

The Effervescence of Algerian Independence

by Alain Messaoudi

How did the ordinary population experience the year 1962, when power was transferred from the colonial authorities to the representatives of the Algerian people? In the absence of archive material, Malika Rahal offers us a history rooted in emotions.

Reviewed: Malika Rahal, *Algérie 1962. Une histoire populaire*, Paris, La Découverte, 2021, 493 pp., €25.

An inclusive approach

In *Algérie 1962. Une histoire populaire*, Malika Rahal explores a revolutionary moment, symbolized by the year 1962, when power in Algeria shifted from the French colonial authorities to the representatives of a people gaining political independence. There is an underlying hope that such a historical work might echo the Popular Movement (*al-Hirâk al-cha'abi*), which burst onto the scene in 2019 with frequent references to 1962. We therefore need to understand how 1962 was experienced by the ordinary population—the subalterns whose voices were seldom heard—beyond the well-known scansions of political history (a ceasefire declaration on March 19, the proclamation of independence on July 5 and, after a political crisis over the summer, the formation of a government under the leadership of Ahmed Ben Bella in September). It is also time to end the popular notion that this period was little more

than a "bad start"—in which the mediocre (those who played their cards right) drove out the good (fighters from the interior *maquis*, which included women)— and instead present it as a time of opportunity.

This sensitive historical analysis is primarily based on interviews, memoirs, autobiographies, private sources, the press and public archives (all primary sources are listed in the appendix, with a short description of the authors of the testimonies). This choice reflects the difficulty, if not impossibility, of accessing public archives, and is embraced fully. It opens the door to other interpretations of events. The book takes an inclusive approach, encompassing the entire population living in Algeria. However, it is intended to compensate for an imbalance, as most works to date have focused on the minorities (Jews, "Europeans", "Harkis") who left Algeria (650,000 did so in 1962), rather than on the majority of the population, also affected by forced displacement (during the war, 3.5 million Algerians were displaced; 2.5 million, or a third of the rural population, were forced *manu militari* into camps, while 300,000 had to take refuge in Tunisia and Morocco).

Despite its scope, this book does not claim to provide a definitive account, but rather to open up new avenues. Accordingly, it is divided into 22 short, more or less complete chapters, organized around four polysemous themes—"Violence", "Bodies", "Spaces" and "Time"—with this final chapter outlining the idea of a shared temporality and a common history.

Violence

The first section on violence is particularly compelling. The opening chapter, "*Le sang volé*" ("Stolen Blood"), follows in Luise White's footsteps. It begins with an analysis of a rumor that spread in the spring of 1962, and this develops into an anthropological-historical reflection. Fueled by real-life events (roadblocks, kidnappings, the existence of clandestine clinics run by the National Liberation Front (FLN) to prevent wounded Muslims from being targeted by the far-right OAS), the rumor claimed that the FLN was kidnapping Europeans in order to obtain blood

¹ Some of them, like the ALN fighters Djoudi Attoumi and Bachir Hadjadj, are among the witnesses whose stories were collected between 2019 and 2021 as part of the Grands entretiens de l'INA (<https://entretiens.ina.fr/guerres-algerie>). They provided material for the extraordinary documentary film written by Raphaëlle Branche and Rafael Lewandowski for the Arte television channel, *En guerre(s) pour l'Algérie* (2022).

supplies. This fear of feeding the "other", the adversary, with its own lifeblood, is testament to the catastrophe experienced by the European minority, a minority with which the Jews of Algeria were mostly associated—despite their unique position, having seen their status as French citizens alternately applied (in 1870) and then withdrawn (between 1940 and 1943). This begs a question that may appear naive: why did the minority, admittedly in a position of domination, refuse to merge with the majority population? Malika Rahal points out that, as early as the 1830s, there was evidence of hostility to the mixing of blood. Yet she overlooks the powerful presence among the officers of the African Army—heirs to the Revolution and the Empire—of a discourse that favored the "fusion of races": it was only after 1870 that the question of miscegenation became taboo, with immigrants distinguishing themselves from "Arabs" and reserving the name "Algerian" for themselves—a term whose use was successfully contested by the Muslim majority after 1914.

