party in the conflict is convinced of the justice of their position. Retrenched positions can be broken only by *consensus*, which is thus a precondition for the cessation of conflict. The injunction to remember also leads to competition between victims, and to the fragmentation of a society.

By contrast, Avichai Margalit (2002) thinks that an ethics of remembering is required under certain conditions. He distinguishes between an ethics based on the dense ties that connect us to relatives, neighbours, and friends, and a moral responsibility based on our tenuous ties with the rest of humanity. Ethics involves interpersonal closeness with those we care about, whose memory should be nourished and reproduced, while morality is exercised between strangers for whom we hold a moral obligation and should defend but not necessarily remember. This is why he writes that "ethics is short on geography and long on memory," while "morality is long on geography and short on memory" (2002: 8). In other words, the universality of the good has little to do with memory. I argue that in the Algerian case it is this very morality of memory – a memory enacted between strangers – that segments of the population are advocating for (for a similar view, see Jonas 1990 further below).

For both authors, however, memory is an experience of presence. For Rieff, this is exemplified by the executioner's request for forgiveness from his victim, in their *co-presence,* illustrated by the prioritising of peace over justice in South Africa. For Margalit, the experience of presence is exemplified by the "moral witness," who describes a wrong without attempting to determine its causes (which is better done by the "political witness") and whose necessary quality is "sincerity" (2002: 170), meaning "telling it like it felt" (2002: 168).

THE ALGERIAN REGIME'S POLITICAL ABSTRACTION AS FORGETTING OF MORALITY

David Rieff and Avichai Margalit explain how we can problematise the strategic forgetting of the Civil War in Algeria as prescribed by the regime. In their contextualising of the question of memory and decoupling of it from the hyper-memorialisation of the Algerian War of Independence, Rieff's and Margalit's perspectives help us to analyse the politics of forgetting in light of present stakes and the co-presence of the moral witness. Political forgetting, if it is to be viable in a post-conflict situation, has to be founded on consensus between the concerned parties (Rieff 2016). What, then, does the forgetting of the "national tragedy" (a common expression used in Algerian juridical and public texts for the Civil War) mean in terms of morality, understood as care for and responsibility towards the other (Jonas 1990)?

The name of the Rahma, or "Forgiveness," Law, as enacted in 1995, has strong religious connotations. *Rahma* signifies the blessings given by God – not, as many observers have suggested, his clemency. This distinction is significant, according to Daniel Gimaret. While clemency integrates an element of forgiving, "whoever takes the trouble to read the commentaries by Muslim writers on the meanings of rahma, rahman, and rahim will quickly conclude that the notion of forgiveness is completely absent" (Gimaret 1988: 377). *Rahma* shows a lack of vengeance on the part of the victor. A person who is offered *rahma* receives God's indulgence; this person is not forgiven, but blessed. It is therefore important to note that by referring to blessing (and mercy), the Algerian state gave the law a political meaning as a gesture of generosity towards the armed Islamist opposition.

In the Civil Concord Law, enacted in 1999, the moral and religious connotations implied by the term *rahma* vanished. The language of pacification, as applied in this legal text, used the more neutral term "civil concord"; but this, too, is not without ambiguity. Civil concord (*al-wiaām*, lit. "harmony") certainly inscribed the new reality of a treaty between the armed Islamists and the state into the political arena. But, according to Mohamed Maougal, the term's political character is partially obscured in modern Arabic. The concept of "*al-wiaām* presupposes a friendly relation [between the parties] and does not imply any type of control, still less a sanctionable obligation" (Maougal 2000: 63). The CCL, however, contains a series of juridical measures which apply only to the armed Islamists, but never to agents of the state. In so doing, it assumes an agreement between two parties, one of which – the state – does not recognise itself as a party but takes a position outside the dispute. This leaves the Islamists as a single party facing society as the other, as if the latter, rather than the state, had been what the former opposed. When, according to this law, the state as protector compensates the families of the terrorists on equal terms with those of the victims of terrorism while imposing silence and forgetting especially on the latter, it reduces its possible interlocutors to simple money collectors, while putting itself on a level above society and the armed Islamists. The state's own involvement in the conflict remains, therefore, underexposed.

