

French Anarchists in the Algerian Revolution

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a review of

Eyes to the South: French Anarchists and Algeria, by David Porter; foreword by Sylvain Boulouque. AK Press, 2011, 550 pp, \$25

David Porter's hefty new book is a remarkable resource for scholars and activists seeking to understand the relationship among French anarchists, French colonization of Algeria, and Algerian anti-colonial movements.

Porter has located and translated many hundreds of articles in dozens of anarchist journals in order to chart French anarchists' analyses of Algeria over the last sixty years. His summaries include extensive quotations from the original sources, set within a rich appreciation of Algerian and French historical and contemporary struggles.

The great strength of the book is that it lets French anarchists speak for themselves. A few of the actors who stand out include influential public intellectuals, Daniel Guérin, who "became the movement's leading published commentator" on Algeria, and Albert Camus, "whose basically anarchist orientation" was clear although he did not label himself as such.

Porter sketches the political orientations of many influential groups. The Federation Communiste Libertaire (FCL), with the journal *Libertaire*, saw national independence as a step toward a classless society and was willing to collaborate with non-anarchists, endorse revolutionary violence, and even participate in electoral politics.

The Revolutionary Action Anarchist Groups (GAAR) with their journal *Noir et Rouge*, were a loosely federated group which supported the Algerian revolution but rejected the FCL as "Bolshevik." The Federation Anarchiste (FA), with the journal *Le Monde Libertaire*, had more reservations about supporting national struggles, given their tendency to replace one master with another, and concentrated instead on opposing "the spread of military repression in Algeria and fascism in France."

These are only a few of the many groups Porter examines.

The weakness of the book is the flip side of its strength: the plethora of detail tends to obscure any central narrative. Porter's instincts are those of an archivist rather than a storyteller. The encyclopedic thoroughness of the book can make it difficult to find a main thread.

For example, I became intrigued by the Kabylia insurrection of 2001; yet there is no single section of the book devoted to this massive revolutionary upheaval. Instead, there are nearly 100 entries in the index under "Kabylia insurrection," and the reader has to piece together the tale herself.

Porter gives the reader substantial assistance to make her way through the forest of detail. The book begins with a useful timeline of events in Algeria since the beginning of the nationalist revolution in 1954, as well as brief background essays on Algeria and on French anarchism. Most books do not have, or need, a section on "Book Organization and Methodology," but this one does.

Here, Porter explains his system of dual introductions to each section: the first introduces the main events and actors in Algeria for that time period, while the second summarizes the main currents in the French anarchist movement during the same period of time.

A recurrent theme in Porter's account is the relation of anarchism to anti-colonial nationalist struggles, to states, and to other progressive actors. Anarchists oppose the oppressive racist practices at the heart of colonialism, but how is that opposition best expressed? Should anarchists support struggles for national liberation because they strike blows against the empire, or oppose them because they usually end up creating new states?

When governments support workers' self-management (autogestion), is that a step toward or cooptation of an anarchist workplace? Is it better to enter coalitions around partially shared agendas, or to maintain an independent stance at the cost of isolation? Does anti-militarism require nonviolence?

It is not surprising to learn that there are no simple answers to these questions. Porter's contribution is to show us, rather than simply tell us, the complex circumstances within which anarchists addressed these questions in relation to the Algerian struggle.

Porter's methodology makes clear the central importance of publications for anarchist communities. While other radical groups might gravitate toward political parties, unions, or other collective projects, anarchists create and circulate words. Of course, they do other things, too—organize rallies; create petitions; provide material aid, including weapons, to rebel groups; support military deserters and draft evaders; organize strikes; engage in various kinds of direct action.

Yet, there is an enduring symbiosis between anarchism and its texts, a persistent dedication to educating people and questioning authorities with the power of the written word. Within the predictable account of the splintering and consolidating of anarchist groups, Porter shows a noble continuity—anarchists' commitment to radical public speech.

