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Compilation of Thoughts as Applied to the Battle of Algiers

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GENERAL EDUCATION

Nominated by Erik Trump, Professor of Political Science



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Author's Note: For this piece, my classmates and I were assigned to use our imaginations to apply what we had been learning in our Introduction to Politics class to the Algerian Civil War that erupted in the mid-19th Century. Political thinkers from many different periods of history were to be brought together by a character writing in a Web Log, and because of the nature of the assignment, there are blatant instances of historical inaccuracies: not only were there no computers in the 1950s; many of the characters that Margaret claims to have interacted with would have been dead.

May 13, 1956

This is my first online journal entry. People call it a “blog.” I feel like I need to introduce myself. My name is Margaret Chesterfield. I’m a bit late in starting a journal; I have been touring Europe for the past few months. Mum and Dad sent me over so I could “experience the world.” I figured, hey, they can afford it, so why not. Wait ‘til they find out I ditched Europe and headed for Africa. Not that I’m going to tell them; I’m sure the credit card bills will clue them in. I had heard while I was in France that there was a bit of commotion down here in Algeria, particularly in Algiers, and I wanted to check it out for myself, partly to get some excitement, but mostly because I know it’ll throw Mum for a loop. From what I can understand, the natives are trying to break free of the French, who took over their country in the early 1800s. It wasn’t made into a territory,

but a province, which makes it really hard for France to dump (*Battle of Algiers*). It’s going to be fascinating, being in the midst of an actual conflict! It’ll be much more interesting than the good old US anyway. I think the thing I’m most looking forward to, as boring as it sounds, is finding out if any of the so-called “intellectuals” that I’ve met have said anything that’s applicable to this situation. Not to brag or anything, but I’ve met a few of these guys while I’ve been traveling, thanks to Mum and Dad’s connections.

Well, I’m off to the beach. I’ll talk to you later, blog. I don’t like how that sounds. I’ll talk to you later, *journal*. Yes. Much better.

June 20, 1956

While I was in France, I met a man named Jean Jacques Rousseau, and from what I’ve seen over here this month, his social contract theory can really only be applied to the conflict in Algiers to show how the deal is *not* supposed to work.

He spoke very fast, and would occasionally break into French, but he explained the social contract as an agreement between all individuals of a state where a person gives up certain liberties in exchange for protection, rights, and so on (Rousseau Book I, Chapter 6). I was curious and asked him what he thought about equality. Rousseau shot off on a tangent about the “general will” and how “all [members] bind themselves to observe the same conditions and should

therefore all enjoy the same rights” (Rousseau Book 2, Chapter 4).

It’s a nice idea and everything, and I’m sure he’s put a lot of thought into it, but I just don’t see a good contract happening here. I ended my last entry making a note about visiting the beach, right? So I went and had a good time, saw a few neat fish, the whole nine yards. But, and this is just a small thing, the nice beaches are reserved for Europeans, while the Algerians have to go use the stony, crappy ones (*Battle of Algiers*). Not to mention the difference between the Algiers European Quarter, a place of luxury, and the Casbah, a pit of poverty.

I’ve spoken to a few Algerians, particularly a maid who works in the hotel I’m staying in, and that’s not where the restrictions end. She’s told me that the so-called “natives” have been trying to gain independence the legal way for years, but following French rules has gotten them nowhere; anytime they’ve tried to have elections of their own to get some political power into the hands of Algerians, the French would rig the election (*Battle of Algiers*).

As if that’s not bad enough (can you tell I’m kind of mad about this?), the Algerians have even been doing their part as French citizens, having served in both of the world wars (*Battle of Algiers*). Now that I think about it, this is another thing that Rousseau mentioned when we spoke; he made it very clear that one of the duties of those involved in the contract was to be willing to give their life for any cause the State desired (Rousseau Book 2, Chapter 5). After the wars simmered down, the Algerians asked for their rights, even protesting for them in the towns of Setif and Guelma, to which the French responded by massacring 45,000 Algerians (*Battle of Algiers*).

