

National Liberation, Social Revolution and Organised Anarchism

The case of French Anarchists and Algeria; A critical review of *Eyes to the South: French Anarchists and Algeria*, by David Porter

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‘Starting a revolution is hard, and it’s even harder to continue it.’

Almost sixty years ago in 1962, Algeria broke free from French state control, after a seven year long militarised campaign of bombing, armed resistance, and workers struggle, largely organised by the Algerian *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN). The campaign for political independence had escalated from bombings to assassinations to full scale insurgency, with the French state resorting to torture, civilian bombings, and military occupation to protect its colonial holding. The victory of the independence movement saw a massive reorganisation of the political system by a socialist leaning president Ben Bella who was tasked with constituting the new independent Algerian state, as well as managing an explosion of *autogestion*, a movement of workers’ self-management of industries and communities by workers collectives. It was only a matter of years, however, before the military wing of the revolution used the existing political instability and the power of its new class of military officers to install a more right leaning and pro-military leader, Houari Boumédiène. This commenced a string of military based rulers with increasing levels of political conservatism, developing a base of religious far right leaders, and the deliberate demobilisation of the working class and the autogestion movement.

There were only small numbers of anarchists within Algeria in the revolutionary period. A few were publicly known like the well regarded Mohamed Saïl, some (mostly European) organised in the North African Liberation Movement, and other French anarchists used their connections in Algeria to provide international solidarity in France and Algeria.¹ In the French metropole the question of Algerian national independence became pivotal to analysing and combatting French capitalism more generally. Critical support for national liberation struggles has at times been approached awkwardly by anarchists who have abstained on the basis of being generally anti-state, yet many French anarchists saw the necessity to support the national liberation movement as a path to general, international working class revolution, and became vocal supporters for national independence.

This article intends to provide a critical review of David Porter’s *Eyes to the South: French Anarchists and Algeria*, a book that closely charts the last sixty years of Algerian history and the role that French anarchists played in it. The book is incredibly comprehensive, framing itself ambitiously as an “Anti-authoritarian introduction to modern Algeria, a brief summary of the French anarchist movement since the 1950s, and an exploration of important anarchist issues”, for the most part letting the events and the anarchist groups speak for themselves. A survey of all the events in Algeria and the French anarchist movement would provide little justice to the material and provide little insight to the concepts covered in the book. With this critical review I instead intend to draw out what I perceive to be the key lessons that anarchists today can take from the book, and I encourage anyone who is inspired or interested to get it themselves.

Porter divides the book into five main parts: The Algerian War of Independence itself (1954–1962), The Ben Bella regime (1962–1965), The Boumédiène regime (1965–1978), the Chadli, Boudiaf, and Zeroual regimes (1979–1999), and the Bouteflika regime (1999–2011), stopping just short of the 2011 Arab spring, and leaving us with some reflections on Algeria and the anarchist movement more generally. Each part is internally divided, to survey the political developments in Algeria in each period prior to detailing the response by each major anarchist group or tendency to the events. It is a bit tragic that the first three parts of the book – focusing on the revolution itself, Ben Bella, and his overthrow by Boumédiène – constitutes less than half of the book, given it is where many of the most fertile insights are located, and where the intensity of

struggle was greatest. This uneven emphasis is compounded by Porter's strict attention to the source material, which allows the minutiae of the discussions in the anarchist movement to play out; a trait that is exciting when the struggle is intense, but less so when things are developing (or degenerating) at a slow pace. Given the monumental ambition of the book, covering sixty years of history, it is perhaps no surprise to see some sections of the book continue in detail without a sense of pace to motivate it. Consequently I see the key insights of the book being centered around its discussion of the revolutionary and immediately post-revolutionary period, and these are the two sections I will exclusively discuss in this review.

French Anarchists' Response to the Algerian National Liberation Movement

The Algerian war is said to have started on November 1st 1954, when the newly formed *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN), a radical split from the moderate *Mouvement pour le Triomphe des Libertés Démocratiques* (MTDL), launched a coordinated assassination and bombing campaign against the occupying French forces, simultaneously releasing their demand for a free Algeria. This major event signalled a dramatic start to the independence movement and shocked the French metropole.

