

ALGERIAN DILEMMAS

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THE Algerian State is only two years old but already many doctors who are deeply worried over the likely prospects of this very young child, have earnestly submitted it to a variety of searching tests. Is it or is it not a "socialist" state? And if not, does it show promise of becoming one? If the promise does exist, how long will it be before it is fulfilled, and at what price? These are the kind of questions which are being asked about Algeria, and it is certainly right that they should be asked, since they are of obvious concern to us. But we need to be clear about the nature of our concern. It is undoubtedly worth while to look right and left before crossing a road; but one looks rather differently if one *has* to cross this road and no other, no matter how dangerous the crossing may be. In other words, we should try not to forget that our judgments on the present Algerian régime are always presented from the outside, that our analyses of the Algerian situation remain purely theoretical exercises (one is tempted to say purely rhetorical exercises), and that, according to sound Marxist doctrine, they cannot therefore make claim to genuine objectivity. The *praxis* of the Algerians may well shed considerable light on their situation for non-Algerian observers, but never as much as it does for the Algerians themselves, who may have to verify their analyses at the cost of their lives. In such matters, only that is true which is capable of realization: the "possible" which fails to achieve this very much resembles the impossible.

In recalling such obvious truths, I do not merely wish to challenge at the outset those who say: "If only Ben Bella had done this..." or "if only such and such had seized power..." but also those who express themselves in a more categorical manner and who say, for instance: "This régime is not socialist, since the F.L.N. is only a party of cadres." For it so happens that, since 1 November 1954 the Algerian problem has become, and becomes every day more concretely, a problem for *Algerians*, so that regrets and criticisms are of no *real* significance if they are not made by Algerians and if they don't have roots in at least a part of the Algerian people, since Algerians alone are in a position to give them *practical* meaning. Similarly, one must reject an even more extreme (and even more abstract) attitude which deplores the fact that the Algerians should have failed to react against the mistakes made in their name, and also to impose socialism on their present leaders.

In any case, the innumerable studies which have been devoted to

Algeria since its accession to national independence show very clearly the remarkable ambiguity of the Algerian situation: a particular factor, which may be described as negative in one situation, may well appear positive in another. The very nature of the Algerian context imposes upon those who study it a dialectical method, and sets mistakes and grievances in a complex totality.

It is precisely this which has turned this rough and doctrinally unsophisticated people, whose first steps in the world we are so paternally concerned to guide, into an exceedingly useful teacher of political reality. This at least seems to me the necessary starting point for any consideration of the extraordinary experience which the Algerian people is going through at the present time.

One could go on endlessly analysing the many factors whose continuous and complex interaction make up, day by day, what may be called the Algerian situation: only a few of them will be taken up here by way of illustration. Even so, by taking account of their inter-relationships, we may be able to suggest some of the most important aspects of this remarkable episode in decolonization.

Independent Algeria is first of all the result of a movement of liberation profoundly different, in many of its aspects, from any other movement in the colonially subject world. The duration of its armed struggle; the type of support it enjoyed and the kind of political organization which it produced; its economy, its traditions and its demography—all these distinguish Algeria very sharply from the countries of Black Africa and from Cuba, from Viet-Nam and from China, from the Soviet Union and from the People's Democracies, from India or any other under-developed country. Algeria is an essentially agricultural and over-populated country, a settlers' colony in which there lived more than a million *colons* as against eight million "native" Algerians in 1954. In the course of a seven-year war against French colonialism, it received a great deal of international support, to a large extent because rather than despite the fact that it was not within the geographical orbit of any socialist country and that its movement of liberation did not subscribe to Communist doctrine. It is, incidentally, this last point which is often raised by Marxist critics to account, sometimes by way of excuse and sometimes as a condemnation, for the fluctuations and the doctrinal shortcomings of the Algerian revolution.

Having myself been fairly closely involved with the national phase of this revolution and knowing well the moral dilemmas of its most politically conscious militants, I believe it is true to say that if the generation of Algerians who gave themselves to the revolution was not Marxist, as indeed most of them were not, the responsibility lies, for a large part, with French "Marxists." My purpose is not to reopen here the whole question of the record of the Algerian Communist Party. That party was simply a branch of the French Communist Party, and its leaders remained to the end so completely remote from Algerian

reality that all they managed to do, in twenty years of activity, was to make more obvious the privileged position of the "European" workers of Algeria, as well as the racialism which this privileged position engendered among these workers against their "native" Algerian "comrades." There is still much too much virulent anti-communism in the world today for such facts to be recalled with anything but sorrow. But it would not do, at a time when the fate of socialism is at issue on a world scale, to forget that a European party was responsible for so great a devaluation of the European contribution to socialism that the Algerian people was brought to reject it, when they might have been able to draw strength from that which was best in it. That Algeria in 1964 should still proclaim itself socialist (even if a loose meaning is attributed to the word) is, in my opinion, a kind of historical miracle.