To understand contemporary motivations, the book invites us to free ourselves from conventional language, such as "terrorist", which may have been taken from the French press of the period, and which today stands in the way of a more accurate perception of realities. The many sources gathered by Malika Rahal have led her to suggest terms that are rarely used in historiography. She proposes the term "effervescence" (chap. 3) to describe the general mood—an effervescence that contained the possibility of an explosion of violence or a demonstration of revelry. She also suggests using the label "vengeful violence" (chap. 4) to describe the actions that targeted not only the Muslim auxiliaries of the French army, but also the men who epitomized collaboration, during the periods when legal authority was declining, after the French withdrawal and during the political crisis of the summer. That violence manifested itself on a local scale, often taking the form of collective violence that united the community around the expiatory victim.

Malika Rahal's book invites us not only to reconsider the words used to describe the past, but also to reflect on the time scales that help us understand the logic of events. A remarkable chapter devoted to the situation in Oran (chap. 5) provides an insight into the paroxysm of violence in the city on July 5, with a massacre that did not

² Pierre-Jean Le Foll Luciani has provided a detailed analysis of the effects of these provisions on political engagement: *Les Juifs algériens dans la lutte anticoloniale. Trajectoires dissidentes (1934-1965)*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2019).

³ This is illustrated in *Annales algériennes* by Edmond Pellissier de Raynaud (1836-1839), *Solution de la question de l'Algérie* by Franciade Fleurus Duvivier (1841), *Du Gouvernement arabe et de l'institution qui doit l'exercer* by Charles Richard (1848) and the work of the Saint-Simonian Ismaïl Urbain (1812-1884).

spare the Europeans, and which became for them a "place of memory". To do so, she situates it within a broader periodization. It was in this city, which had long been overwhelmingly "European", but where the "Muslim" population was now the most numerous, that the OAS displayed its worst violence. At the end of February, in the middle of Ramadan, a car bomb killed more than 20 people in Mdina Jdida, and in the spring, OAS snipers targeted inhabitants of the el-Hamri ghetto district who crossed their line of fire. While an agreement was reached on June 27 between the OAS and the FLN in Algiers, this was not the case in Oran, where the independence fighters clashed with various armed groups, some of which had links with banditry. A section devoted to the bitter disillusionment of the Messalists (chap. 6), who were unable to re-form a party to participate in the political life of the independent state, is followed by chapters on the question of the body(/ies).

Opening up opportunities

Drawing on studies of other post-war periods, this section examines a paradox that is by no means extraordinary. In the spring of 1962, grief over the loss of loved ones was combined with the joy of reunion, with the return of prisoners and soldiers. Most people were delighted to be able to demonstrate their ability to join forces in the reclaimed public spaces, while at the same time dreading the possibility of civil war breaking out as a result of the conflict between the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic (GPRA) and the general staff, and between the maquis in the wilayas and the soldiers fighting from Morocco and Tunisia. The periods when there was a power vacuum—first in the spring, with the handover between the French and Algerian authorities, and then during the summer, when an internal crisis tore the FLN apart—opened up a window of opportunity (chap. 10), but also created the risk of outbreaks of private violence. The festivities (chap. 12) are brought to life by combining visual sources, such as photographs and films, with oral testimonies, which allow us to reproduce the words accompanying the gestures (*allâh yarham al-chuhadâ'*—may God be merciful to the martyrs—gives full meaning to the index finger raised to heaven) and the emotion involved. While there are few images of the processions that marked the announcement of the ceasefire in March, there are numerous pictures of the July celebrations that were covered by the international

⁴ Amar Mohand Amer, report on "Guillaume Zeller (pref. by Philippe Labro), *Oran 5 juillet 1962. Un massacre oublié*", *Insaniyat* / 65-66 | 2014, pp. 325-327 (online).

press. For Malika Rahal, the frequent images of groups carrying Algerian flags from the tops of trucks—men, women and children together—symbolize a reappropriation of space.

