Comparative Afterlives:

Vichy France and the Algerian War

A few weeks ago, when I was preparing this lecture, I didn’t expected that I would have to cope with such a burning question: are the current riots in France a kind of a legacy of “colonialism” or is it a biased way to understand contemporary French issues?

In any case, the legacy of the past is with no doubt part of the problem. When last Tuesday, French Prime minister announced the possibility to institute a curfew in the upset areas, many commentators quite instantaneously mentioned that the ground on which this decision was taken, was a law promulgated in the beginning of the Algerian War, in 1955. One might ask : why such an information ? This law already existed whenever it has been voted. And, whether we approve it or not – which is another problem –, a curfew and a state of emergency belong to the usual apparatus of a State, even for a democratic one coping with unexpected and alleged dangerous situations, as for example the patriotic acts supposed to face terrorism. Meanwhile, it’s undisputable that the colonial past roots in the mind of many of the protagonists, whether consciously or not.

Another example. A few days ago, some French leftists denounced the curfew as a revival of Vichy, even mentioning the Statute of the Jews of 1940. This is an usual issue in France when you want to stigmatize a political adversary: you just mention either he is a collaborator or that his behavior reminds you the pétainist régime.

With these two very recent examples, one may observe that the past often haunts French issues for history is mainly declined in our contemporary societies in terms of guilt and victimhood, and in France, mots of the time, this is the State which is blamed for the wronoings of the past.

The Papon trial is quite a good example of this tendancy. On Thursday 16 October, 1997, a man is standing at the bar, in Bordeaux. His name is Jean-Luc Einaudi. He is not a witness in the usual juridical sense, nor he is a professionnal historian. He is a militant who chased Papon for a long time for being responsible of what he calls « the massacre » of October 17, 1961, when a huge demonstration called by the Algerian FLN in Paris turned into a tragedy when the police forces decided to repress the mog in a very brutal
way. Until today, there are tremendous debates among historians to establish how many people died (from a dozen to several hundreds).

Let me quote him briefly:

“Thousand of people were caught in the round up. When the police cars weren’t enough, M. Papon commandeered the buses of the RATP (the Parisian public transit authority). In 1942, these were the buses of the TCRP (a Parisian private company) which were commandeered. And are requisitioned too some specific places in Paris to park the arrested people: the Porte de Versaille (a huge hall for fairs), or the Coubertin Stadium, for the Vélodrome d’hiver – the famous Vél d’Hiv doesn’t exist anymore”.

The situation here is quite emblematic. M. Papon was an active senior officer working for the Vichy Regime, but who succeeded to go through the purges without any damages. After the war, he played an important role in Algeria, and then he became préfet de Police in Paris, in March 1958. He was thus partly responsible of what happened in October 1961. Nevertheless, his presence in the dock, in Bordeaux, in 1997-1998, resulted only for his participation to the deportation of the Jews, in 1942-1944, and in no way for his deeds in 1961: whatever French soldiers and others did during the Algerian War, this was completely under the statute of limitations. The whole debate upon the possibility to judge former members of the Vichy regime for crimes against humanity during the 1990’s was even strongly conditioned by a parallel discussion – and a strong reluctance which finally prevailed – about the possibility to judge crimes committed in Algeria either.

In this perspective, the Papon trial offered a marvelous opportunity to embrace both situations. It illustrates to what extent the afterlives of these two major events in French contemporary history intermixed themselves.
Why such an interdependance? Why even such a widespread confusion between the legacy of two historical situations which are in some way comparable, but in many different ways, very different? How many times have I heard since the Vichy syndrome is now over, let’s put on the agenda the one of the Algerian one, as if it was the next nationwide didactic lesson to follow.

