

The books that inspired Natalya Vince: “Domination and the Arts of Resistance helped me think about the complex nature of encounters between ‘the powerful’ and ‘the powerless’ in Algeria”

by Blog Admin

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Natalya Vince is Senior Lecturer in North African and French Studies at the University of Portsmouth. She specialises in modern Algerian and French history. Natalya talks us through the books and even films that helped shape her understanding of Algeria’s many complexities.



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The opportunity to contribute to this blog got me thinking about which books, recognisable across disciplines, or at least across fields, have shaped me as a historian. The enduring relevance of Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* and Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger’s *The Invention of Tradition* strike me every time I return to Algeria, a country where political legitimacy and social cohesion remain bound up with the construction and dissemination of a national past. E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class*, that undergraduate reading list staple which I read (most of) the summer before starting university, was, I now realise, key in shaping my interest in ‘bottom up’ history and ‘agency’. Because I work on a state which is not entirely democratic, where criticising the government through jokes, false rumours and gossip is a national sport with unspoken but commonly understood limits, James C. Scott’s *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* helped me think about the complex nature of encounters between ‘the powerful’ and ‘the powerless’.

But the truth is, I love a case study. Of course, case studies are informed by broader frameworks and in turn serve to illustrate, enrich or challenge the national or international picture. But what I love about case studies is the richness of detail which enables you to ‘get under the skin’ of a society. I like mentally mapping out street names I recognise in primary sources, tracing the itinerary of one individual of no obvious significance through boxes and boxes of archives, reading adverts, obituaries and news-in-brief in yellowing local newspapers and trying to understand why an oral informant appears to go ‘off topic’ in the middle of an interview.

My love of the case study, dating from an A Level history project on the British Union of Fascists in East London which I carried out as a student at City and Islington College, did not encounter Algerian history until the final year of my undergraduate degree, which was in French and History at Balliol College, Oxford. Yet when I came to study decolonisation, I was absorbed by India, Palestine and Vietnam – countries that seemed ‘relevant’. Algerian colonisation and decolonisation seemed too ‘different’ to provide a useful point of comparison, I bought into a myth of Algerian ‘exceptionality’ which ignored both the interconnectedness of the history of decolonisation and the ways in which Algeria exemplifies many of the key themes and tensions of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries.

Then I began to read works by novelists such as Assia Djebar, Mohamed Dib, Rachid Boudjedra and Kateb Yacine. Born during the colonial period, witnesses, and in some cases, actors, in the War of Independence (1954-1962) as well as incisive critics of the post-colonial period, these writers introduced me to a country which I knew very little about. Djebar’s most famous book is *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, but it was two of her earlier works which inspired me the most: *Les Enfants du Nouveau Monde*, a collection of short stories exploring the hopes and disappointments of independence, and *Les Alouettes Naïves*, set amongst Algerian exiles and refugees living in Tunisia during the Algerian War.

These books got me interested the social history of post-independence Algeria and mechanisms of

adaptation and resistance to the new order. By focusing on oral histories of women who were veterans of the Algerian War, I hoped to challenge the enduring perception that the status and roles of women in the Arab and Muslim world boils down to a battle between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’. Lila Abu-Lughod cogently critiques this simplification in [Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East](#), arguing that post-colonial projects with women as their object should not be seen as part of a trajectory moving from patriarchy to liberation (or vice versa) but instead placed ‘squarely within the messy situations of state building, anti-colonial nationalism, changing social orders, and the emergence of new classes.’

I find myself using this quotation a lot, but there are relatively few publications on the post-independence history of Algeria to help us understand such ‘messy situations’. This is for a variety of reasons. Within Algeria, post-independence history is a sensitive issue as it cannot be easily worked into a politically expedient narrative of heroes and villains in the way that the anti-colonial struggle can. For scholars not working under such political constraints, there remains the tendency to write Algerian post-independence history from a Franco-Algerian perspective using the language of trauma and repressed memory rather than focus on Algero-Algerian or international aspects of the past 50 years. There is also a shortage of archival sources. In this context, James McDougall’s [History and Culture of Nationalism in Algeria](#) was pathbreaking. He examines how the ‘ulama’ – Muslim theologians who developed an important strand of cultural nationalism in the 1930s – continued to ensure the endurance of their ideas in the post-1962 period through their mastery of a language of ‘national culture’ in which Islam occupied a predominant place. McDougall thus writes a history of 1960s and 1970s Algeria which is very different from that provided by Italian Marxist and Third Worldist sympathiser Gillo Pontecorvo in his brilliant 1966 film *The Battle of Algiers*.

To return to James C. Scott, in order to understand contemporary Algerian society – notably how those without power relate to those who have power, and tensions between different generations, regions, social groups and genders – I would recommend some comedy. Merzak Allouache’s 1976 film [Omar Gatlato](#) unflinchingly deconstructs Algerian masculinity and remains relevant today. Cartoonist [Ali Dilem](#)’s razor-sharp sketches critique corruption, poverty, ‘bearded men’ and the army generals who rule from the shadows. Fellag’s stand up routine *Djurdjurassique Bled* is an irreverent history of Algeria from the dinosaurs to the present day.

Fellag is pretty fun to watch and read ‘for work purposes’, but if I really want to switch off I’ll turn to any kind of fiction. That said, a non-fiction book that I was recently gripped by, devouring its 614 pages in the course of a weekend, was Carmen Callil’s biography of Vichy collaborator and shameless opportunist Louis Darquier de Pellepoix, [Bad Faith](#). It is a brilliant piece of scholarship as well as unputdownable – it is also, of course, a case study.

This article was originally published on LSE’s [Review of Books](#) blog.

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