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Marnia Lazreg: Torture and the Twilight of Empire: From Algiers to Baghdad

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INTRODUCTION



IN THE COURSE OF A discussion about the Algerian war, a disenchanted man in his twenties who worked in the mailroom of a government institution where I had been employed in the early years of independence when I was still a student said to me: “The French army broke my testicles! And here I am recording mail day in, day out.” A shy young woman at the time, I had not quite grasped the enormity of the pain and suffering that this man had experienced, nor had I understood his trauma, although I glimpsed the depth of the anger that gleamed in his eyes. It was my first encounter with a person who had been tortured during the war. I often remember that look. Years later, it helped me to understand the sexual core of torture and, by implication, the silence in which it had been wrapped in Algeria: that men, just like women, had been systematically raped.

In the summer of 2001, while I was in Algiers carrying out interviews for another research project, two publications appeared. The first one was by an Algerian woman, Louise Ighilahriz, a former revolutionary, who broke silence about the torture and rape she had endured during her interrogation by Colonel Graziani and his men in 1957.¹ This was the first time since the independence of Algeria that a woman wrote about her sexual abuse at the hands of paratroopers. The other book was by a retired French general, Paul Aussaresses,² who not only admitted to having tortured numerous Algerians, but also described the methods he used in a detached manner, expressing no regrets and making no apology. A number of war memoirs had already been published by retired Algerian generals, to which were added young deserters’ accounts of torture committed by the Algerian military against Islamist suspects, and confessions to assassinations by former Islamists. I grew intrigued by these tales of torture and war from both sides of the Mediterranean and was unsure of their significance.

In France, Aussaresses’ confession created a stir, sparking a flurry of legal actions against him, and renewed interest in a chapter of French history that government and public opinion had wished to bury in silence. It occurred to me that the Evian Accords that put an end to the Algerian War in 1962 had not mentioned torture, but had declared a moratorium on legal actions for all acts of violence committed during the war. There

was to be no equivalent of the Nuremberg trials. I thought again of the man in the mailroom.

Oddly, writers dealing with French veterans of the Algerian War often think that Algerian combatants had an easier time of it.³ They claim that Algerian combatants did not suffer, as French soldiers allegedly did, from having to keep their involvement in a problematic war silent. Unlike their French counterparts, the story goes, Algerian combatants returned home victorious and were celebrated for their success. They were able to put the war behind them and move on with their lives, while French soldiers returned to a life in the shadows, resented by their society for having defamed it, and abandoned by a government that had failed to treat them in the manner that it did veterans of previous wars. Perhaps this is a case of the grass looking greener on the other side, or a circuitous way of bemoaning defeat.

The memory of torture and other atrocities has fed a steady stream of French narratives that unburden the self as they shed light on the core of a dishonorable war. Memory retrieval has been aided by professional studies made possible by the opening of the military archives in 1993.⁴ The cumulative effect of this speaking and writing about the war has resulted in a trivialization of the significance of torture as glossy pictures turn war into an orgiastic intellectual entertainment.⁵ Speaking authoritatively about both sides of the war, a new generation of French historians felt entitled to change its name and the identity of its initiators: It was a “war of independence” they asserted, not a “revolution” as Algerians who won it have claimed; and nationalists are turned into “independentistas.”⁶ Thus a long-standing monopoly over meaning enables the empire to reproduce itself by deconstructing itself with one hand, and re-composing itself with the other.

In this climate of recovery of the colonial past, French legislators passed a law on February 23, 2005, that attempted to rehabilitate colonialism by proposing (in Article 4) that school curricula present it as a positive system of rule, especially in North Africa.⁷ They also rehabilitated formerly convicted and deported citizens (an oblique reference to members of the clandestine Organisation de l’Armée Secrète) opposed to the independence of Algeria who became eligible for monetary compensation.⁸ The management of what French historians have of late called “*la mémoire*,” has become a political affair.⁹ Torture and related atrocities cast serious doubt on the plausibility of the ongoing revisionist history of “empire,” French as well as British, which seeks to extol the benefits of colonial domination for the colonized and downplay its cost as collateral damage.¹⁰ This relegitimation and rehabilitation of the French “civilizing mission” elides a discussion of whether the colonial empire was inevitable. It eschews the fundamental core of colonial ventures: the extension or

preservation of the interests of the colonists not the natives. Had colonial systems been motivated by an alleged gift of “civilization,” a cultural charity, it is incomprehensible that the gift failed to reach the majority of natives.