Indeed, this "miracle" is even more striking if one remembers the material conditions in which this people fought to the end, with the roughest of political programmes, a struggle which the most militant among them used to describe, in the beginning, as a "suicide operation." For that struggle to succeed, it became necessary to use, often to an extreme degree, a nationalist mystique, together with the concept of *union sacrée* and to insist on military discipline. Naturally enough, this led to the emergence of a concept of public life in Algerian thought much more closely geared to militarism and the virtue of obedience than to political commitment and the practice of criticism and self-criticism.

It is at this point that we reach one of the essential contradictions of the Algerian régime, and it is important not to describe it in too abstract terms. One *could* say that the principles have become socialist but that the methods have remained nationalist: but this would present a false picture of the real situation, and an exceedingly ugly picture too, since it would mean that, as the principles are incapable of realization, they are only used as a rhetorical alibi. The real circumstances are rather more complex, as may be judged by an examination of the relationship between Ben Bella and the Algerian masses.

Let it first be said that two opposite kinds of extreme views may both be rejected: if Ben Bella really were—or if he really were not—the spokesman of the masses, the fact would have become very clear a long time ago. The whole point that *he is such a spokesman, and also that he is not*—that he is sufficiently their spokesman to keep power and enjoy a measure of popularity; and that he is not sufficiently their spokesman to overcome the different factions which constantly affect every kind of decision for which he himself has to bear responsibility.

It is precisely on this question of responsibility that are focused most of the criticisms which have been made against the present leader of the Algerian people in the last two years. Indeed, it may well be said against Ben Bella that he lacks authority *vis-à-vis* the various forces from which he draws his support, and that he governs "in the name of

the people" without really trying to provide the people with the means of governing through him. Nor is the point made less valid by the legend propagated by the unconditional supporters of the régime as to Ben Bella's popular origins; in any case, while his parents were poor peasants, Ben Bella himself seems to have had a mostly petty-bourgeois youth, marked at first by the European influences which were felt in Marnia, his native village, and then by the attraction which the bourgeois city of Tlemcen had for him. In fact, one cannot but attach a certain importance to the rather elitist character of his revolutionary commitment, ever since 1956: the man who, on the morrow of independence, seized power and did not recoil from compromises in order to keep it, is also the man who, as a political prisoner in a French jail, pressed the leaders of the Algerian revolution who were at large to keep that revolution under the exclusive control of those who had begun it, or rather more accurately of those among them who had survived.¹

It is of course a matter for no great surprise that a man born into a family of poor fellahs, and having therefore a very close acquaintance with the conditions of life of that class while having ceased himself to belong to it, should have felt morally compelled to devote his life to the liberation of his brothers; and that he should also have wanted to guide their struggle, since he happened to have had certain chances of which they were deprived. However, though this *ought* to have been a common pattern, the fact is that among the Algerians of Ben Bella's generation who did manage to win the very limited opportunities of a native petty-bourgeoisie, only the tiniest minority continued to have any concern for the condition of the Algerian masses and particularly for the destitute peasantry; it was only that tiny minority which felt deeply a moral obligation towards them, and which preferred to use their newly acquired privileges in the service of the Algerian people rather than for their own personal advantage. It was only a handful of men who assumed responsibility on 1 November 1954 for the realization of the deepest wishes of their people, by taking the terrible risk of beginning the war of liberation: they did so in the name of the Algerian people, but they had been given no explicit mandate so to act. They were bound, once the "suicide operation" had turned into a victorious march, to see themselves more than ever as tutors and guides. No doubt, Ben Bella is not the Algerian people. But are his rivals, men like **Ait Ahmed**, Boudiaf or Khider, more the Algerian people than he is? And where, without all of them, would the Algerian people be today?

It is true that Ben Bella, having become the rival of his peers and comrades, has caused them to go into an opposition whose effectiveness remains at least doubtful. We may blame him for this, but evidence is lacking that they, or one of them (but which?) would have done much better; and if, on the contrary, we praise him for it, we are also indulging in far too definite judgments. The same point may be put differently by

saying that Ben Bella should not be turned either into the Messiah or into the Evil Genius of the Algerian revolution.

