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College Literature, 30.1, Winter 2003, pp. 115-123 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/lit.2003.0008>



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Taking a Stand for Algeria

Jacques Derrida

Concerning the crisis which Algeria experiences today, only the Algerians can find political solutions. Yet these cannot be born in the isolation of the country.

Everybody recognizes the complexity of the situation; diverging analyses and perspectives can legitimately be expressed about its origins and developments. Nevertheless, an agreement can be reached on a few points of principle.

First of all, to reaffirm that any solution must be a civil one. The recourse to armed violence to defend or conquer power, terrorism, repression, torture and executions, murders and kidnappings, destruction, threats against the life or security of persons, these can only ruin the possibility that is still within Algeria's reach in order to build its own democracy and the conditions of its economic development.

It is the condemnation by all of the practices of terrorism and repression which will

*Jacques Derrida was awarded the Adorno prize in 2001. **Fichus** came out in 2002.*

thus begin to open a space for the confrontation of each and everyone's analyses, in the respect of differences.

Proposals will be made to increase the number of acts of solidarity in France and elsewhere. Some initiatives are required without delay to make public opinion sensitive to the Algerian tragedy, to underscore the responsibility of governments and international financial institutions, to further the support of all for the Algerian democratic demands.

I am asked to be brief, I will be. When I ask, as I will do, in the name of whom and in the name of what we speak here, I would simply like to let some questions be heard, without contesting or provoking anybody.

In the name of whom and of what are we gathered here? And whom do we address?

These questions are not abstract, I insist on this—and I insist that they engage first of all only me.

For several reasons. Due to decency or modesty *first*, of course, and because of a concern about what an Appeal like ours may contain in both strengths and weaknesses. However generous or just it may be, an Appeal—particularly when it resonates from here, from the walls of this Parisian auditorium, that is, for some of us, not for all precisely, but for many of us, when it is thus cast from far—I always fear that such an Appeal, however legitimate and well-meaning it may be, may still contain, in its very eloquence, too much authority; and I fear that as such it also defines a place of arbitration (and there is indeed one in our Appeal, I will say something about it later). In its apparent neutrality in arbitration, such an Appeal runs the risk of containing a lesson, an implicit lesson, whether it be a lesson learnt, or worse, a lesson given. So it is better to say it, it is better not to hide it from ourselves. Above all, decency is required when one risks matching a few words to such a real tragedy about which the Appeal from the ICSAI and the League of Human Rights rightly underlines *two characteristics*:

1. *The entanglement* (the very history of the premises, of the “origins” and of the “developments” which have led to what looks like a terrifying deadlock and to the entwined sharing of responsibilities in this matter, in Algeria as well as outside); which implies that the time of the transformation and the coming of this democracy, the response to the “Algerian democratic demand” mentioned several times in the Appeal, this time *for* democracy will be long, discontinuous, difficult to gather into the act of a single decision, into a dramatic reversal which would respond to the Appeal. It would be irresponsible to believe or to make believe the opposite. This long time *for* democracy, we will not even be able to gather it in Algeria. Things will have to take place *elsewhere too*. None of the autonomy of Algerians is removed by such a serious reminder. Even if we could doubt this and even if we kept

dreaming of such a reversal in the course of events, the very time of this meeting would be enough to remind us of it. Indeed, we are here after the so-called “reconciliation talks,” that is, after a failure or a simulacrum, a disaster at any rate so sadly foreseeable, if not calculated, which sketches, as if negatively, the dream of the impossible which we can neither abandon nor believe in.

2. Our Appeal also underscores the fact that faced with such an entangled situation, the diversity of perspectives and analyses is “legitimate.” And how true that is! But at this point, the Appeal carefully stops and goes back to what it defines as a possible “agreement” on a “few points of principle.” Yet, nobody, even among the first to sign the Appeal (I am one of them), is fooled by the fact that the “diversity of analyses and perspectives,” if it is taken to be legitimate, can lead some to diverge on the “few points of principle” at stake (for instance, about what is to be understood by the three major words or motifs of the Appeal: that of *violence* [all forms of violence are condemned: but what is violence, that armed violence which is the most general concept in the Appeal? Does it cover *any* police operation even if it claims to protect the security of citizens, and to ensure—or claims to ensure—the legal and normal processes of a democratic society, etc.?], then that of *civil* peace [What of the civil in general? What is the civil? What does civil mean today? etc.], and above all that of the idea of *democracy* [Which democracy is referred to?]).