In this book, I take a different approach. I examine torture as an analytical category and practice (that is, a conscious and rule-bound activity) through which to understand how, between 1954 and 1962, the militarized colonial state normalized terror to forestall the collapse of the empire in an age of decolonization. In tracing the etiology and methods of state terrorism, I explore the justifications that allowed for the routinization of torture in a “total” war of decolonization-recolonization. From this perspective, the book seeks to uncover torture’s layered meanings for practitioners and victims; the role it played in techniques of population screening¹¹ and social engineering; and its use as a catalyst for imperial identity formation and crystallization. Torture was not, as was often claimed by military officers, an epiphenomenon of the war. It was central to the army’s defense of a colonial empire in its waning years. The systematic use of torture was the logical outcome of revolutionary-war theory (*guerre révolutionnaire*) and doctrine developed in the 1950s by a group of veterans of colonial wars, especially in Indochina. Many had also fought in World War II. They were men who had suffered a loss of honor and relevance in fast-changing postwar France. The Algerian War offered them a last opportunity at recouping both. In this context, systematic torture was not just an instance of violence committed by uncontrolled soldiers; it was part and parcel of an ideology of subjugation that went beyond Algeria’s borders.¹² Algeria became a testing ground for fighting “revolutionary” wars in Africa and Latin America.¹³

Torture was intimately linked to colonial history and to the nature of the colonial state. It had been used in the aftermath of the invasion of Algeria in 1830 when rape, beatings with a *matraque*, exposure of naked bodies, and starvation were frequent.¹⁴ Thereafter, it was not uncommon at the hands of colonial policemen and gendarmes who used the methods of electricity and water on communists and nationalists. But it had not risen to the level of a system as it did after 1954.¹⁵ Rather, it was part of a general pattern of police brutality exercised on a native population that lacked the legal protection enjoyed by French colonists.

Algeria was invaded in 1830, but French control was not established securely until the 1870s. Resistance was first organized by Emir Abd-El-Kader, who set up the first native government since the incorporation of Algeria into the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth century. After his defeat in 1844, a series of tribal-based uprisings took place episodically until 1871, when the last one of significance was crushed in the Grande Kabylie. After each uprising, land was confiscated by the colonial state, and

heavy fines exacted from the insurgents. The military administered the countryside through the Arab Bureaus until their demise in the 1870s. Throughout this period, tensions arose between the settlers who had been given land confiscated from the native population, and the military. Settlers perceived the military—which had wrought untold violence against the Algerian population—as protecting the interests of rural Algerians. From 1884 until 1946, Algerians were governed by a special legal system—the Code de l'Indigénat—that severely restricted basic civil liberties and criminalized attitudes as anodyne as “insolence.” Algerians were neither free men in the Roman sense, nor slaves. They were neither full-fledged citizens as Frenchmen were, nor subjects. Theirs was a qualified “citizenship” best captured by the expression “protected subjects.”¹⁶ They did not become full-fledged citizens until 1958. Their legal status was that of “French-Muslims,” which meant that they could not be accorded citizenship rights on account of their religion. The war of decolonization (1954–62) was the culmination of a long process of economic immiseration, political disenfranchisement, and colonial intolerance of Algerians’ attempts to agitate for change within the system. There is ample evidence to demonstrate, as the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) has claimed, that all nonviolent options to change the inequities of colonial rule had been exhausted. For example, a liberal law passed on September 20, 1947, gave Algerians, including women, citizenship rights—even as it instituted a double electoral-college system, one for Algerians, the other for colonists.¹⁷ However, opposition from the settlers’ lobby thwarted its implementation. The war was as ferocious as the occupation in the nineteenth century. It saw the rise of a generation of young nationalists¹⁸ initially organized into two rival parties, the FLN and the Mouvement National Algérien (MNA). In a relatively short period of time, the FLN established itself as the sole party waging a war of decolonization against a determined army supported by settlers with powerful influence on the government in Paris, and a stratified colonial population of over one million, comprised primarily of descendants of immigrants from southern Europe.