In this case, it is difficult to speak of consensus as Rieff does; rather, it seems more appropriate to speak of neutralisation within a configuration between three parties: the Islamists, the state, and the rest of society. In a single gesture, by neutralising the Islamists or offering them amnesty, the state also neutralises society and sets it to the side. The fever of commemoration that surrounds the Algerian War of Independence and maintains its memory until today is strikingly absent for the Algerian Civil War. Consequently, I argue that the state's decree of forgetting as issued by the CCL institutes a policy of remembrance. Hoewever, it is directed less at the memory of the conflict between armed Islamists and the state than at the forgetting of these events and the Civil War itself.

At stake in this elision is the agency of the political subject. The triadic relationship of state, Islamists, and society works on several levels. First, it is an official process of distancing and disjunction that objectifies difference – for example, in the construction of a dominant discourse of the Islamist as a radical figure, the absolute other. He is treated as if he were not an Algerian; he is not even a Muslim – he is a "barbarian" in the sense that he has neither *logos* nor *polis* (Pagden 1989). But not only the Islamists are affected by this process of distancing; it applies to whoever disagrees with the official prescription of forgetting. Above all, it is a non-recognition of the other and of their suffering. To recognise the suffering of the other is to recognise their being. The denial of suffering is not new – Emmanuel Alcaraz (2017: 269), analysing an important, often ignored element of Algerian subjectivity, emphasises how official history gives primacy to combatants' memory over the suffering of the population and the violence committed by the French colonial army. This non-recognition of suffering engenders another obliteration: that of the witnesses themselves or of anyone who takes it upon themselves to reflect on the Civil

War. Amnesty and the law forbidding the evocation of crimes committed during the Civil War preempt witnessing, be it "moral" or "political."

Second, forgiveness is the other notion attached to this distancing. On 3 October 2005, the president at the time, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, appeared on public television to solemnly ask for forgiveness from the victims of the Civil War without exception (Bennadji 2007) – be they the victims of the Islamist groups or the state forces. The "victims" Bouteflika addressed were deprived of the possibility of refusal that would determine their agency. The consequence of this action was "absolute victimisation," because in it "the victims are deprived of the right to speak" and to forgive (Derrida 2001: 58). As Rieff emphasises, this way of forgiveness closes off possible routes to active forgetting. Certainly, the president's declaration integrates others (Islamists) through forgiveness, but the inclusion of the latter is ambiguous and strategically ambivalent. The characteristics ascribed to the Islamists are often turned on themselves: they are at times "wayward sons" whom the Algerian president asks to "return home," and at other times they are bloodthirsty criminals.

Third, through the process of neutralisation, the de-subjectivation whereby the person is denied their personhood and disconnected from their identity, life, and experience, not only targets the disparate Islamist others but equally applies to the rest of the population. The neutralisation of the population can be explained best not by an immediate relation of cause and effect, but by complex long-term implications. The population is asked to forget the Civil War unconditionally (as the notion of consensus presupposes), since for the governing regime the Civil War continues to be the most powerful justification for its survival, which it increasingly conflates with that of the state. On the one hand, the spectre of the Civil War haunts Algeria under the sign of permanent war, constantly reactivated by official discourse as the expression "internal / external enemy" highlights. On the other hand, it is the injunction to forget that gradually removes, or alleviates, the responsibility of the Civil War's principal actors.

All of these elements – the weakening of the political subject through strategic erasure of public memory in favour of official monumentalisation, the ambiguous and "floating responsibility" (Bauman 1993) resulting from the reconciliation laws, the shadowy presence/absence of the war and its imposition as a non-event for the whole population – are indications of a process of erosion of the political and moral subject, which culminates in instrumentalist and amoral politics by the current Algerian regime. However, despite this erasure, the Algerian public sphere is still activated by citizens in search of truth and justice, consistently setting the stage for an active remembering of their suffering during the Civil War.

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