It is difficult to read this book without becoming weighted down by the appalling levels of violence inflicted on the Algerian people over the last 60 years. There are the "big numbers": as many as one million Algerians killed, 3 million displaced, in the anti-colonial struggle, and about 60,000 pied-noirs (citizens of Algeria from France) killed.

Competition between rival revolutionary groups resulted in another 10,000 dead. Then, the "Black Decade" of the mid-1980s to mid-1990s, an "endless traumatic nightmare experienced by Algerians caught in the middle between the extreme violence of racial Islamist guerrillas and the police and army": as many as 100,000 dead; widespread torture, kidnapping, and imprisonment of anyone deemed critical of the regime, including "westernized" women, journalists, teachers, professors, doctors.

There were the "small numbers": popular artists, singers and writers imprisoned or assassinated. School children hideously murdered. Explosions in markets. Dozens of victims at every demonstration. Small wonder that one of the slogans of the brave young people in the Kabylia rebellion was, "You can't kill us. We're already dead."

Several fascinating episodes beg for their own stories. Among them are the remarkable successes of workers' self-management in the Algerian revolution. After independence and the departure of the pied-noirs, workers on farms, in factories and in service industries across the country took over their workplaces and ran them, as Porter says, "with few resources of their own, except years of work experience and observation."

Self-managed workplaces expanded to include one quarter of the Algerian male work force. Porter stresses the vulnerability of autogestion, since there was no organized anarchist movement or strong revolutionary syndicalist consciousness to support it, leaving it dependent on the government.

While at first the state appeared to endorse these arrangements, in the end, local workers' control was incompatible with the state's centralizing agenda. In some ways this situation was the opposite of that in Spain during the revolution of the 1930s, where generations of anarchist organizing preceded and guided the seizure of the means of production.

While the self-organizing enterprises in Spain were wiped out by military conquest, the self-managing sector in Algeria "was piece by piece transformed into state-run industrial enterprises, collectivized but hierarchical state farm units, more centralized and consolidated autogestion farms, or privatized farms and factories."

Another provocative thread in Porter's account is the remarkable "Berber Spring" of 1980, which saw the emergence of strong anti-state movements based on the cultural roots of Berber identities in the Kabylia region. They spread across the country before being violently repressed by the state. Called the aarch movements, these were a sort of indigenous anarchism in which grassroots assemblies organized themselves and coordinated interactions through a federated structure, calling on old and respected traditions to confront or evade state power.

The Kabylia rebellions reemerged in 2001 with stronger participation by women and young people. Post-situationist Jaime Semprun wrote a detailed account of the 2001 insurrection in Kabylia for the CNT-AIT website.

He said, “having reestablished village assemblies for the sole purpose of uniting together against repression, the insurgents discover other purposes for which they can be the instrument. The great art of these returns to the past by revolutions when they revive ancient forms of community is to rediscover more than what was lost.”

This insight is key, in my view, to seeing anarchist-friendly ways of life in indigenous practices. Semprun calls our attention to anti-hegemonic cultural traditions as active reservoirs of potential transformation, not dead collections of lost pasts.

In his conclusion, Porter briefly presents ideas of contemporary Algerians whose ideas move toward anarchism: writer Tarik Ben Hallaj; union organizer Achour Idir; singer Lounes Matoub; writers Mohamed Kacimi (El Hassani) and Mezioud Ouldamer; musician and poet Lyachir Vouchlaghem; painter Abdelkader Guermaz.

He ends by reflecting briefly on the contrast within anarchism between “optimists,” who see possibilities for radical change on the horizon, and “skeptics,” who hold those dreams up to critical scrutiny. Porter rightly suggests that a viable anarchist movement needs both, and that anarchism flourishes best when rooted in particular times and places, rather than abstracted from geography and history.

Despite the many tragedies he recounts, I find in the Algerian stories much support for my own “optimistic” perspective. I would like to hear more from David Porter, in his own voice, about what has made him optimistic and what, skeptical, in his close study of French anarchists and Algerian rebels.

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See her website at politicalscience.hawaii.edu/lists/emma-goldman/index.html for information about her books.



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