In a repetition of nineteenth-century colonial history, the state relied on the military for not only waging the war, but also administering the rural population. The Fourth Republic was the casualty of the ensuing military encroachment on politics. May 13, 1958, was a turning point in the war: Charles de Gaulle was brought back to politics by a group of generals, staunch advocates of a French Algeria, among whom were Raoul Salan and Jacques Massu (an unabashed advocate of torture), who hoped he would decisively end the war in favor of France. However, after continuing to wage the war for four more years while proposing various political settlement formulas, including a measure of autonomy for Algeria, de

Gaule opted for recognition of independence. Before making his final historic decision, he extended to Algerians unconditional citizenship in 1958. A highlight of the war prior to May 13, 1958, was the “Battle of Algiers” in January 1957: the Casbah was surrounded by paratroopers seeking to break an FLN-ordered eight-day strike and dismantle the underground Autonomous Zone responsible for urban guerilla warfare using the “bomb strategy.”

On the ground, the colonial population had been waging its own counterrevolutionary war through the establishment of a clandestine terrorist movement, the OAS (Organisation de l’ Armée Secrète) targeting Algerians and French advocates of Algeria’s independence. However, as de Gaulle appeared less reliable than the hard-line generals expected, they staged a short-lived putsch in April 1961. Subsequently, the state tried to regain its control of the military. The declaration of Algeria’s independence on July 3, 1962, after the signing of the Evian Accords, put an end to the war, and helped the French government restructure the military and return it to its domain.

The state in Algeria was the bifurcated colonial modality of the state in France. For all practical purposes, the French state that considered Algeria an extension of France, comprised of three (extra) departments, empowered its agents differently whether they were located on one or the other side of the Mediterranean. State terror became established in Algeria, at the behest of the French government in France. It did not affect the majority of the French population in France, although it curtailed its civil liberties to some degree. Jails throughout France were filled with Algerian political prisoners (many of whom were transferred from Algeria) and their French supporters; torture was inflicted on suspects in Parisian police stations;¹⁹ and over two hundred Algerians were killed and thrown into the Seine on October 17, 1961, by orders of the police prefect of Paris, Maurice Papon.²⁰ Nevertheless, torture was not routinized in France as it was in Algeria.

If the historical context of colonialism facilitated the emergence of torture as a method of control, the war itself crystallized the stakes and clarified for the military the importance of the use of unbridled force and terror. War, as a situation in which normative restraints on life and death are suspended, has close affinities with torture. As Elaine Scarry has shown, war’s relation to torture is mediated by the labor of “civilization,” a concept dear to colonial officers in Algeria. Torture partakes in the work of the civilization in whose name it is practiced,²¹ and in which it finds its justification against the alleged barbarity of the enemy. War and torture feed into each other in the same way that torture and terror do.

Justifications of torture play a crucial role in its routinization; they require for their efficacy a suspension of disbelief: They harness an array of

reasons of unequal value and importance that must be accepted as a whole. If looked at separately, each loses its weight, weakening the whole. The dictionary points to the root of justification as making “just,” whereas explanation “makes flat.” I take the position that intentional assault against the body physical or the body social is not justifiable, albeit explainable. In wars, “just” or “unjust,” belligerents are bound by rules of engagement, which are meant to avoid or minimize the occurrence of atrocities.²² In Algeria, justifications of torture found fertile ground in the myths spun on natives’ flawed nature and a narcissistic view of French cultural supremacy.