1° - If we let apart for a moment common opinions, historians might agree on a possible parallel between Vichy France and the Algerian War – I’m talking here about history not about memory, about what “really” happened, and not the way it was represented afterwards

- the two events constituted, for different reasons, two major defeats in French recent history which contributed to change profoundly the international status of a Nation which was still a great power until 1939;
- they were two moments of profound national divisions, even a beginning of a civil war, which shook the recent consensus upon the Republican regime in France;
- moreover, the two events are linked together and this the same generation who had to cope with both. Many historians think that the Algerian war began on May 8, 1945, when the French massacred a small city in Algérie in order to stamp the beginning of a nationalistic uprise;
- last but not least similitude, the two processes didn’t stop with the end of the war, and continued to live after.

– I use here the word « afterlife » which seems to me more neutral and more general than “memory”; it’s a way to emphasize that political or cultural issues related to a specific period of the past are probably more depending on their own context than related to the past as such. If we see in the current situation in France a consequence of colonization, we must keep in mind that the contemporaries didn’t see the colonial process as we do, we must recall for example that the Algerian fighters considered themselves more as heroes than victims, that they wanted at that time victory and not recognition. What happened after is another story which cannot be analyzed only in terms of memory.–
Besides the common points between Vichy France and the Algerian war, we must taking in account the huge differences between the two historical situations.

- what happened in France during WWII happened elsewhere, even if the question of Vichy is more or less a particular one; what happened during the Algerian War is a specific situation, due to the fact that one million European leaved in Algeria which was at that time a French département although the “natives” didn’t have the same rights than the “Français d’Algérie”, an expression used for people with an European or a Jewish background.

- if we compare the casualties and the total balance of the two wars, there is no possible comparaison – from a French point of view:

### CASUALTIES (DEAD) DURING WWII AND THE ALGERIAN WAR

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<th>GERMAN OCCUPATION</th>
<th>ALGERIAN WAR</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>French/Europeans</td>
<td>Algerians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soldiers</td>
<td>150,000</td>
<td>25,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Civilians</td>
<td>250,000</td>
<td>5,000 ?</td>
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<tr>
<td>(including POW &amp; Jews)</td>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>400,000</td>
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The Algerian war was a war and a civil war for Algerians, not for the French.

3° There are also huge differences between both « postwar » situations :

a) In the last decade, the issues upon Vichy dealt with the necessity and the best way to remember, the best manner to inscribe the legacy of the « Dark years » in a long-term

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perspective of French history, and the need for recognition for the crimes committed by the French State, mainly against the Jews.

- Except in very particular situations, like during the trials for crimes against humanity, there was no face to face between the older enemies; except a minority in the extreme right, no one seriously defended the point of view of the perpetrators.

- There is not even real historiographical controversies about the interpretation of Vichy France: almost all historians, with some nuances, agree on the nature of the Vichy regime, its implication in the Final solution, its own part of initiative which didn’t result from a German pressure.

b) The situation is completely different In the case of the Algerian war:

- the memory of the war is still a vivid issue between France and Algeria, which are not fully reconciliated until now. President Bouteflika often accuses French colonialism to be responsible for the war against Fundamentalists, in the 1990’s, which is a usual way for politicians to look for a scapegoat to explain their own deficiencies.

- Moreover, there are millions of French citizens, from Algerian background, especially from the second or third generation, who consider the Algerian War as a victory over colonialism, and who however still express a great resentment against France, their own country today, because of their social conditions. This second and third generations is not only claiming for a decent life – like many others in France and in Europe –, they are claiming for a real equality having the feeling that although they have all of the French citizen rights – on the contrary of the grand fathers and grand mothers who had a special status before 1962 –, they still lack of a real place in French society

- On an opposite side, there are also a smaller minority of French and European citizens, many from a Jewish origine, who are born in Algeria (or in Marocco or in Tunisia) or whose parents came from Algeria in 1962, and who suffered a kind of injustice in leaving what they considered as “their country” as well. They developed a kind of a nostalgia - la Nostalgréie -, even a kind of resentment, still perceptible today, especially among the French jews from sephardic origin (who played a major role in the recent debates over the Vichy legacy even if their parents suffered much less than the Jews who were in France at that time).