Detailed by Porter, the responses to this event by the two major factions of French anarchist politics at the time, the platformist inspired *Fédération Communiste Libertaire* (FCL) and the synthesist style *Fédération Anarchiste* (FA), are instructive for debates concerning the politics of national liberation and anarchist organisation.

The FCL were leading supporters of the national liberation movement in the French metropole, immediately declaring their enthusiastic support for the 1954 campaign and developing a campaign committee to fight French colonial repression. They argued that national liberation was a necessary transitional stage to the social revolution, provided it was won through a working class revolt. The FCL saw in this campaign a chance for French and Algerian revolutionaries to mutually assist each other in the project of international revolution, whilst crushing the especially violent and racist oppression of the extant colonial system in Algeria.

The FCL believed that participating in the direct struggle for Algerian national liberation was not only about building international revolution, but also ensuring that the organisation itself was externally oriented. George Fontenis, a leading proponent of FCL, put it like this:

*"Without an intense real activity, demanding full-time energy towards outside forces, organisational life tends to decompose.... Genuine political conflicts give way to specious speeches and claims of bad faith." *

The Algerian war gave such an opportunity for real external activity. The FCL would come to collaborate directly with Algerian militants, smuggling flags and arms, providing false identity papers and secret meeting places, transporting and providing safety for Algerian militants. They wrote in support of the revolution in their newspaper and distributed it throughout their networks. There was constant informal discussion between FCL and Algerian militants about encouraging a social revolution in Algeria.

The FCL's open support of the Algerian national liberation movement put the organisation under momentous state pressure. Their newspapers were confiscated seven times, FCL officials

were charged and overall served twenty-six months in prison and were fined 3 million francs, and FCL meetings about colonial repression were banned and violently dispersed. This police pressure led the organisation to go underground, and when the pressure failed to relent, the organisation folded in 1957. Fontenis later reflected that the decision to go underground was a romantic rather than rational response to the police pressure, and that “the more a group engages itself in the path of intervention and action at any price... to keep pace with its lack of power... the more it refuses to see reality and the more it throws itself forward suicidally.”

In comparison to the FCL, the FA’s initial response (at least, the response from its most prominent members, given it was a network) was more reserved, arguing that although the revolt and anger of Algerians was justified, it was impossible for anarchists to fully support a nationalist movement, which would just deliver the proletariat to exploitation by its own bourgeoisie. They were highly critical of the French colonial violence and the campaign of repression, but stopped short of fully supporting national liberation. It was argued that social revolutionary goals were already being co-opted by groups like the FLN to achieve the political goals of national liberation, rather than develop the working class towards revolution. Porter describes them as “retain[ing] their distance from and pessimism about the Algerian revolution despite understanding and sympathizing with the revolt against colonialism”, and as purposely abstaining from direct aid and support. As the revolution progressed, their stance softened and the FA generally acknowledged that national liberation was inevitable, but their action remained oriented around critiquing French torture and the president de Gaulle’s heavy handed interventions.

In my view, the FCL’s support for the Algerian national liberation movement was instinctively correct, given that the movement in hindsight did represent a working class struggle against the capitalist class in Algeria, which was near synonymous with the colonial ruling class. The FCL gave a fairly accurate critique of the FA’s moralistic sympathy of the Algerian revolts and abstentionism towards the direct struggles of the Algerian proletariat. The FA’s abstention only gave further space to pro-state socialists and the growing nationalist bourgeoisie, rather than contesting them politically. National liberation, if struggled for and by the working class, is the sort of reform struggle that has the potential to develop the power and organisation of the proletariat to the social and political goals of revolution more broadly. Throwing out the established ruling class does not necessitate the imposition of the other in the long term, if bourgeois and nationalist elements are critiqued in the process of liberation, and the process of struggling for this political revolution and the dislocation of capitalist social order potentially develops space for a social revolution. This being said, the FCL’s support comes out the other end of the revolution less critical than it should have been, and the FA was correct to identify that there existed nascent bourgeois forces in the national liberation movement that needed to be combatted. We can only speculate that if FCL had survived longer if their position would have developed, but what we can say for certain is that abstaining from the movement did nothing to stop the growing nationalist and militaristic arm of the FLN from growing hand seizing power.