In this book, I do not review or engage in discussions of what degree of physical punishment rises to the level of torture as these generally constitute preliminaries to defending torture as a legitimate form of interrogation. I simply propose that torture is the deliberate and willful infliction of various degrees of pain using a number of methods and devices, psychological as well as physical, on a *defenseless*, and *powerless* person for the purpose of obtaining information that a victim does not wish to reveal or does not have. It is the powerlessness of the victim, the inability to defend herself and her absolute vulnerability to the torturer that captures the specific character of torture. Slapping a victim may seem a mild form of punishment, and not torture. But, when the slap is inflicted repeatedly by a large soldier, or a group of soldiers going at it together, in a manner such that the victim loses her balance and her hearing, it becomes a method of torture. Torture is methodical: It has a beginning, an evolution, and an end. It unfolds holistically,²³ according to a design, and with various tools, of which the slapping hand is one. It is multilocal and multimodal. It cannot be conceived piecemeal. It is the totality of the torture *situation* that needs to be grasped in order to understand that torture is not definable in terms of bodily harm or psychological torment alone. It is not only what goes on during the electrical or knife-carving sessions that defines torture. It is also the preliminaries—what French torturers called “softening” the victims—as well as what happens between torture sessions that could last one to three days, and at times several weeks on and off.

The torture situation is not summed up by a torturer and his victim thrown together in a room with a few instruments. It is a structured environment with a texture of its own, a configuration of meanings, a logic and rationale without which physical, let alone, psychic, pain is incomprehensible and ineffective. In the social situation of torture, memory, identity, and culture weave a network of ideas and perceptions, experiences and ideals that define a genuine battle between two embodied realities: in this case, colonial France with its unbounded power and mythologies, and colonized Algeria, with its claim to a full share of humanity.

Conversely, the fact of doing torture allows the torturer to voice (albeit freely) *his* identity claims. General Aussaresses could not help evoking the Battle of Valmy of 1793 while torturing an Algerian in 1957. Torture thus appears as a political practice that unfolds in a social *situation* from which it is inseparable. In this respect, the stated end of torture, intelligence, does not and cannot define torture: Torture in Algeria was not primarily about information, although some useful information was collected.²⁴ Information can be had without the use of torture as a French intelligence officer found out.²⁵

As with its colonial counterpart, the democratic state in crisis is especially attracted to torture because it is pure power, and affords absolute control. Although politically onerous, engaging in torture for liberal democracies also provides an expedient and instantaneous response to a crisis defined as one of “security.” Tapping into torture-power is, for the state, a manner of re-sourcing itself, rejuvenating itself by re-creating itself, refashioning its existence as the power of instrumental reason.²⁶

Torture converts abstract power into concrete power (the potential for coercion into actual coercion). But, unlike police power that randomizes physical abuse, torture, when *ordered* for reasons of state in spite of the legal prohibition against it, targets its victims in a systematic manner. As a source of pure power, torture allows no immediate counterpower that physically harms the torturer. Torture is no less than absolute power over body and mind targeted at their molecular constitutive elements. It scars the body and sears the mind. The power conveyed by torture is unique insofar as it is transformative. No one who undergoes torture can forget it or find it justifiable.²⁷

Torture-power makes possible, and feeds into terror. In this book, I will often use terror and torture interchangeably, although they are analytically distinct. Without torture, terror would lose its capacity to sustain fear and silence in its victims. Torture may take place without terror, but terror needs torture to magnify its impact. The colonial state in Algeria engaged in five related acts of terror: torture, rape, disappearances, summary executions, and reprisals. The last three seldom occurred without torture, and torture seldom occurred without rape. Terror and torture worked together like Jekyll and Hyde, feeding on each other, supporting each other, filling in for each other.