In the end, these words engage only myself, for if I have supported and even participated in the preparation of the appeal for civil peace in Algeria, if I approve of all its formulations (which seem to me both prudent and demanding), I cannot be sure ahead of time that, as far as applications and consequences are concerned, my interpretation is in all respects the same as that of the others who have signed it.

Thus, I will try to tell you briefly how I understand some crucial passages of the Appeal. I will do so in a dry and analytical manner, to save time but also in order to refrain from a temptation I have which some might deem sentimental: the temptation to turn a demonstration into a sensitive or pathetic testimony, and to explain how all I will say is inspired above all and after all by a painful love for Algeria, an Algeria where I was born, which I left, literally, for the first time only at nineteen, before the war of independence, an Algeria to which I have often come back and which in the end I know to have never really ceased inhabiting or bearing in my innermost, a love for Algeria to which, if not the love of citizenry, and thus the patriotic tie to a Nation-state, is nonetheless what makes it impossible to dissociate here the heart, the thinking, and the political position-taking—and thus dictates all that I will say. It is precisely from this position that I ask in the name

of what and of whom, if one is not an Algerian citizen, one joins and supports this Appeal.

Keeping this question in mind, I would thus like to demonstrate telegraphically, in four points, why our Appeal cannot limit itself to a praiseworthy *neutrality* in front of what, indeed, must be above all the responsibility of the Algerians themselves. Hence, “not to limit oneself to political neutrality,” which does not mean that one has to choose a side—we refuse this, I believe—between *two* sides of a front supposed to define, for a large part of the public opinion, the fundamental fact of the current conflict. On the contrary, it seems to me that political responsibility today consists not accepting this fact as natural and unchangeable. It consists of demonstrating, by saying it and by turning it into acts, that it is not so and that the democratic way has its place and its strengths and its life and its people elsewhere.

By saying this is not to be politically neutral. On the contrary it means to take a stand 4 counts:

To take a stand:

1. For a new international solidarity;
2. For an electoral agreement;
3. For a dissociation of the theological and the political;
4. For what I would more or less properly call a new Third Estate.

We take a stand for a new international solidarity

The Appeal says that the solutions belong to the Algerians alone, a correct claim in principle, but it adds several times that these solutions cannot be born in the “isolation of the country.” This reminds us of what must be made explicit in order to demonstrate the consequence: political solutions do not depend in the last instance on the citizens of this or that Nation-state. Today, with respect to what was and what remains up to a point a just imperative, that is, non-intervention and the respect of self-determination (the future of Algerian men and women of course belongs in the end to the Algerian people), of understanding it runs the risk of being, from now on, at best the rhetorical concession of a bad conscience, at worst, an alibi. Which does not mean that a right of intervention or of intrusion, granted to other states or to the citizens of other states *as such*, should be reinstated. That would indeed be inadmissible. But one should reaffirm the international aspect of solidarity that anchors us as citizens of determinate Nation-states. Which does complicate things, but also sets the true place of our responsibility: neither simply that of Algerian citizens, nor that of French citizens; and this is why my question, and my question as one who has signed the Appeal, comes from neither an Algerian nor a French person as such, which does not free me *on the other hand* of my responsibilities, civil or more than civil as a

French citizen born in Algeria, and obliges me to do what must be done according to this logic in my country, toward the public opinion and the French government (as we try to do here; all that remains to be done in this regard has been and will still have to be set). For example (for lack of time it will be my only example) the logic of the Appeal leads us to take sides—it is indeed necessary—with respect to Algeria’s foreign debt and what is linked to it. This matter is also, as is well known (unemployment, despair, dramatically increasing poverty), an essential component of the civil war and all of today’s sufferings. But we cannot seriously take a position on the economic recovery of Algeria without analyzing the national and international responsibilities in this situation. And, above all, without pointing to means of politico-economic interventions which go beyond Algeria, going even beyond France. It is a matter of European and worldwide stakes, and those who call, as we do, for such international endeavors and call to what the Appeal carefully names “international financial institutions,” those who call for these responsibilities and these solidarities, those do not speak anymore *solely* as Algerians or French, nor even as Europeans, even if they *also* and *thereby* speak as all of these.