Ben Bella showed great skill in the face of the opposition: of his rivals, some had earlier been his followers, and the common defeat of all of them has so far failed to bring about a community of views among them—save the belief held by each of them that it would be preferable for him to govern Algeria instead of Ben Bella. No doubt, each believes that his rule would be preferable for the Algerian people. Unfortunately, it is precisely on this point that one is bound to express the most definite doubts.

For if we consider Ben Bella's main rivals, what do we find? One of them, **Bitat**, may be ignored, since he has played no major role in events up to now. (He actually returned to Algeria in December 1964.—Tr.) Another, Ait Ahmed, expressed his opposition on two different levels: first, in terms of a legal opposition, as a member of an Assembly completely picked by the Political Bureau of the F.L.N.; and then by means of an armed opposition, dangerously marked by regionalism in so far as Kabylia was his only base of operations and his only centre of support. Boudiaf, for his part, first had a period of hesitation and then became the theoretician of the Opposition's socialism against Ben Bella's own version of it. Unfortunately, he has not so far given a clear indication of what there is in his views that would make their application preferable to the actual practice of the Algerian Government. As for Khider, it was he who played the major political rôle in Ben Bella's accession to power; it was also he who decided on the mode of organization of the new F.L.N.; and everything goes on as if he were still its general secretary, except that he intended to use the F.L.N. for policies compared to which the policies of Ben Bella must easily win the support of all socialists.

In order to gain power, Ben Bella sought the support of a number of *wilayas* (the military regions into which the Algerian maquis was divided) even though "wilayism" had come to denote the regionalist leanings of certain *wilaya* leaders against the attempts at unification of the leadership of the F.L.N.; and he also relied on the A.N.P. (Armée Nationale Populaire), an army which had been trained and equipped outside Algeria but which never entered Algerian territory and which did not therefore take part in the liberation struggle. But once he had achieved power, Ben Bella hastened to condemn "wilayism" and regionalism, particularly as expressed in Kabylia; and it cannot be seriously denied that the power of the A.N.P. was steadily reduced, despite the marks of recognition and prestige granted to its commander-in-chief, Boumedienne.

Secondly, Ben Bella undertook to govern Algeria without having any well-defined political and economic doctrine; but he managed to use events and opinions, so that his "empiricism" produced a policy compared to which the criticisms of his rivals seem increasingly negative,

sterile and sectarian; nor have these rivals used their exile for the purpose of elaborating an alternative set of policies any more attractive than the *ad hoc* programme of Ben Bella.

Again, Ben Bella continues to use the political instruments which were left him by Khider, the rival he supplanted; he does not seem able to turn the party into a genuine mass party, and thus to make it a real means of communication between the base and the summit. But it is also true that the F.L.N. is being given a new and different rôle in the life of the country.

Meanwhile, decree follows decree, as more and more important sectors of the Algerian economy are nationalized, or socialized. In the most important of these, the agricultural sector, all enterprises abandoned by the colons have been placed under the management of those who were employed in them before. Similarly, the number of enterprises in the industrial sector managed by the workers had, by March 1964, become large enough for a congress of workers in self-managed enterprises to be held; and this was followed in June by three decrees: one regulating the organization of the "socialist industrial sector"; another defining the financial arrangements to be followed in these enterprises; and a third setting up a national Inspectorate of industrial worker-managements.

It is true that the practical application of all these measures presents enormous difficulties; new problems arise every day, and the inter-connection between them makes any solution the more difficult. But it is worth noting that the problems are more clearly and more ruthlessly formulated by the men in power than even by their opponents. Some of these opponents mainly object to the socialist orientation of the régime; others, it would seem, have fallen victim to the kind of premature senility which almost always affects certain minorities, and which causes them to concentrate on political grievances rather than put forward genuine and realistic alternatives—the same disease which has gripped almost the whole of the French Left in relation to Gaullism.

In itself, the accumulation of difficulties is hardly a sufficient criterion for deciding whether a régime is or is not socialist: everything depends rather on the manner in which it deals with these problems, or in which it tries to elude them. By institutionalizing the principle of self-management, the Algerian Government was bound to face a whole series of grave problems, of which only the most important need to be mentioned here. In the first place, the lack of qualified personnel was to affect not only production itself, which was in any case inevitable, it also affected even more the system of collective management. For Algeria was not only short of agricultural experts and engineers but also, which was at least as serious, of people with sufficient knowledge of accounting, the credit system and marketing. Moreover, while the system assumed the participation of workers in decision-making, it also held in germ the classical conflict between state planning structures and the local,

democratically based organizations. It was therefore urgently necessary to set up a number of intermediate institutions which, acting as transmission belts, would help to reconcile the interest of the whole with that of each separate enterprise. Another problem, extremely acute, was the question of who was to be employed in these enterprises, and at what wages, in a context of massive and chronic unemployment.