It’s really no wonder the Algerians are worked up. They’ve been organizing attacks against the police, which I had never really seen firsthand before today. I was in a shop and happened to look out the window when an Algerian in a black shirt came up behind a policeman, stabbed him in the neck, took his gun, and ran off. I’ll admit, I screamed. I’ve never seen an act of violence before. I’ve never seen somebody die. I don’t understand how a person can look at their fellow man and be okay with killing him.

Something that’s helped me to understand how a person can kill another person was a chapter in Steven Pinker’s book, *The Blank Slate*. He writes of the three reasons that people go to war, and the first is competition (Pinker 318). It’s a bit unnerving how inhumane humans can become when in pursuit of something they want, so much so that people in their way are seen as “its” rather than people (Pinker 319). To put the stabbing in this perspective, I guess that man saw the police officer not as a fellow human being, but as an impersonal object that was part of a group blocking his rights.

Pinker also writes about moral circles, the groups that people ally themselves with. There are two moral circles that I see here – the Algerians and the Europeans. Anybody outside of a particular sphere, it seems, isn’t worthy of the sympathy that is given to those inside it (Pinker 320).

I don’t think that this whole business about not recognizing a person as a person is limited to physical violence. Come to think of it, the Europeans didn’t treat the Algerians as humans when they denied them the equal rights I mentioned before. I think I know now what Martin Luther King was talking about. Mum made me sit down and read a letter he had written while in jail. In talking about the segregation problems of America, he wrote that it “ends up relegating persons to the status of things” (King, “Just and Unjust Laws”). The African Americans weren’t (usually) physically acted against, but there were laws separating them and treating them like objects instead of people.

I see that happening here, too, except that instead of “White Only Restaurants,” there are splendid European beaches and inferior Algerian ones. Algerians’ participation in elections is allowed, unlike African Americans, but the elections are fixed.

I feel pretty rotten having come here looking for action. It’s not a novel that I’m wrapped up in, nor a radio broadcast series; this is real. People, real people, are suffering and are trying to end that suffering.

October 1, 1956

I wonder if violent force, defined by Ellen Grigsby in *Analyzing Politics*, especially in the form of terrorism, is ever right.

At the end of last month, the Algerians started to use indiscriminate violent force (aka terrorism) against the Europeans (*Battle of Algiers*). The National Liberation Front (FLN) organized the setting of bombs in select public locations. I actually walked out of one of the targets, a café, just an hour before an explosion ripped it apart. I’m an American and they could have easily killed me along with the Europeans, and that scares me. That café was full of all kinds of people who weren’t even directly involved in the oppression of the Algerians. I understand why they targeted the law officers earlier in the year, but it’s harder to see how they can justify this (*Battle of Algiers*).

Grigsby defines force as the “exercise of power by physical means” (36). Of the four kinds of power she describes, force is the least expensive (43). I was browsing the Internet today and came across an article by Marc Nicholson that sang the same song, only about terrorism. He calls it “resistance on the cheap” and notes that it’s particularly used by civil groups who have few resources compared to those forces they usually face – a state (Nicholson 4). He

also writes that it makes military sense for these groups to use terrorism. Instead of losing whatever forces they have amassed to a superior one, they can seek a different goal: “to so upset the civilian economic and social life of an adversary state as to force negotiations on more equal terms” (Nicholson 4).

I can follow how it’s a rational move to save your own men and supplies by using this tactic, but I don’t agree in calling it cheap. What neither Grigsby nor Nicholson take into account is the anger that is roused in the target society when its innocent civilians are attacked. This can cost the group members when the larger state with more resources starts to root out the cause of innocent deaths. And though it may cost little to make a bomb or to buy a knife to kill the aforementioned police officer, it will take more than one or two incidents to bring the opposed state to the negotiating table, and the costs, in lives and in capital, will compound. Like I said, the first reaction won’t be to negotiate with the terrorists, but to hunt them down.

A bit beside the point, but I’m disappointed that the Europeans would stoop to using bombs on civilians first. I know that they were probably very frustrated with the targeted attacks on their law enforcement, but to kill at random with explosives when no indiscriminate violence had been used against them was a bad move. It goes against what Nicholson says too in that the French or whoever detonated the bombs are part of the superior state and shouldn’t have to use terrorism like the civil group.