- Thus, there are plural interpretations of the Algerian war for the grand sons and the grand daughthers of the winners and the losers are sharing the same school benches.
Moreover, there are a lot of disputes in public debates as well as among historians about different interpretations of the past. We have a good example with the recent law promulgated in last February in order to praize the role of what we call “les Français rapatriés”, an expression to designate both European-background people who came after 1962 and the “Harkis”, the Algerian-background people who helped the French during the Algerian War. In their will to propose a kind of a counter-memory and to address the criticisms over French behavior, they proposed an article saying:

“School programmes must recognize the positive role played by the French presence overseas, especially in North Africa, and must give to the sacrifices of the soldiers of the French army born in these territories, the prominent place they deserve.”

Then, after having emphasized the differences between the history and the memory of two events, how and why binding them together?

I have already told it: the comparison is a political and cultural issue as such in contemporary French society. Even more: the revival of the memory of Vichy and the Holocaust, which has been a major issue in the last two decades in France, led to a paradoxical situation regarding the memory of the Algerian war:

- on the one hand, the great importance dedicated to the Shoah fueled the new judeophobia, a phenomenon which is widespread all over the world, including in France, and especially among part of the French muslims community: this was a vivid issue until the recent riots, and don’t forget that some of the brothers of the young people who are burning cars, were burning synagogues a few months ago.

- on the other hand, the struggle for the memory of the Holocaust conducted by survivors associations became a model used by groups who wish an equivalent recognition for some victims of the Algerian war, mainly those who were tortured by the French army.

In a more general way, my own comparison is based here on two hypothesis:
FIRST Hypothesis: Both Vichy France and the Algerian have known quite a similar afterlife and a comparable evolution in French collective memory, what I have called previously the four steps of memory:

- a first step of transition which emphasizes the difficulties to exit war and go back to a normal situation: concept of “sortie de guerre”, which describes more a process, even a long-term process, than a moment or a period;
- a second step of mourning, forgetting and usually official amnesia
- a third step of anamnesis, or how the past returns into the present
- and finally, a fourth step of possible hypermnesia before a possible normalization (like the situation today about the memory of Vichy).

SECOND hypothesis: Afterlives of both events led to similar ways of remembering, similar kind of public and collective actions to defend the point of view of the victims and to promote a « duty to remember », a very recent issue; thus, both afterlives belong to a same contemporary “culture of memory”, and both are symptoms of a specific relationship between past and present in contemporary societies.

The four steps of memory

When I wrote the Vichy Syndrome, in the 1980's, I dealt with the issue of memory without being fully aware about what it really meant. I tried to propose a kind of an empirical interpretation of the presence of the past from the end of the Vichy regime, in 1944, until the moment where the book was published, in 1987, just before the opening of the Barbie trial.

In this previous work, I identified four periods in Vichy’s afterlife which I spontaneously considered as a specific trademark of what I have called the “Vichy syndrome”. Later, reading the deluge of books on the memory of the Holocaust either in other European countries – mainly in Germany – or elsewhere, like in Israel or in the US, I got the impression that my empirical “four-steps” concept could apply not only to the Vichy case but to the memory of the Holocaust as a whole, the “Vichy syndrome” becoming in this perspective just the French part of an international and widespread phenomenon.

Then, I observed what happened in France in the last decade with the revival of the Algerian war in collective consciousness. Reading books on the memory of this event, I realized that the “four-steps” argument could apply here as well, even with some important
differences. This means that the explanation of the evolution of memory is less depending from the original event as such than from a specific way we have to cope with the past, whatever is the past, today.
1° - Transition and “exiting war”

- The end of the Vichy regime is a complex period where the desire of reconstructing the country and closing the books was challenged by a profound feeling of bitterness, even of revenge. During these period, political parties, veteran associations, former resisters proposed what will become a dominant interpretation of the Dark years: the country was victim of the Nazi barbarity, the collaborators were “a handle of miserables”, Vichy was an authority de facto which never had any kind of a legitimacy, and the “true France”, the one of the République, the one of the homeland of the rights of men, survived in London, Algiers or in the Resistance. The role of Vichy, its profound impact on French society, and moreover its role in the Final Solution were played down, not to say completely ignored for conscious or unconscious reasons.