The farms which had come under workers' management constituted the richest area of cultivation in Algeria and were therefore an essential element of the economy.⁸ Should such resources have been compromised by considering these farms as a means of employment for the unemployed of the agricultural sector, and particularly for the innumerable ex-soldiers whom the Army is desperately concerned to provide with work? Or was the risk to be taken of creating a category of privileged workers by employing on these farms only those who had been working on them before? And how were these workers to be paid adequately, while at the same time avoiding the development of selfish attitudes? The problem was even further complicated by the fact that it was still impossible to tell what the profits of the enterprises might be, and also because, quite often, those most closely involved were not yet qualified to take part in the reckoning up of these profits.

For these reasons, and for many others, some very difficult choices had to be made. One cannot simultaneously reproach the Algerian Government for not being socialist enough *and* for having done no more, in making a choice, than to render official the situation which had been created, in many agricultural enterprises, by the spontaneous initiatives of the workers themselves. It would seem, on the contrary, that such a process augurs fairly well for the development of the Algerian revolution, in so far as the régime has, at least up to now, allowed that revolution to deal with the concrete questions which arose in its path rather than to seek to impose its own solutions upon it.

It may well be said that: no agrarian reform has yet been undertaken, and that the large and middle landowners have retained their land, while about two million agricultural workers are still waiting to be settled on the land. Must one therefore conclude that Ben Bella's régime is so closely involved with these landowners that it cannot afford to act resolutely against their interests? One reason for not taking such a view is that the régime has been so firm with a number of former political leaders whose own leanings would have led them, in this domain, to favour the maintenance, more or less, of the *status quo*. More important is the fact that agrarian reform is already an explicit concern of the trade union leaders, of the leadership of the F.L.N. (as witnessed by the report of the "preparatory commission" of the first Congress of the F.L.N.), and of some of the most influential members of the Government. Their concern, however, is also practical: the reform they want must neglect neither the complexity of the task at various levels nor the fundamental revolutionary aim which is at the

core of the system. Rather than imagine that, by putting off for a year such a major decision, Ben Bella has been compelled to give in to the pressure of the landowners concerned, it is more appropriate to note that he lacks at present the necessary means, *on a technical plane*, for carrying out such a task; and since he is not yet able to proceed with the elimination of a social group which continues to have a certain importance in the present Algerian economy, he clearly believes it preferable not to incur its active opposition prematurely.

Of course, it is easy to sneer at the improvised nature of such policies. We have become accustomed to take seriously only those movements which begin with ideas and then proceed to the facts; and it is not perhaps purely a matter of chance that our own "movements" should remain so profoundly static, so incapable of gripping concrete situations. Ben Bella, for his part, accepted for a year the policies of **Khider**, and then agreed to the summoning of a congress on agricultural self-management, and on industrial self-management; then of a congress of the F.L.N.; and he was also content that profoundly revolutionary measures should be advocated in all of them, together with the indictment of shortcomings of every kind. With this in mind, it is perhaps legitimate to conclude that if his socialism is "regrettably empirical," at least his empiricism is of a relatively socialist **character**. It is quite true that the Algerian leaders follow behind events; would it be preferable that they should anticipate events to the point where they cannot even control them? No doubt, it is unfortunate that a more deliberate and premeditated development should not occur. But the simple fact that no one should so far have been able to propose adequate remedies for this situation would seem to suggest that it is inherent in the situation itself. In any case, one could not but be suspicious of a government which had everything worked out while the people itself was still so unsure of its directions.

These few considerations, which rest on a very cursory analysis, are not intended to minimize the importance of certain aspects of the Algerian situation which may well be thought disquieting. It is not to be denied, in particular, that the police has at present in Algeria a repressive character (including on occasion the use of torture, as in the worst days of colonialism); that the Army brings its full weight to bear on the Government's policies; that a bureaucratic administration, often ominously acting on the pattern of the **formerly** occupying power, is quite inadequate for the job at hand; that the hesitations of the **régime** favour the emergence of a caste of speculators, who ostentatiously display their wealth before a people as miserable as ever, and more susceptible than ever to the temptation of seeking some kind of livelihood in France; that the single Party fails to act, as it should, as a political stimulus, and that one reason for this failure is the undue proportion of careerists and opportunists which have joined it; and that, finally, Islam is officially granted a place in daily life which may

well, without any secular sectarianism, be judged excessive. Such facts lead one to feel much sympathy for some courageous people who persistently refuse, at considerable risk to themselves, to rally to the régime. But sympathy does not necessarily entail agreement: so long as these men only manage to define their opposition in negative terms, so long will it be legitimate for European socialists to be more interested in the efforts of a government which does what it can with the means that are at its disposal, and a government moreover which is hardly less representative of the Algerian people in its present mood than are the Government's opponents.

