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France and the Memory of the Algerian war: The Ambiguous Commemoration of October 17, 1961.

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**France and the Memory of the Algerian war:
The Ambiguous Commemoration of October 17, 1961.**

(Translations from the original French text are mine)

On May 9, 2001, the French daily *Libération* published the results of an opinion poll on “torture during the French-Algerian war.” In this poll, 56% of those questioned declared being favorable to an official apology to the Algerian people from the French President or Prime minister. To the question: “according to you, who are the main parties responsible for the use of torture during the French-Algerian war?” 50% of the French placed the blame on the political authorities at the time, while 31% placed the blame on the military. In addition, 56% wanted to see the officers who had used torture brought to justice. (This poll followed the publication in May 2001 of a book by General Aussaresses condoning the use of torture during the war).

According to this poll, a majority of the French population seems ready to face the painful memories of the French-Algerian war, and is not afraid to engage the responsibility of the French state in the crimes that took place at the time. Yet, on October 17, 2001, the mayor of Paris, Bertrand Delanoë, was left alone to inaugurate the plaque commemorating the Paris massacre of Algerians on October 17, 1961. No member of the French government chose to accompany him in the ceremony. Could it be that there is a significant gap between French public opinion and the French government regarding the crimes of the French-Algerian war?

The purpose of this essay is to analyze the complex spaces between officially acknowledging a crime, taking responsibility for it, and asking for forgiveness, through the “strange commemoration” of October 17, 2001.

On October 5th, 1961, as the French-Algerian war was coming to an end, several high-level government officials took part in a secret meeting to decide on a series of security measures against what chief of police Maurice Papon, described then as “the criminal activities of

Algerian terrorists.” One of the measures taken during this meeting was the establishment, as soon as October 7th 1961, of a curfew for Algerians from 8:30pm until 5:30am. Following this decision, the Algerian Independence Movement (the FLN) organized a large peaceful demonstration in the center of Paris, at 8pm on October 17, 1961. Twenty to thirty thousand Algerian men, women and children took part in the demonstration. The purpose of the march was to protest against the curfew while transgressing it at the same time.

The response from French public officials was implacable. Under the orders of Maurice Papon, the Parisian police, helped by the national police (CRS), attacked with incredible violence the peaceful demonstration. The number of victims is still being debated by historians and public officials: it ranges from a few dozen to nearly three hundred, according to researcher Jean-Luc Einaudi. More than 10’000 were arrested and kept captive for several days in a stadium east of Paris. The editorial of philosopher Jean-Paul Sartres’ *Les Temps Modernes* did not hesitate to compare the Parisian police to the Nazi police, and this massacre of Algerians to a “pogrom.” In the days following this dramatic event, more than 1500 Algerian men were expelled from France to internment camps in Algeria.

When looking at this event today, what is most striking is the silence of French government officials, who instead of allowing the opening of a public inquiry, preferred to censor and confiscate publications dealing directly with this event.

This violent page of French history did not completely disappear from French collective memory, however. A quick analysis of articles commemorating this event since 1961 in the four main daily newspapers (*Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, *L’Humanité*, *Libération*) can give an indication of the evolution of the “work of memory”. The evolution was the following: no article published in 1971, one article (the first) in *Libération* on October 17, 1980, 6 articles in 1981, 13 in 1991 and more than 30 in 2001. This visibility in the daily press is a direct consequence of the work of intellectuals, historians, novelists, and moreover, descendants of victims, through organizations such as “MRAP”, “do not forget October 61” and “sos racisme.” For several years now, a small

group comes to the St Michel Bridge on October 17, to pay homage to the victims killed by the French police, whose bodies were thrown into the Seine river. This year, there were several thousand people on the bridge, responding to the call of humanitarian organizations and leftist groups. They were walking behind a banner that read “in the name of memory.”

After 40 years of official silence, the October 17, 1961 massacre suddenly returned to the French public and political scene. For the first time, an elected official, the new socialist mayor of Paris, officially recognized the existence of the massacre by inaugurating a commemorative plaque “to the memory of the numerous Algerians killed during the bloody repression of the peaceful demonstration of October 17, 1961.” This limited gesture is considerable because it symbolizes the first recognition of a monument, of what Pierre Nora called a “realm of memory” of the Algerian war on French soil.