We take a stand for an electoral agreement

One cannot invoke, however abstractly, democracy, or what the Appeal calls the “Algerian democratic demand” without taking a stand in the Algerian political sphere. A consistent democracy demands at least, in its minimal definition: 1). A schedule, that is, an electoral engagement; 2). A discussion, that is, a public discourse armed only with reasoned arguments, for example in agreement with the press; 3). A respect of the electoral decision, and thus of the possibility of transition within a democratic process which remains uninterrupted.

This means that we, who have signed the Appeal, have already taken a stand twice on this matter, and it was necessary. *On the one hand*, against a state apparatus which urgently creates the necessary conditions, in particular those of *appeasement* and of discussion, in order to reinitiate *as quickly as possible* (and this *rhythm* poses today the most effective problem, the one to discuss democratically) and interrupted electoral process. *Voting* is not indeed the whole of democracy, but without it and without this form and this accounting of voices, there is no democracy. *On the other hand*, by the very reference to a democratic demand, we also take a stand against whoever would not respect the electoral decision, but would tend, directly or indirectly, before, during or after such elections, to question the very principle presiding over such plebiscite, that is, democratic life, a legal state, the respect for free speech, the rights of the minority, of political transition, of the plurality of languages,

mores and beliefs, etc. We are resolutely opposed—it is a stand we take clearly, with all of its consequences—to whoever would pretend to profit from democratic processes without respecting democracy.

To say that we are logically against both of these perversions insofar as we refer to democracy in Algeria, is not to speak as either a citizen of this or that Nation-state, or as an Algerian, or as a French, or as a French from Algeria, whatever the added depth and intensity of our responsibility in this respect may be. And we are here in the international logic that has presided over the formation of the ICSAI, a committee first and foremost international. By the same token, beyond that painful Algerian example in its very singularity, we generally call—as the International Parliament of Writers does in its fashion, sharing our demands and associated with us today—for an international solidarity seeking its supports neither in the current state of international law and the institutions that represent it today, nor in the concepts of nation, state, citizenship, and sovereignty which dominate this international discourse, *de jure* and *de facto*.

We take a stand for the effective dissociation of the political and the theological

Our idea of democracy implies a separation between the state and religious powers, that is, a radical religious neutrality and a faultless tolerance which would not only set the sense of belonging to religions, cults, and thus also cultures and languages, away from the reach of any terror—whether stemming from the state or not—but also protects the practices of faith and, in this instance, the freedom of discussion and interpretation within each religion. For example, and here first of all, in Islam whose different readings, both exegetical and political, must develop freely, and not only in Algeria. This is in fact the best response to the sometimes racist anti-Islamic movements born of that violence deemed Islamic or that would still dare to affiliate itself with Islam.

We take a stand for what I would tentatively call, to be brief, the new Third Estate in Algeria

This same democratic demand, as in fact the Appeal for civil peace, can only come, from our side as well as from those with whom we claim solidarity, from those active forces in the Algerian people who do not feel represented in the parties or structures engaged on either side of a non-democratic front. Hope can come only from these “live” places, these places of life, I mean, from an Algerian society which feels no more represented in a certain political state (which is also a state of fact) than in organizations that struggle against it through killing or the threat of murder, through execution in general. I say *execution in general*, for if we must not delude ourselves about the notion of violence, and about the fact that violence begins very early and

spreads very far, sometimes in the least physical, the least visible, and the most legal forms of language, then our Appeal, at least as I interpret it, still positions itself *unconditionally* in terms of a limit to violence, i.e., the death penalty, torture, and murder. The logic of the Appeal thus requires the unflinching condemnation of the death penalty no less than of torture, of murder or the threat of murder. What I call with a more or less appropriate name the new Third Estate, is what everywhere carries our hope because it is what says no to death, to torture, to execution, and to murder. Our hope today is not only the one we share with all the friends of Algeria throughout the world. It is first and foremost borne, often in a heroic, admirable, exemplary fashion, by the Algerian man or woman who, in his or her country, has no right to speak, is killed or risks his or her life because he or SHE speaks freely, he or SHE thinks freely, he or SHE publishes freely, he or SHE associates freely. I say the Algerian man or woman, insisting, for I believe more than ever in the enlightened role, in the enlightening role which women can have; I believe in the clarity of their strength (which I hope tomorrow will be like a wave, crashing peacefully and irresistibly); I believe in the space which the women of Algeria can and must occupy in the future that we are calling for. I believe in, I have hope for their movement: irresistibly crashing in the houses and in the streets, in workplaces and in the institutions. (This civil war is for the most part a war of men. In many ways, not limited to Algeria, this *civil* war is also a *virile* war. It is thus also, laterally, in an unspoken repression, a mute war against women. It excludes women from the political field. I believe that today, not solely in Algeria, but there more acutely, more urgently than ever, reason and life, political reason, the life of reason and the reason to live are best carried by women; they are within the reach of Algerian women: in the houses and in the streets, in the workplaces and in all institutions.)