Large numbers of men may be taught to read and write in two years; but it takes a few more years to turn them into qualified technicians. The lack of qualified personnel has from the start been the major problem of Algerian independence. The war of liberation, and then the O.A.S., destroyed a substantial part of those elites which the colonizing power, in the grip of contradictory interests, had, though reluctantly and parsimoniously, finally allowed to enter the modern world. There could be no immediate solution to such a "bottleneck." To train people is a more or less long-term enterprise, depending on the particular sector concerned. But there is no doubt that the time it takes also depends on the "tone" which the leaders manage to give, from the very first days, to the revolutionary enterprise as a whole. The manner of training depends on the level of political consciousness, and this level in turn depends on the trust or the mistrust initially shown by the rulers towards the masses. It is certain, on the other hand, that the importance of training is further enhanced in a political context where a genuine mobilization of the masses has not been successful, because there was not, at the start, the boldness to stake everything on the initiatives of the masses. One is entitled to feel, in analysing the present Algerian situation, acute regret on this score, but this cannot constitute the theme of opposition. For the rivals of the summer of 1962 fought with identical weapons, and one is not aware that any of them asked the masses to make the decisive choice; the only serious conclusion which is to be drawn from this fact is that the masses were not then ready to assume their responsibilities in the constructive phase of the revolution; moreover, their rulers, who had scarcely prepared them for these responsibilities, were fighting publicly, without however giving them any conclusive reason to commit themselves in favour of one or the other.

In a still fluid situation, where politics had only been conceived in negative terms, that is to say in relation to the foreign oppressor, the reaction of the masses was the healthiest conceivable: one faction having already more than half won, the Algerian people interposed itself, without arms, between the contestants and made impossible a civil war which seemed just then inevitable. In so doing the masses won the right to judge the victors by their achievements. But this admirable expression of its sovereignty was also, in reality, the token of the people's inability

to make positive decisions. The people needed to demand everything; but it was content to cry "*baraket!*" ("enough!"), thus preferring to be governed by whoever happened to win than to sink into chaos by not being governed at all.

This is the first and fundamental element of any revolutionary policy in Algeria: namely, the stage of development of a people which is only able to manifest its political sense in the least elaborate forms, but which has none the less been made mature by the terrible losses and sufferings it experienced in seven and a half years of pitiless conflict. It would be very poor Marxism to see this people as mere object, and not to perceive that its objective situation, allied to its very recent experience, will cause it to develop much further, whatever its leaders may or may not do. In Algeria at least as much as in any other country in the world, it is the masses which will eventually win. But the real revolutionaries, those who take initiative at the grassroots, are still ignored by the rulers, while those who have the means to act are still not revolutionaries. The only hope of bridging this gap between the masses and those who claim to represent them does not lie in wholesale opposition; it lies rather in a patient and collective effort within an Algerian context which is today globally determined; and it must be an effort aimed at transferring power, not to Ben Bella or to X or to Y, but *from* any group of leaders *to* the majority of a people having at last achieved adulthood.

Ultimately, there is only one Algeria, which is still seeking its way amidst material and moral difficulties almost inconceivable to our European minds. No one should risk making this search more difficult still by lightly taking sides for this or that faction, or by a wholesale and irresponsible condemnation.

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(Translated by Nan Keen)

NOTES

1. I refer to a document which, unless I am much mistaken, has never been published *in extenso*, but of which certain French newspapers published short extracts at the time (probably given them by the police) and which provoked extremely violent reactions in the leading circles of the Algerian revolution. The document is a report written by Ben Bella in the months which followed his kidnapping in October 1956, and of which the essential part was transmitted to Cairo at the beginning of 1957. The document was seized by the police when a number of members of the first Federal Committee of the French Federation of the F.L.N. were arrested in February 1957.
2. Of an active population of about 2 million agricultural workers, 100,000 only are employed on these farms, which only represent one-fifth of the area of cultivation of Algeria, but their production represents three-quarters of the total agricultural production of the country, and almost two-thirds of its total exports.