The establishment of a climate of terror from 1954 to 1962 in Algeria was a reenactment of a historical precedent. The generals in Algeria carried out a counterrevolutionary war not so different from the revolutionary war waged in the late 1700s. Although the French Revolution had abolished judicial torture, physical and psychological torment by other means did not end, and massacres of internal enemies were common during the Great and *petite* terrors.²⁸ The wheeling onto the public square of

the dreaded guillotine, set up to behead those labeled counterrevolutionary, was the functional equivalent of the tortures by portable electric generators (*gégène*) in Algeria. Itinerant torture was a sort of *guillotine sèche*.²⁹ In either case, the individual had no recourse, couldn't protect herself. Terror claims its victims in a manner similar to torture "in the dark of the night, far from the living, anonymous, without echo, without witness, and without a last will."³⁰ The ends of terror are sometimes invoked to justify its use. Hannah Arendt distinguishes terror undertaken by revolutionary leaders eager to unmask hypocrisy and preserve political virtue from ideological terror: Robespierre is counterposed to Stalin.³¹ Yet, state terror is no more justifiable than state-sponsored torture. The burden of torture on the French colonial state is all the heavier in that for intellectuals such as Merleau-Ponty France is a "country favored by history."³²

National (qua "insurgent") movements of liberation also use torture. Theirs is a discrediting recourse to torture as punishment—which constitutes one aspect of torture as analyzed in this book—that does not attain the sophistication of the means and functions of torture employed by the militarized state. The pain endured by victims is no less real. Although their use of torture cannot be justified, such movements cannot be equated with the colonial states against which they fight. The entanglement of states with torture is frequently justified by reference to the violence perpetrated by these oppositional movements. But states have obligations to preserve the law, not to violate it. More importantly, because they have the monopoly on the use of force, states are morally as well as politically obligated to use it judiciously in a manner that preserves the physical and moral integrity of all their citizens.

The book is divided into four parts. Part I focuses on the imperial politics of torture as it analyzes the theoretical-doctrinal foundations of the systematic use of torture. It examines revolutionary war as well as the antisubversive doctrine that it spawned. It traces the ensuing militarization of the colonial state and delineates the role played by torture and terror in psychological action as exemplified by three selected models of "pacification."

Part II constructs an "ethnography of torture" detailing the language in which torture is spoken, its sexual core, its functions in identity crystallization. It also examines the military use of women in expanding its psychological action strategy.

Part III addresses the interface between conscience and imperial identity that sustains tolerance or rejection of torture and terror. It examines the management of conscience by torturers and observers of torture, and the moral justifications proffered by the Church, individual chaplains, and right-wing Catholics. It also analyzes perspectives on torture's meanings

expressed by three influential intellectuals, Jean-Paul Sartre, Frantz Fanon, and Albert Camus differently positioned vis-à-vis Algeria, and representing different aspects of political consciousness and identity.

Part IV focuses on the philosophical and moral issues raised by torture through an examination of moral philosophers' justifications of the exceptional use of torture. It also discusses the reemergence of torture as a tool of state terror in postindependence Algeria and the United States in Iraq and Guantanamo Bay.

The data for this book was gathered over a period of five years. I have used the Archives Nationales in Algiers, the archives of the Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre (SHAT) now the Service Historique de la Défense in Vincennes, the Centre des Archives d'Outre Mer in Aix-en-Provence (CAOM), as well as the Bibliothèque Nationale François Mitterrand in Paris. I have also used interviews with two regional leaders of the Islamist movement in Algeria, one former urban Islamist guerrilla, and one surrendered member of the rank-and-file, to elicit their views on the uses of terrorism and torture. These interviews were part of a larger book project that is resulting in two books, of which this is the first. Although these interviews are not crucial to the present book, they have helped me understand how terror is justified. I have also used confessions of French torturers, and eye-witness accounts by both Frenchmen and Algerians, war diaries kept by protagonists from both sides of the war, as well as monographs. Diaries have been an invaluable source of information about the war and torture. They prove remarkably accurate when checked against declassified military documents. However, even though they record torture situations, and episodes of reprisals with detailed realism, some diaries were kept for purposes of absolving guilt, rather than for genuine personal records of feelings about the daily minutiae of the war. Caution had to be exercised in drawing conclusions from such accounts. The memory of the war, like all memory, fades after a while, which makes the plethora of recent accounts of the war obtained through interviews of former soldiers carried out by French social scientists somewhat unreliable. In addition, occasional reluctant discussions I have had with Algerians who have survived torture convince me that existing confessions of former torturers or witnesses to torture have left a whole range of sexual practices (such as incest) enforced during torture séances unspoken. But, no matter their accuracy, these narratives constitute good documentary evidence of states of mind, and feelings in the post-Algerian War era.