From an organisational perspective it’s clear that the external orientation of the FCL guarded it from the abstentionist tendencies of the FA, and it meant that they had a serious impact on the political epoch of the late 1950s/early 1960s. Fontenis’ warning that groups without an external focus tend to spiral in pointless internal debates was a pot shot at the FA, but also a general lesson for anarchists to heed. Despite the organisational mistakes that the FCL made – and there are more beyond the aimless stubbornness they showed when they faced increased police repression, including a reckless and failed electoral push – their impact on the Algerian war demonstrates

seriously that strategic and disciplined organisations are the best way that anarchists can make a political impact. This affirms the need today for organisations like the FCL, that take political organisation and intervention seriously.

The Ben Bella Regime: The Limits of National Liberation and Worker Self-Management

After seven years of intense struggle against the French state, a cease-fire was announced on March 19, 1962 in order to negotiate French withdrawal from Algeria. The main political players in Algeria, notably the leaders of the FLN, were left with a vacuum in which they could mold a new Algerian political and social order.

At a political level, the FLN became the only clear political leadership in the country, yet was internally fractured between two main factions. The first, the militarised 'army of the exterior' which had operated out of neighbouring Morocco and Tunisia, the Armée de Libération Nationale (ALN) led by Houari Boumédiène. The second, the 'army of the interior' section of the FLN, that mobilised worker and peasant support for its campaign and militia, whose internal power brokers rallied around socialist-leaning Ben Bella as its leader, himself a former officer in the French army. The alliance of convenience between the now-politicians representing the muscle of the revolution, the Algerian working class, and leaders representing the developing bourgeois class of military officers, was a contradictory alliance that would inevitably crack. This alliance, formed on the political program of national liberation, ran face first into having to answer without any serious preparation the social question – the organisation of society and the economy that would follow after the French occupation.

Meanwhile, on the social front, the flight of French property owners in Algeria to France in the months following independence left the door wide open for Algerian workers to seize factories, farmland, and service sectors and manage them via worker committees. This wave of appropriations, driven entirely from the working class itself, completely reformatted the Algerian economy in the course of months. There is no evidence of an explicit socialist program from these worker committees, apart from some experience and propagandising in labour disputes and strikes – instead it was the best way that the workers decided to continue making a livelihood. This tendency of autogestion (self-management) was so large that it was estimated that in 1964, even after the state instituted a few rounds of industrial nationalisation, that between 500,000 – 700,000 workers out of the 2.2 million active workers were working in a self-managed unit, cultivating between 6–7 million of the 17.5 million cultivatable acres in the country. Given the decentralised and unplanned nature of this rapid seizure, the self-managed units struggled to build the infrastructure necessary to organise across sites and industries. However, worker-run newsletters began to circulate and large labour federations such as the Bureau National d'Animation du Secteur Socialiste (BNASS) began to openly teach and advocate for self-managed units and organised mass worker conferences and attempted to rally support the project of autogestion. These organisations cut against the increasingly pacified and pro-state general workers union, the Union Nationale des Travailleurs Algériens (UGTA).

The new political leadership under Ben Bella, whose base of political support was the Algerian working class, had little choice but to collaborate with radical economic self-management, and in many ways Ben Bella was sympathetic to the project of converting Algeria into a state social-

ist society. The new government formed a committee, the *National Office for the Protection and Management of Vacant Properties* (BNBV), of influential local and international radicals (including a founding member of the Trotskyist Fourth International, Michaelis Raptis – better known as Michel Pablo) whose goal it was to link the projects of social and political revolution that were occurring largely in parallel in the country. Porter is largely critical of the state intervention into the autogestion movement, foreshadowing that “the very decision to move the state further into the structure, dynamics, and support of this sector set up a predictable confrontation with the principle and reality of control from below”.

The main product of the BNBV committee was a series of edicts released in 1963 named the March Decrees, which put forward a generic model of worker’s self-management that the self-managed units would need to adhere to in order to be recognised and integrated into the national industry. This largely had the effect of taming the autogestion industry for Ben Bella’s own political ambitions, and coincided with the stacking of the UGTA leadership with pro-government officials to further tame worker revolt and build a compliant base of working class support for the new government.