While history is grounded in the facts of the past, memory is constantly actualized as it comes into contact with the present. It is because of the fragility of spontaneous memory and its possible disappearance, that physical spaces (such as monuments), but also temporal spaces (such as commemorations) are necessary to maintain the memory of past events alive. It is precisely because Algerian immigrants remained invisible for so long, out of the city and out of French history, and because the French government did all it could to isolate and fragment individual memories, that this Parisian commemorative plaque represents a central event in the history of contemporary France. Even though this commemoration was not associated with an official apology or a clear desire to open one of the darkest pages of the history of 20th century France, this gesture allowed the concrete introduction of the tragic events of October 1961 in French collective memory.

Although the plaque was placed in silence, without an official speech, the mayor of Paris accepted to answer questions from the press. Apparently very moved by the event, he declared:

“I think that it was important, in the name of memory, to remember what had happened.
[...]

This plaque is not directed against anyone. It is dedicated to the victims of this painful moment and to their descendants. I want their descendants to know that they are members of the Parisian community, and that their history is our history. The work of memory of the town of Paris should include all Parisians. “

This declaration from the mayor of Paris shows all the complexity and the ambiguity of this municipal celebration. In order to explain the role of this plaque in the construction of a French national history of the French-Algerian war, I would first like to contrast this declaration from the mayor of Paris, with the speeches of President Chirac and Prime Minister Jospin regarding the national commemoration of the crimes against Jews in France during the 2nd world war (more specifically the roundup of Jews in the Vel d’Hiv in Paris in July 1942).

In his 1995 speech, President Chirac did not hesitate to involve the collective responsibility of France, but also of the French state. Without formally apologizing, Chirac acknowledged that France had committed an unforgivable, or rather “irreparable” act. Two years later, Prime Minister Jospin admitted that “July 16 and 17 1942 will remain infamous days in the history of our country.” Jospin continued his speech by saying that “memory is a Republican necessity” and that “there is no nation without memory.”

“Nation”, “Republic”, “France”, “French State”, “Government”, all these words used in the speeches of Chirac and Jospin regarding the crimes of the 2nd world war, are absent from the mayor of Paris’ declaration. Despite the courage of his decision to place this commemorative plaque, despite his good will, the mayor of Paris cannot make any official declarations in the name of the French state or even of the French government, since he is only an elected official of the town of Paris.

In his declaration to the press, Delanoë acknowledges the need for France to begin a work of memory, even if this memory is painful. The plaque is dedicated to the victims of this “painful moment” but also to their “descendants”. Delanoë continues his speech talking of the “community of Parisians” and of the “memory of Paris.” He is very careful not to mention the community of the French and the memory of France. The problem, however, is that the events of October 1961 do not only belong to the history of Paris, they are an integral part of the history of the French-Algerian war.

In light of the events of October 1961 and in order to better understand the ambiguity of the recent recognition of this dramatic moment, it is important to study how the French state and the political elite managed the memory of the French-Algerian war. While new generation politicians, such as the mayor of Paris, are beginning to speak more openly of these questions, it is interesting to note that each successive government of the 5th republic has contributed to the elaboration of a complex juridical system making it impossible to establish a collective responsibility for the crimes of the French-Algerian war.

Four successive amnesty laws (in 1962, 1966, 1968 and 1982) were voted by the French parliament in an attempt to “erase” the troubled memories of the Algerian tragedy and reunite French society. The first text was included in the Evian treaty marking the end of the war on March 19, 1962. The Evian treaty stipulates that “no one can be subjected to disciplinary or judicial measures, or any discrimination because of acts committed during the French-Algerian war before the official ceasefire.” This text, signed just a couple of months after the tragedy of October 1961, makes it impossible to bring to trial the perpetrators of the massacre.

