

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 literature 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.

Table of contents

<i>Abstract</i>	2
<i>Table of contents</i>	4
<i>List of tables</i>	7
<i>Maps</i>	7
<i>Abbreviations</i>	8
<i>Note on transliteration</i>	9
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	10
<i>Dedication</i>	12
1. Introduction	13
The politography of international security	16
Assumptions	20
Methods	23
<i>Taking the linguistic turn seriously</i>	23
<i>Problematizing problematisations</i>	27
Overview	34
2. Literature review	39
The representation of violence	39
<i>New civil wars</i>	39
<i>The Islamification of violence</i>	41
The violence of representation	44
3. Democracy	48
The politics of causation	50
The metrics of <i>Hogra</i>	57
Agents, structures and logics of violence	66
Conclusion	72
4. Civil War	75

The new science of civil wars	77
War without a name	83
A question of violence (in general): civil war, from centre to margin	94
<i>'Juking the stats'</i>	95
<i>The context of death</i>	103
<i>Identity</i>	105
Conclusion: from civil war to 'new' war ?	107
5. Violence	110
The horror	110
The massacres	117
A question of violence (in particular): the massacres	125
<i>Angry against God</i>	126
<i>A rational slaughter</i>	132
<i>Nested civil wars</i>	134
<i>A dirty war?</i>	138
<i>Voodoo counter-insurgency</i>	145
<i>A regime divided</i>	146
<i>The privatisation of violence</i>	148
Conclusion	153
6. Identity	157
From ideology to identity: armed conflict in the new world order	157
Problematic Constructions	162
<i>Conditions of representability</i>	165
<i>Unstable geographies of violence</i>	169
Representing consensus	177
<i>Witnesses, survivors and perpetrators</i>	177
<i>Other Algerians</i>	185
<i>Observers</i>	189
Other governments	189
Scholars and experts	191

Human rights groups	193
Conclusion: certain violence, ambiguous identity	194
7. Intervention	196
Arming humanitarianism	196
Intertextuality of intervention: reading the Algerian massacres in an international context	203
<i>Contested framings</i>	203
<i>Internationalisation</i>	209
<i>Intervention</i>	217
The contingency of sovereignty or intervention?	230
Conclusion: Magic words or magic worlds?	235
8. History	239
‘History will judge’	239
Civil war as simulacrum	250
Violent imaginations	257
Conclusion: historicisation and/as problematisation	263
9. Conclusion	267
History, intervention and irony	267
Politiography in the face of atrocity	274
International politics in the face of atrocity	278
Bibliography	281
Newspapers, wire services and magazines	281
Books, chapters, journals and other periodicals	283