Representation, civil war and humanitarian intervention:
the international politics of naming Algerian violence, 1992-2002

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Abstract

This examination criticises some of the main textual efforts within the self-identified politiography of Algeria that have attempted to help make the last twenty years of violent conflict in Algeria intelligible to Western audiences. It attends to the way in which particular representations of Algerian violence were problematised within, and cross-problematised with, prevailing international security discourses and practices, especially the concurrently emergent litterature on civil wars and armed humanitarian intervention. Unsatisfied with general international response to the conflict in Algeria in the 1990s, particularly the major massacres of 1997 and 1998, this study questions how certain problematisations were used to understand the violence and how those renderings contributed to the troubled relationship between the representation of mass violence in Algeria and international efforts to intervene against it.

As a study in politiography, the primary object of analysis here is not the entire discursive field of Algerian violence but rather select yet influential scholarly texts within the genre of late Algerian violence. While these works helped co-constitute the broader discursive formations of Algerian violence that enabled its own representation as such, this examination does not necessarily address them vis-à-vis unique, superior or competing representations drawn from the traditionally privileged sites of initial discursive production of international security. The primary method of critique here is deconstructive in so far as it simply uses the texts — their arguments, their evidence and their archival logic — against themselves. Borrowing insights from currents in recent neopragmatist thought, this study seeks to reverse engineer some of the more dominant international problematisations of Algerian violence, so as to unearth the deeper politics of naming built into specific representations of Algeria and more generic frameworks of international security.

After first exploring the conflict’s contested political and economic etiology (chapter three), as well as its disputed classification as a civil war (chapter four), this study closely examines the interpretations of the most intense civilian massacres, those that occurred between August 1997 and January 1998 (chapters five and six). How these representations resulted in the threat of (armed) humanitarian intervention are of particular concern (chapter seven), as are the ways in which foreign actors have attempted to historically
contextualise Algeria’s alleged tradition and culture of violence (chapter eight). The aim is not to produce — though it cannot but help contribute to — a new history or account of the politics of the Algerian conflict and its internationalisation. The intent is first to underscore the inherent yet potentially auspicious dangers within all problematisations of mass violence. Secondly, it is to advocate for ironic forms of politiography, given the politics always-already embedded within acts of naming, particularly when it comes to questions of mass violence. A politiography that is able to appreciate the contingency of representation and intervention, and so underscores the need for a more deliberately and deliberative ethical and democratic politics of representation in the face of atrocity.
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