Four years later, in 1966, another law would broaden the scope of the amnesty, to include all infractions committed during police operations. The 1968 law proposed to amnesty all crimes committed in relation (direct or indirect) with the French-Algerian war, whatever the nature or gravity of the condemnation. Finally, the 1982 law allowed the rehabilitation in their functions

(and the retroactive payment of pensions) to all military and public officials having served during the war; this law also included the OAS generals who had attempted to assassinate General de Gaulle in August 1962. More than any other, the 1982 law caused angry discussions in the government and in parliament. A close analysis of this law reveals the rhetoric chosen by the French state to officially institute “forgetting”.

On November 25, 1982, Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy presented his project to the French parliament in the following way:

“Twenty years have passed. Since, many steps have been taken in the direction of forgiveness [...] A nation is always stronger when it can overcome its divisions and re-incorporate “lost citizens”. Our role is not to divide once again. Our role is to reconcile and rally the entire French population. [...]

Forgiving is not forgetting. It does not include an approval of the facts that were once condemned. [...] But French society must help to appease minds. It must help close the wounds. This is the role of the government. [...] However, forgiveness cannot be partial. Forgiveness cannot be measured or negotiated, especially when it has emanated from the highest authority in the State.”

Analyzing the different concepts used by Pierre Mauroy can help understand how amnesty laws function, and their role in the construction of a certain memory, or a certain forgetting of the French-Algerian war and its associated crimes.

First, Mauroy speaks of amnesty as a “pardon” that would be emitted by the highest authority in the state. According to him, it is the role of government to show “the road to forgiveness”. Amnesty represents a form of collective pardon granted by the French state in the name of the French people. The problem is that this “pardon” or “forgiveness” is not introduced as a request. For it to be a request, the government would have to recognize both victims and culprits.

In a 1999 interview, Jacques Derrida noted that the end of the 20th century had been marked by an inflation of political recourses to forgiveness, amnesty, apology or even regret. The problem with forgiveness, according to Derrida, is that it tends to be confused with the procedure of political amnesty. Yet, while amnesty functions within a specific political and juridical framework, the discourse of forgiveness must be articulated within an ethical framework.

Many philosophers have discussed the question of forgiveness and its relation to amnesty. I would also like to address this debate using three contemporary authors, who have thought of this question in light of the crimes against humanity committed during the 20th century. The dominant thesis, as it is presented by Vladimir Jankélévitch in *L'Imprescriptible* and by Hanna Arendt in *The Human Condition* is that forgiveness can only be contemplated if the culprit recognizes the crime, and is repentant.

By definition, a crime links one or several victims with one or several culprits. As Arendt explains, forgiveness cannot be unilateral: it is the result of an exchange between the victim and the culprit, the result of a confession, which is why “no one can forgive him/her self”. Following the same line of thought, Jankélévitch claims that it is impossible to forgive Nazi war crimes since the perpetrators have never clearly acknowledged their culpability. Forgiveness, according to Arendt and Jankélévitch can only be formulated as the response to an act of repentance. Once the culprit has recognized the crime and apologized, the victim will then decide if the crime is forgivable or unforgivable. This is why, Arendt explains, “men are unable to forgive what they cannot punish, and unable to punish what appears unforgivable.”

When we apply the definition of forgiveness described by Jankélévitch and Arendt to contemporary French history, it appears clearly that the different amnesty laws voted by the French government since 1962 cannot be associated with legitimate acts of forgiveness.

In the case of the commemorative plaque placed by the mayor of Paris, there is the same effort to refrain from designating a culprit, someone responsible for the October 1961 massacre. Delanoë declared that the plaque was not directed against anyone. He is partially right: indeed, because of the numerous amnesty laws voted since 1962, those responsible for the massacre of October 17, 1961 have been pardoned *before even having been condemned*. In the absence of a culprit, both the notion of fault and the notion of forgiveness become absurd, lose all meaning.

Contrary to individual forgiveness or presidential pardon, amnesty does not have to be requested. Amnesty is imposed even on those who have not yet been condemned. As noted by Christian Bourguet, “this is the sign that this type of pardon is tied to the general interest of society rather than to the interest of the one who is forgiven.”

The logic of amnesty or arbitrary forgiveness can only lead to a “forced forgetting” that makes any “work of memory” difficult. In this specific case, Prime Minister Mauroy’s declaration that “forgiving is not forgetting” loses all pertinence. Amnesty laws are part of a politics of silence and of voluntary forgetting, often hidden behind what States call “national reconciliation.”