I found it stimulating, albeit risky, to combine archival research with the sociological need to look for patterns, structure, and agency. More importantly my need as a historical sociologist to find the theoretical implications of constellations of events was at times counteracted by history's absolute disdain and unconcern for neatness and orderly thought. Read-

ing the historical record filled me with a mixture of awe and trepidation. Awe because it is enormous, uneven, with the trivial and the significant assembled together. In folder after folder, lay, stamped with the word “secret,” the directives and instructions that led to the untold pain, suffering, and death of women, men, and children. Trepidation because I feel encouraged to take a subject matter that belongs to a very complex and layered history in a different direction with the help and insights afforded by interdisciplinary tools of analysis.

I hope this book will contribute to the study of injustice and powerlessness of which torture was the most telling expression under colonial domination. My purpose is to provoke concerned scholars into a reflection on the link between the state-sponsored human degradation that took place in Algeria in the mid-1950s under the guise of “pacification,” and the wanton abuse of prisoners at, among other places, Abu Ghraib, Iraq, Guantánamo Bay, Afghanistan, and in the countries to which torture is outsourced including Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco. The similarities between the French generals’ arguments in favor of terror methods ostensibly to fight terrorism, and those made by the Pentagon, White House legal counsels, and well-intentioned intellectuals are striking. The logic is the same, and in spite of the emergence of human rights as a test of a country’s political maturity and commitment to democracy, the merits of torture are debated and defended by politicians and lawyers who claim realism as their cover. The similarities between the Algerian and Iraq wars are not fortuitous. There is ample evidence that the conduct of the Algerian War has been a source of information, if not inspiration, for the U.S. government. The film *The Battle of Algiers* has been used by the Pentagon as a training tool,³³ and President Bush asserted on *60 Minutes* on January 14, 2007, that he was reading a history of the Algerian War recommended to him by Henry Kissinger.³⁴ Prior to delving into this history, Mr. Bush read Albert Camus’s novel *The Stranger*, apparently to get insight into Algerian-qua-Muslim culture from an opponent (albeit popular writer) of Algeria’s independence. There are many reasons why the Algerian War would be of interest to the Pentagon’s prosecution of the war against Iraq: Algeria and Iraq are predominantly Muslim societies whose cultures are deemed inferior, their political aspirations misunderstood or unrecognized; U.S. authorities, like French officers, are convinced that they *know* their enemy’s culture, when in reality they approach it through an ethnocentric conceptual grid that serves geopolitical interests; resistance to the U.S. military occupation is carried out by an underground movement using urban guerilla methods similar to the FLN’s; torture as a technique of interrogation is used in Iraq as it was in Algeria; the military is faced with an elusive enemy that frustrates its capacity to win a clear victory in spite of its technical superiority. Hence Algeria and Iraq

appear interchangeable; and the French Empire is revisited for its value as a primer for American imperial politics.

On a final note, I will depart in this book from a tradition in French historiography, and refrain from using the term “métropole” to refer to France, the center of colonial power. I will instead use the expression “colonial state” to which I will add the qualifier “in France” or “in Algeria,” wherever its area of operation might be. I will also refer to the men and women who fought in the *maquis* as “combatants,” not “rebels” or “insurgents.” The vocabulary used during the Algerian War continues to be employed normatively when it needs to be questioned for defining the war from the perspective of counterrevolutionary doctrine.