Reorganizing spaces

The third part of the book opens with the notion of repossession, and is dedicated to the theme of spaces, sometimes to the point of blurring the lines—would a geographer agree to refer to landscape, territory and soil as "three states of space" (p. 262)? "*La recouvrance*" ("Recovery", chap. 13) reminds us that the Algerians' assertion of sovereignty over the entire territory was not straightforward. They may well have feared that the Sahara, where hydrocarbon deposits had been discovered and used for nuclear testing, would be lost to them, or that a territory unifying French populations would be created between Algiers and Oran. For the next decade, France would continue to have gendarmes and military bases in the country, and Algeria's control of its own airspace did not come into effect until 1967. In addition, the country's ravaged forests had to be replanted and the land cleared of mines, in particular to allow the return of refugees to the border areas.

Malika Rahal reminds us that France's withdrawal followed a period in which the French had been concentrated in certain districts of the main coastal towns, creating an overwhelming sense of emptiness in these areas following their departure (chap. 15, "*Le retournement de l'espace*" ("The changing use of space")). She discusses the fate of abandoned objects and the settling of Algerians in residences hastily vacated by the French, before a department for vacant property was set up to regulate these movements and slow the pace of relocations. Accounts tend to distinguish between those who refrained from moving into empty homes and the less scrupulous people who allowed themselves to do so—which raises the question of a possible sociology of this sharing. This great upheaval produced a powerful mix, an exceptional social diversity and a relationship to (co-)ownership in urban spaces that have yet to be studied in greater detail. Organized by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the League of Red Cross Societies, the scale of the repatriation of refugees outside the country's borders has been forgotten, perhaps due to a feeling of reticence on the part of those who were forced to remain outside the armed struggle for independence (chap. 16).

The author pays particular attention to spaces that are highly charged with symbolism. "Regroupment camps" (chap. 17), commonly referred to as concentration camps, were a widespread phenomenon, as recently studied by Fabien Sacriste¹. A quarter of future Algerian citizens passed through these camps, which took various forms. Those that were built *ex nihilo* on an orthogonal plan are the best documented, but some were built with plant materials, leaving no trace in the present landscape, while others were grafted onto existing settlements, their boundaries marked by barbed wire and with controlled access. Malika Rahal reminds us that most of those displaced did not return to their villages, except to nurture the memory of their place of origin. Farms (chap. 18) were also a place of symbolic significance. They were colonial constructions, where a number of torture centers were set up—a study by Claire Mauss-Copeaux, which also cross-references archives and oral sources², could have been cited or discussed here. Following independence, farms became a place for experimenting with self-management, at least in the case of the largest and most productive colonial farms, while small Algerian farms remained on the sidelines of this transformation.

Pasts, presents, futures

The final section examines people's different relationships with the times in which they lived: the time of expectation, of a future that confirmed some people's fears of a crumbling world and fulfilled the hopes of emancipation for the majority (chap. 19); and of the present, when independence was achieved—along with the mixture of fervor and bitterness that accompanied the election of an assembly from a single list and the appointment of a government in a climate of urgency that allowed very young people with limited qualifications to take up positions of responsibility ("*L'adventio*n", chap. 20), as well as the often frustrated prospect of a return to the days before colonial dispossession and the restitution of lost possessions (land, language, religious traditions, etc.) in both their material and symbolic dimensions ("*1962-1830*", chap. 21). The restoring of the Ketchaoua mosque to Muslim worship on November 1, 1962 provides an ideal example of this desire to mark the closure of a "colonial

Commenté [SD1]: Note de la traductrice : ce mot est écrit au singulier en français, tandis que "présents" et "futures" sont au pluriel. J' ai trouvé que ce serait plus cohérent de mettre les trois au pluriel car après on parle des différentes perspectives et relations au temps vécus. Est-ce que vous êtes d' accord ? Si vous voulez le garder au singulier, il faudrait simplement enlever le -s (" Past").