Nevertheless, the Vichy regime and the collaborators were put on trial, in a massive way: about 350,000 people were at a moment or another under the threat of a prosecution; and there are six to seven more French collaborators (about 1,500) who were legally executed in France between 1944 and 1953 (without mentioning the 10,000 summary executions) than former nazis in the Western occupied zones of Germany at the same time.

Then, the process of memory began with very mixed feelings: the proud to see the Nation, thanks to the France libre and the Resistance, being part of the Victors, but the repressed shame for having been obliged to leave with the enemy during four long years; the happiness to see the democracy restored but the ambivalent remembering of the support given to Marshall Pétain, four years before.

In the case of the Algerian war, the first step, the “exiting war process” was very different. The nation as a whole has rejected the war for a long time, and most of the French people didn’t feel really concerned by the “événements”, except the fact that in total, about 1,200,000 French men served in Algeria between 1954 and 1962.

The repatriation of one million “Pieds-Noirs” was one of the most important social consequence of the end of the war, but these people were not really welcomed. In a long-term perspective, one can underline two major unexpected consequences of the colonization
of North Africa and its brutal decolonization: France has today the most important Muslim community all over Europe, and the most important Jewish community as well.

On the contrary to what happened after WWII, no soldiers or officers were judged after 1962 for their behavior in Algeria. The end of the war was marked in its very beginning by a process of amnesty. The first one is part of the Évian agreements, in 1962, between the new République algérienne and France. Other important laws were voted in 1964 and in 1968 to pardon those who helped the FLN, and the former members of the OAS. Thus, the books were closed quite immediately, and speaking about the books doesn’t mean to speak about the lone Algerian war, it refers to the whole process of colonization. From one day to another, the Nation seemed to forget the profound social and cultural consequences for having been during a century and a half a worldwide colonial Empire.

2° Mourning, forgetting and amnesia

Here, there is a real common situation between the legacy of Vichy France and the Algerian war. From the 1950’s to the 1970’s, Vichy and Collaboration were no more issues in French society, and became more or less “taboos”. A similar phenomenon happened after 1962 for the Algerian War, and lasted until very recently.

But, here we must be careful when speaking about “amnesia”. To my opinion, a “collective amnesia” is in cultural matters what an amnesty law is for lawyers: it is a fiction. It means that it is a constructed representation of the past shared by a collectivity which decides not to speak any more about the past. Actually, amnesia means frequently “silence”, and usually “official silence”. By no way, it means that people forgot what happened. It means that they accepted more or less, and not without strong resentments to look forward and not backward.

In a heuristic way, a period of silence about the past can be identified by the fact than it precedes a period into which the past is alive in a society. It’s because many survivors began to testify in the 1980’s about the Holocaust that we realized to what extent they were silent before. This is the same thing with the Algerian war: the growing number of witnesses talking about the war in the 1990’s emphasized the profound silence which occurred in the previous years.
Here again, we have to be careful: until very recently, official silences, collective or political amnesias were usual ways to cope with a traumatic past, for example the legacy of a civil war. This changed quite recently, with the tremendous impact of the memory of the Holocaust, which led to consider that remembering is a supreme value of modern global societies.

3\textsuperscript{rd} and 4\textsuperscript{th} steps: A process of anamnesis, and hypermnesia

In this context, one can observe a similar movement of anamnesis for the Dark years and the Algerian war. The revival of the Vichy syndrome began in the 1970’s, and reached a peak in late 1990’s, with the Papon trial – this is now a well known situation; the revival of the Algerian war began in the 1980’s and reached a peak in the 1990’s as well, it means at the same time, like two rivers merging.