The anger, the suffering, the trauma, but also the resolution of these Algerian men and women—we have a thousand signs of them. It is necessary to see these signs, they are directed at us too, and to salute this courage—with respect. Our Appeal should be made first *in their name*, and I believe that even before being addressed to them, it comes from these men, it comes from these women, whom we also have to hear.

This is at least what I feel resonating, from the bottom of what remains Algerian in me, in my ears, my head, and my heart.

Translated by Boris Belay

Note

¹ Ce texte a été prononcé par Jacques Derrida lors de la réunion publique qui s'est tenue, à l'initiative du CISIA (Comité international de soutien aux intellectuels

algériens) et de la Ligue des droits de l'homme,, au grand amphithéâtre de la Sorbonne le 7 février 1994, à la suite d'un Appel pour la paix civile en Algérie.

Voici deux extraits de cet Appel auxquels Derrida fait allusion dans son intervention :

«À la crise que traverse aujourd'hui l'Algérie, il appartient aux seuls Algériens d'apporter des solutions politiques. Celles-ci, pourtant, ne peuvent naître de l'isolement du pays.

Chacun reconnaît la complexité de la situation : des analyses et des points de vue divers s'expriment légitimement sur ses origines et ses développements. L'accord peut néanmoins se faire sur quelques points de principe.

Avant tout, réaffirmer que toute issue ne peut être que civile. Le recours à la violence armée pour défendre ou conquérir le pouvoir, le terrorisme, la répression, la pratique de la torture et les exécutions, les assassinats et les enlèvements, les destructions, les menaces contre la vie et la sécurité des personnes, ne peuvent que ruiner les possibilités dont dispose encore l'Algérie de construire sa propre démocratie et les conditions de son développement économique.»

«C'est la condamnation par tous des pratiques de terrorisme et de répression qui commencera ainsi de dégager un espace pour la confrontation des analyses de chacun, dans le respect des divergences.

Des propositions seront faites afin de multiplier les actions de solidarité en France et dans d'autres pays. Des initiatives s'imposent sans retard pour sensibiliser l'opinion au drame algérien, souligner la responsabilité des gouvernements et des institutions financières internationales, développer le soutien de tous à l'exigence démocratique algérienne.»

[This speech was given by Jacques Derrida at the public reunion held at the CISIA (International Committee for the Support of Algerian Intellectuals) and the League of the Rights of Man, at the Grand Amphitheater of the Sorbonne on February 7, 1994, following an Appeal for Civil Peace in Algeria.

Below are two extracts from this appeal to which Derrida alludes in his speech:

"In the current Algerian crisis, it falls exclusively to the Algerians to develop political solutions. These, however, cannot spring from the isolation of the country.

"Everyone recognizes the complexity of the situation: diverse analyses and points of view legitimately reflect their origins and developments. Nevertheless, agreement may be reached on certain points:

"Firstly, to reaffirm that the issue is solely civil. Recourse to armed violence to defend or to conquer power, terrorism, repression, torture and execution, assassination and kidnapping, destruction, menace to life and personal security, can only ruin the potential that remains to Algeria to build her own democracy and the conditions of her economic development."

"It is the universal condemnation of the practice of terrorism and of repression which will thus begin to clear a space for the confrontation of individual analyses, with respect to differences.

“Propositions will be made to multiply the actions of solidarity in France and in other nations. Initiatives will arise without delay to “sensitize” opinions of the Algerian drama, to underscore the responsibility of governments and of international financial institutions to develop support for the requirements of Algerian democracy.”

Translated by Constance A. Regan]