The tremendous violence of amnesty laws, according to Jacques Derrida, is that they deprive the victim of the right to speak, of the right to say “I forgive you” since they forgive in place of the victim. Amnesty laws are thus a second victimization, an “absolute victimization” since they deprive the victim of the possibility of contemplating to forgive the unforgivable.

Amnesty laws are thus the contrary of forgiveness; amnesty laws kill the very possibility of forgiveness. Pure forgiveness, according to J. Derrida, must be enunciated beyond any political, social or cultural motivations that are usually found associated with amnesty laws

J. Derrida contests Jankélévitch and Arendt’s idea that the culprit must recognize his/her culpability in order to be forgiven. According to him, forgiveness should not be based on a dialogue or an understanding between the culprit and the victim. For Derrida, the very idea of reconciliation is what makes forgiveness impossible. Yet, in all official discourses justifying

since 1962, the successive amnesty procedures, we can find the correlation between the need to forgive and the need to reconcile / reunite. According to J. Derrida, the “wound” must remain open in order for forgiveness to be possible. As he declares in his 1999 text *Sur Parole*: “for forgiveness to take place the irreparable must be reminded or must remain present, the wound must remain open”. If the wound is healed there is no space for forgiveness. .

As recent events in France confirm, the “wound” of the French-Algerian war is still open. Despite successive amnesty laws, numerous dissenting voices can be heard. A few days before the October 17, 2001 commemoration, another incident highlighted the tense relationship between France and Algeria, and re-opened the “wound” of the war just a little more.

On Saturday October 6, 2001, a historical soccer game between France and Algeria was supposed to take place. It was the first game between France and Algeria since 1962. This game had been described by politicians and the press as the “match of reconciliation” and an example of multi-cultural France.

Yet, from the very beginning of the game, the hope of reconciliation was shattered when thousands of spectators booed the French national anthem, after having listened to the Algerian one in silence. Then, about 15 minutes before the end of the game, as France was leading 4 goals to one, the stadium was invaded by dozens of young spectators, mainly French of Maghrebian origin, which caused the game to end abruptly.

For Azouz Begag, Algerian sociologist and novelist, the reaction of these young people was caused by their difficulty to reconcile two conflicting elements of their identity (French and Algerian). If they booed the French national anthem, it was to pay tribute to a country, Algeria, mutilated by so many wars and suffering, as it opposed the famous, rich, and beloved French national team.

For Mohamed Ghoualmi, Algerian ambassador in France, the game interrupted on October 6 reveals the complexity and the depth of the passionate relationship between Algeria and a “multicultural” France. The young people, who booed the French anthem and invaded the

field, are the descendants of the hundreds killed on October 17, 1961. Their reaction may simply be a desperate way to have their voices heard in a French society focused on national unity and forgetting.

While extreme right leader Bruno Mégret is already using this event as an example of insecurity and violence in contemporary France, it is interesting to ask, on the contrary, if such social “excesses” are not the first signs of a resistance to the silence imposed by the French State regarding the French-Algerian war.

As soon as 1995, Etienne Balibar was suggesting re-thinking the border between France and Algeria, not as a border between two nations, but as internal borders within each nation. He suggested thinking of the internal differences within both nations, implacably linked by history, language, and a large bicultural population, at once French and Algerian.

How will this new generation chose to manage its inheritance of the collective memory of the French-Algerian war? What spaces will be available for such a “work of memory”? Would an official apology to the Algerian people from the French State not risk reinforcing the silence, rather than opening a forum for the voices of the victims? Such a procedure (the official apology) tends to assume that an apology directly leads to forgiveness, and therefore tends to permanently close the debate. On the other hand, an official recognition of the crimes committed by the French State during the Algerian war, even if it was not directly associated with forgiveness as discussed previously, would allow the creation of a “moment” of memory that would serve as a reference point in the construction of a History of Postcolonial France.

The repressed voices of the victims of October 1961 can still be heard through their descendants. As long as these voices are not taken into account by the French State, the reconciliation of a multicultural France with itself will not be possible.