One can explain the revival of the Algerian war by two contextual explanations, one at an international level, the other one, at a social one.

The first Gulf war, the first Intifida and the general situation in the Middle East are here important elements. Moreover, the beginning of the civil war in Algeria, in late 1990’s, the growing influence of islamists movements led to a comparison with the past, especially for some fundamentalists who still continue to blame France and those in Algeria who are faithful to the French culture. In their perspective, the Algerian war was less the war of independance of a former colony than a war between Islam and Christianity.

On the other hand, I haved already mentioned the situation of millions of young French citizens, from Algerian background, who began to fight in the 1990’s for a better integration, either by claiming equal rights or facing racism (SOS Racisme), or joining some religious groups challenging the so-called French model. Whatever are their political choices, including burning cars, they are not in a logic of silence and reconciliation, but in a logic of victimhood and recognition, which is probably the faith of any second or third generation after a traumatic event: remember the word of Ezekiel, in the Bible: “The fathers eat the sour grapes, but the children’s teeth are set on edge ».
This last statement leads me to invoke here another series of explanations, not linked to the specific meaning of the Algerian War in French or international politics, but which refers to a specific way to cope with the past in contemporary societies, what we can call the “era of victimhood”, by comparison to the “era of the witness”, emphasized by Annette Wieviorka.

The era of victimhood

Comparing battles for memory is not to provide here comparisons between the crimes committed by the Nazis and their French accomplices in the Holocaust, and crimes committed by the French army in Algeria. This comparison is simply nonsense to my opinion at a historical level. The war in Algeria was not a genocide even if it had obviously a racist dimension: the round up of October 17, 1961 has nothing to do with the Vél d’Hiv round up, despite what was suggested at the Papon trial. The French army committed undoubtedley systematic acts of torture; but the FLN committed numerous war crimes too, especially against civilians, and including against Algerians: the civil war in Algeria, between different factions, or the repression after 1962 led to a tremendous number of casualties which were not caused by the French.

Whether we accepte or not these factual elements, there is no doubt that the comparison has been often made by groups or people defending the point of view of the “colonized”. What is interesting here is not to point out the usual instrumentalization of the past, but to underline to what extent there are similar ways of acting upon the past, with the idea – the illusion ? – to repair it. Here, the memory of the Holocaust has worked as a model from which it is possible to identify the main features.

We can see in both situations the same valorization of memory and the denunciation of forgetting.

We can see the same difficulty to establish a consensus for a commemoration which can be accepted by all the parties.

We can see the same metonymical use of the past: the persecution of the Jews is seen as the main element of the Vichy regime; the 17 October 1961 subsumes all the other crimes committed during this war.
We can see the same use of late testimonies, and finally the same will to instrumentalize the law and justice as vectors of memory, which succeeded in the case of the Holocaust survivors, but failed in the case of the Algerian war.

Conclusion

- To my opinion, after the recent period of recognition of the Holocaust survivors, the Second World War is probably now over. The legacy of colonialism is not. But what is at stake is less the memory of the last episode, the décolonization wars, than the profound impact of the whole process during almost two centuries: this is what some historians call “l’impensé colonial”, which means the inability for instant to establish an objective balance of history, and then can lead either to underestimate the ethnic dimension of current social problems, or to overestimate them, and to adopt a very easy explanation coming from the past, in order not to face the reality: for example, what is at stake today, is it the inability of the French society to integrate the grand sons of the former colony, or to accept 6 to 7 millions of Muslims, which is a different problem?

- the duty of remember was a value in the case of the Holocaust until very recently.
  - today, please, forget the Holocaust a little bit
  - what is a duty to remember in the case of the Algerian war? Probably, we probably may rely on the old tradition, the one which encourage the forgetting of the old wounds in order to let the possibility to live together.