I think I’m off. I’ve taken to writing down at the hotel bar (they have wireless access down here), but I don’t like staying out too late anymore.

P.S. Mum mailed me today to ask me to come home before I’m “blown to smithereens.” I don’t think I *can* go. I need to see this thing through, even if technically I have no national interest in it.

October 3, 1956

Apparently, the bombing activity has brought the hotel guests together in the bar tonight to discuss the current events. Of the many people letting their opinions out, the two I’m most interested in are my fellow countrymen, Henry David Thoreau and Reinhold Niebuhr. They’re having a discussion at the table next to mine.

Thoreau is of the opinion that the Algerians, at least in their motives, are doing a good thing. “Too many people refuse to stand up and act against injustice. They try to push it off with a vote. That’s as good as saying to the government, ‘if you could just please consider this, I would appreciate it.’ No, these people, these Algerians, they’re making a change” (Thoreau 241-260).

Niebuhr waits a moment to reflect on what his friend

has said, takes a long draught of what looks to be some kind of soda, and responds.

I would agree that these people are oppressed, and that their cause, equality, is a just one. But I cannot help but think that they’re going about this the wrong way. Violence, I believe, tends to perpetuate injustice. Think about it; now the Europeans who might have been sympathetic to the cause of the Algerians are angry about their innocent dead, and the unequal treatment will be increased. Besides that, have the natives thought about the international community? If they plan to ask for help, how can they justify themselves after losing all credibility in a terrorist attack? It is only nonviolence that has the potential to gain popular approval and support, especially for oppressed nationalities. (Niebuhr 169-200)

Thoreau, slightly drunk, smiles at the mini-speech given by his companion. He murmurs something about going to the bathroom and staggers off.

I wonder about what Thoreau has said about the nature of voting: is it really useless? The United States emphasizes it so much and is so proud of it, saying that it gives people the power to choose what they want for themselves. Is more required of me as a citizen? I read in a newspaper somewhere that Thoreau had been imprisoned for refusing to pay taxes (Thoreau 241-260). Maybe he, like Niebuhr, is more interested in non-violent but thoughtful methods of opposing the government. The Algerians have certainly moved past this kind of protest.

Niebuhr is still sitting alone. I wonder what he thinks of Thoreau. Maybe I’ll talk with him for a bit. I’ll be back.

* * *

I’m back in my room. Niebuhr had some very interesting insights. For one, he knew that Thoreau had been imprisoned, and actually seemed quite glad about it. He highly esteems the efforts of Gandhi, and actually quoted him when I brought it up: “Non-violence implies voluntary submission to the penalty for non-co-operation with evil” (Gandhi). It was actually a point on which he seemed disappointed with the Algerians. He realized that they had tried the legal methods of breaking free of the French already and had resorted to violence, but they hadn’t accepted the penalty for their actions.

This stance about accepting punishment reminds me of something else that Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote about in that letter of his about just and unjust laws. “I submit,” he said, “that an individual who breaks a law...and willingly accepts the penalty...is in reality expressing the very highest respect for the law” (King).

There’s so much to think about over here. But as it is, I’m tired and am headed to bed. Goodnight, journal.

March 4, 1957

It's been so long since I've written. I'm still in Algiers. Mum and Dad are threatening to cut me off pretty soon, but I know they won't.

Recent events, namely a very unnerving press conference, lead me to write to you again, journal. As an American, I was given access to the conference today, and an issue came up that I've heard rumors about, but haven't heard confirmed. Late last year, when the French Paratroopers came in, the local police pretty much handed the Battle of Algiers over to them to solve (*Battle of Algiers*). At the press conference, Colonel Mathieu, head of the Paratroopers, didn't exactly confirm it, but it's pretty certain that the French are torturing Algerians to find out who belongs to the FLN. This news brings to mind what two men I met last year in Europe said about leaders. One, Niccolo Machiavelli, I met in Florence, Italy. When I spoke with him, Machiavelli was very concerned with how a leader was esteemed by his people, particularly with whether it was better for him to be loved or feared (Machiavelli 65). In the end, he told me how it was fear that should be preferred over love, for love is fickle and can be potentially destructive. But he also stressed how it was important to avoid having the population hate the leader in question (Machiavelli 66).