Commenté [SD2]: Note de la traductrice : J' ai trouvé cette phrase très difficile à suivre. J' aurais aimé la couper en deux ou trois phrases différentes (car on préfère des verbes en anglais), mais je ne voyais pas où...

¹ Fabien Sacriste, *Les camps de regroupement en Algérie - Une histoire des déplacements forcés (1954-1962)*, Paris, Les Presses de Science Po, 2022.

² Claire Mauss-Copeaux, *Hadjira. La ferme Ameziane et au-delà...*, Paris, Les Chemins du présent, 2017.

parenthesis", as does the choice of July 5, echoing the landing of French troops at Sidi Ferruch/Fredj in 1830, to celebrate independence. In a final chapter, "*L'Invention du Passé*" ("Inventing the past"), Malika Rahal sees her narrative as a means of uniting a people and founding a sovereign nation. She describes the proliferation of narratives in the wake of independence, the films made at the time, and the choice of new street names. She also highlights the impact of the definition of categories of beneficiaries, including those involved in the struggle for independence, and the victims of the war of liberation. This process required compiling documentation, and thus led to the construction of an "administrative narrative of the past".

In the conclusion, the author suggests that the chrononym "1962" should be considered in chronological terms that go beyond the calendar year: this revolutionary period, which began with the demonstrations of December 1960, marking the moment when Algerians took possession of the public space, lasted until the establishment of state authority in March 1963, with some reverberations extending into the 1970s, which remain to be studied.

This book—which was written as part of the author's diploma to supervise research (HDR)—proposes a popular history, not only in terms of the history of ordinary people, as defined by Howard Zinn, but also in terms of an embodied history, sensitive to emotions, sensations and sensibility, as defined by Michelle Zancarini-Fournel.

While its complex structure and sometimes elaborate terminology can make it somewhat difficult to read, the fluidity of the writing, its division into short sequences, and the presence of cross-references and an index make it easier and lighter to read intermittently—perhaps the result of the research notebook, "*Textures du temps*" ("Textures of time"), which the author wrote in parallel with this book¹. The way it is presented also invites further reading. Malika Rahal makes only the most discreet appearances in the text, through an uncle, a cousin, or an admission of an inclination that makes her prefer to imagine an *atarcha* plant grown naturally in Algeria, rather than a rose geranium imported by the perfumers of Grasse (p. 335). More often than not, however, she begins her chapters with an experience, a recounted story that gripped her: the arrest of a Harki; a detail recorded during an interview; the emotion

¹ Michelle Zancarini-Fournel, *Les Luttes et les Rêves. Une histoire populaire de la France de 1685 à nos jours*, Paris, La Découverte, coll. Zones, 2016. On how popular history is used, see Émilien Ruiz, "L'histoire populaire : label éditorial ou nouvelle forme d'écriture du social ?", *Le Mouvement Social*, vol. 269-270, n° 4, 2019, pp. 185-230.

² <https://texturesdutemps.hypotheses.org/>

shared when recalling the Independence Day celebrations on July 5. From these scattered elements, the historian seeks to grasp the meaning and thereby fuel a wider reflection.

This book not only offers a fresh understanding of the upheavals of the period symbolized by 1962. It also shows that new ways of writing history have emerged, as the weakness or closure of archival institutions spurs inventiveness. By choosing to "fire on all cylinders" (p. 18), and by crossing disciplinary boundaries, Malika Rahal proves that it is possible to write a history nourished by memorial material, whether already fixed or newly generated. In so doing, she has opened up new horizons.

First published in laviedesidees.fr, May 18, 2022. Translated by Susannah Dale, with the support of Cairn.info. Published in booksandideas.net, 30 January 2024