Such a base of support, however, was too little too late. Over time the contradictions in this new Algerian state were too pronounced to keep steady. On the one hand, Ben Bella was attempting to court popular support by legislating and promoting a tamed version of autogestion, but at the same time the practice of autogestion could not help but undermine the authority of the state implementing it. In 1965 – only three years after he assumed the presidency – Boumédiène organised a swift and bloodless coup using his contacts in the military officer class as his base. With the working class increasingly demobilised and ill equipped to assert its own political interests against that of increasingly bourgeois nature of the national liberation movement, a new political class generated out of the national liberation struggle asserted itself and re-imposed state power, snuffing out the autogestion movement by legalistic and violent means in the coming years.

Among the lessons we can draw from this period of Algerian history is that it demonstrates the need to engage with the political dimension of a revolution alongside the social dimension and the importance of critically supporting the working class element of national liberation movements whilst being critical of the bourgeois elements that can develop alongside it. Without the development of anarchist ideas and practices in Algerian social life, the economic self-management that the Algerian working class embraced was unable to cohere into a political challenge against the reassertion of a new political class. Although Algeria had a libertarian social culture inherited from pre-colonial social customs, as remarked by Mohamed Saïl, and a history of contemporary worker and political struggle to complement it, this was not enough to resist the turn towards a new class society when the military wing of the revolution asserted itself as a new ruling class. The ‘critical’ support of the Algerian national liberation movement during the whirlwind of the autogestion years lent more on support rather than on criticism, which gave left cover for internal elements to use working class support for national liberation to support their own particular ambitions. These lessons reinforce a central revolutionary idea from anarchists – that the means that we use to make a revolution cannot help but condition the ends it achieves. In this case, the means of a military wing of professional soldiers led to the genesis of a new ruling class. The low levels of political organisation amongst the autogestion unions, something that would require decades of political struggle to cultivate, did not exist to resist it.

In the here and now, this demonstrates that we must be organised and openly struggle as anarchists to take advantage of the political moments a revolutionary period offers, and that the political lines we develop early in a struggle can have significant outcomes. One can draw a line between the decision to rely on bombing and military force as the means of revolution in 1954 and the overthrow of Ben Bella and the decay of autogestion in 1965.

Conclusion

Porter's book carries some crucial lessons for modern anarchists about critical support for national liberation, the necessity of organisation for anarchist militants, and the need for political organisation rather than just economic self-management to bring about a social revolution. In the chapters that follow, the book details (among many other things) how the Algerian state built up a right wing religious base to crush socialist sympathy, and the continuing exploitation of Algeria by the French through national economic control and visa programs — lessons that are well outside the scope of this review but can be learnt by picking up the book for yourself.

It's important to recognise that the Australian colonial context is very different to the Algerian one, so we cannot draw a direct comparison. With around 90% of the Algerian population being Indigenous Algerian at the time of the revolution, a mass movement based on national independence could be built there in a way that would not be possible in Australia, where Indigenous people account for only around 3.5% of the population. The social upheaval that accompanied the political revolution in the Algerian national liberation context is not possible in Australia with purely the remaining Indigenous population, and instead the political demands of Indigenous sovereignty will need to be won within the wider working class on a political basis as a part of a wider social revolution. What exactly this entails requires far more research, debate, and discussion, especially with the Indigenous working class, but such a challenge will be necessary for all anarchists and working class people to engage with for a social revolution in Australia to be possible. What is clear, however, is that the political demand for Indigenous sovereignty is something that anarchists should absolutely be in support of and organise around, and that we should be critical of actors who would use this movement for their own opportunistic reasons or to redirect its demands to preserve Australian capitalism, for example politicians like Jacinta Price or institutions like the state-tamed land councils.

Beyond our own shores, as waves of international imperialism ebb and flow and climate change intensifies, we should expect that the Australian state's role as an imperialist power in the Pacific will intensify. Australia exists already as an imperialist outpost to protect the interests of capital in South East Asia, militarily and economically, coordinating campaigns of oppression in the region and plundering the natural and social resources of each state for the interests of capitalism. Beyond acknowledging this, we should look for new ways to build direct support and solidarity with our geographical neighbours, and disrupt Australia's imperialist ambitions in South East Asia which gives it the tools not only to further oppress and plunder overseas but oppress the Indigenous and working class population of Australia.

Our task must then to not only struggle for Indigenous sovereignty on this land, but also to cast our eyes to the north and build real international solidarity, a solidarity of common struggle, with the workers in the Pacific islands, South East Asia, and beyond, to crush both imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism domestically and internationally.

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