With that in mind, my question is this: will the use of torture cause the French people to hate (to a degree) their government? Torture is so different from war injuries and deaths. At least in warfare, a soldier has the opportunity to defend himself. If the French people hate their government, aren't they more likely to sympathize with the Algerians? After all, the Europeans have not only lost civilians, but have killed Algerian civilians, so are equally in the wrong as far as terrorism is concerned. And what kind of impact does it have on the international community and their view of France?

The other man, an Englishman named John Locke, I met in London. Like Machiavelli, he was concerned with the leadership or government of a country, only Locke was focused on the problem of tyranny. One thing he said that really sticks out to me was that while a king must not be a tyrant, nor can he give those who serve him (like the police or military) the power to act against the law (Locke). The French police gave the authority to the Paratroopers to do "what was necessary." If torture goes against natural law, are they doing exactly what Locke said is tyrannical? And citizens certainly don't like tyrants; the United States is proof of that. In fact, "don't like" is only a stone's throw away from hate, to bring in Machiavelli's concept.

Enough of that – I found out an interesting fact today from my hotel maid: one of the reasons for the FLN choosing to move their activities to Algiers was so that the con-

flict would be covered by international press (*Battle of Algiers*). During the press conference, I sat next to a journalist named Chris Hedges, an American like myself. At the end of the affair, I had a chance to ask him a question of my own, for I was curious about how he would present the material to readers back home. He looked almost sad as he answered. "I'll tell them what they want to hear and what the state wants them to hear" (Hedges 22-23). He gave a defeated half smile, slipped his pen and pad into his messenger bag, and stalked off.

This disturbs me. I guess I had known the media to not be 100% truthful, but to hear it put so coldly, that he would give the readers exactly what they wanted (or what the state wanted for them), and not necessarily a factual report, was upsetting. The truth can hurt; I've learned that from living over here for so long, but pain can mean growth.

May 28, 1957

Reports came out that today there was a massacre in the village of Melouza involving followers of Messali Hadj, leader of a party that was threatening to the FLN (*Battle of Algiers*). From what I've heard, the strategy of repressing other groups to keep the FLN as *the* political party has been used a few times.

I have a book by Randolph Bourne with his essays in it that I bought in a used book store downtown. In "The State," he writes about minority opinion in war, though in a different context. "Minority opinion, which in times of peace was only irritating, becomes, with the outbreak of war, a case for outlawry" (Bourne 404). Algeria isn't a state at this point, but the concept that when in conflict, differing opinions are shot down by the dominant group, is very relevant to what has happened. Those with opposing opinions were killed by the FLN.

In thinking about minority opinions in the context of this battle, I wonder if each "opinion group" is part of a different social contract or moral circle? It certainly seems like it. The FLN saw Messali's followers as an obstacle, like Pinker described, and had to remove them to achieve the group objective.

I also wonder if despite their efforts, the FLN is starting to crumble. One of the leaders, Ben M'Hidi, was arrested a few months back, and I think that under the stresses of torture, the captured members of the organization have started to crack. It seems that every day, the French announce names of captured FLN members, but after Hedges, I don't know if this is just what they want us to hear or if it's true.

May 30, 1957

It's time for me to go back. I've learned so much here,

and I know I've changed. It may sound cliché, but I do think I "found myself" on this trip. I'm not sure if it started in Europe or if it all happened here, where everything I'd learned from all of the people I thought were full of hot air actually made sense.

Besides, I can't ask my parents to keep supporting me like they have been, and there is little I can do for these people. I'm actually getting frustrated with my inability to help the situation one way or the other, and maybe my best bet in making a difference is to educate those I know in the States about what's happening in a country half a world away.

On that note, journal, I bid you adieu.

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