

New Light on a Colonial Massacre

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A recent book and two documentaries shed new light on the repression of the demonstration by Algerians in Paris on 17 October 1961. By looking at these events in their long-term context, they show that the repression was not some sort of blunder. It was a “colonial massacre” perpetrated by the Paris police acting under the orders of their Prefect (Commissioner), the infamous Maurice Papon.

Reviewed : Emmanuel Blanchard, *La Police parisienne et les Algériens (1944-1962)*, Paris, Nouveau Monde éditions, 2011, 447 p.; and films directed by Jacques Panijel, *Octobre à Paris* (1962), and Yasmina Adi, *Ici on noie les Algériens* (2011).

During the suppression of what is referred to as the “demonstration” (*manifestation*) of 17 October 1961, between 100 and 200 Algerians were murdered by the Paris police, and thousands of others of those arrested were deported to Algeria. Between twenty and thirty thousand people (i.e. between a sixth to a fourth of the Algerians in the Paris region) took part in the demonstration. Though these events were forgotten for a long time, in the last twenty years they have been the subject of a flourishing historiography, which has helped clarify the facts. The book published by Jim House and Neil McMaster in 2006 (in English; and in French in 2008) seemed to exhaust the question. However, the films and book discussed here are important because they present unpublished accounts of police repression (*Octobre à Paris* [October in Paris] and *Ici on noie les Algériens* [Here We Drown Algerians]), and reconsider the genealogy of this violence (*La Police parisienne et les Algériens* [The Paris Police and the Algerians]).

Three Views of the Algerian War on the Mainland

Emmanuel Blanchard's book *La Police parisienne et les Algériens* is based on his dissertation. It is an exceedingly rigorous, persuasive and balanced work that relies mainly on the archives of the Prefecture of Police (PP) and the Ministry of the Interior. After an enquiry into the social conditions of the 17 October repression, the author focuses on the daily practices of the Paris police vis-à-vis the Algerians and the "materiality of their interactions" (p. 8), drawing on Alain Dewerpe's work on the "state massacre" at the Charonne metro station.¹

In the first part of his book Blanchard describes the new status given to Algerians between 1944 and 1947 in order to preserve the colonial project, and its consequences on the mainland. According to him, it constituted a "veritable legislative and institutional disarmament on policing issues" (p. 32), given that the Algerians were from then theoretically French citizens. In the second part he analyses the adaptation by the police to this new situation during the period 1947-1958, in their creation of seemingly general services and their adoption of different methods. The third part reconsiders the construction of the "North-African problem" by the PP during that period, by analysing the discourse that equated Algerian workers with beggars and criminals. The challenge for the PP was to legitimize the overhaul of policing services tailored to the Algerians, in spite of their new status as French citizens. These projects received significant support due to the closeness of the Prefect of Police to certain elected officials and the press, but they also came into recurrent conflicts with the Ministry of the Interior. The last part of the book describes the success of the strategy of empowering the PP between 1958 and 1962 under the leadership of Maurice Papon. Special service units were finally created, their radical methods imported from the colonial territory and borrowed from the military. We get to the demonstration itself only by way of a conclusion, in Chapter 11.

Octobre à Paris is a documentary film directed by Jacques Panijel, produced in the wake of the events. A partisan work, it is a heated attack on the actions of the Paris police. Panijel was on the Audin Committee, set up after the disappearance of a young communist mathematician in Algiers in 1957, Maurice Audin, arrested and murdered by the French army.

¹ Alain Dewerpe, *Charonne, 8 février 1962: anthropologie historique d'un massacre d'État*, Paris, Gallimard, 2006.

The film was banned straight away, and copies were seized when attempts were made to show it. Later, for reasons that remain obscure, Panijel refused to have the film distributed, in spite of the ban having been lifted in 1973. It appeared in cinemas only for the fiftieth anniversary of the demonstration, which was after Panijel's death in 2010.

This documentary was shot in the slums of the Goutte d'Or district in Paris and of the suburbs Nanterre and Gennevilliers. The first part presents accounts by Parisian Algerians who were beaten and sometimes tortured or left for dead by the French police between 1958 and 1961. The second part deals with the 17 October demonstration, by a filmed reconstruction of the departure of the demonstrators from Nanterre and by a photographic montage. It is an outstanding archive on the violence used against the Algerians and, more generally, on the sociology of Algerians in Paris in the 1960s. It does indeed let several women and children have their say, but skilled working men, whose presence is often ignored, also speak their mind.

Ici on noie les Algériens was made fifty years later, in 2011, by Yasmina Adi. In 2008 she had already made a film about the Setif massacre, *L'autre 8 mai 1945* [The Other 8 May 1945], which was a real work of historical research. This time she claims to have more than anything a memorial intention. Focusing on the repression of the demonstration, this documentary takes an original approach of interviewing many widows of the demonstrators, but also FLN activists.² It is based especially on the remarkable documents from the PP archives, hitherto unavailable: photographs of police headquarters on the evening of 17 October, and of the Algerians detained at the Parc des Expositions; newsreel films of the expulsion of Algerians at Bourget aerodrome; and so on.

Actors in the Repression

Emmanuel Blanchard provides some particularly interesting details on the sociological recruitment of officers at various levels of the police hierarchy. His research is guided in particular by the hypothesis that the colonial socialization of the actors was one factor that explains the violence. While prefects of police were largely “incorporated in the colonial arena” (p. 176), on the other hand a study of the careers of a sample of *gardiens de la paix* (“guardians of the peace,” the lower ranks of police officers) leads Blanchard to the

² There were already several good documentaries on the subject. See A. Tristan et M. Lallaoui, *Le silence du fleuve* (1991) and P. Brooks and A. Hayling, *Une journée portée disparue* (1992).

conclusion that most of these officers had “minimal colonial experience,” (*capital colonial*) generally consisting only of their military service in Algeria.

So Blanchard concentrates his attention on the special police services for “North-Africans”: the *Brigade nord-africaine* (North-African Brigade) in the interwar period, then, starting in 1953, the *Brigade des agressions et violences* (Assault and Violence Brigade). He shows in particular that Berber and Arab speakers were always a minority of the recruits (whether French or “North-Africans”). After 1958 that was no longer the case. As Prefect of Police, Maurice Papon created technical assistance services modelled on the Algerian SAS³ (*Sections administratives spécialisées* [Special Administration Sections]) and led by Officers of Algerian Affairs, and especially the *Force de police auxiliaire* (FPA: Auxiliary Police Force) in 1960. This “military/police” unit (p. 322) consisted of *harkis* (Algerians soldiering for France) recruited in France and in Algeria. They played a central role in the repressive system set up by the Prefect of Police. Their numbers had declined to about 400 of the 20,000 police officers of the PP, but they were in the front line of the various units involved on evening of 17 October. More generally, they were entrusted with the “low policing” tasks, and to them was delegated the torture committed in the cellars of the Goutte d’Or (which are shown in *Octobre à Paris*).⁴

Be that as it may, the regular police forces used humiliation and violence against Algerians on a daily basis. In fact, what emerges from this study is that it is not police officers’ colonial socialization that explains their general attitude, it is rather the constructed image of the Algerian as an “undesirable.”

The Periodization and Nature of the Violence

One could lament the absence of contextualization in Yasmina Adi’s documentary, which does not go back much beyond the introduction of the curfew on 5 October 1961, considered to be the immediate trigger of the demonstration. However, this film does have the advantage of not stopping on 17 October, and of lingering on the reactions in French society in the following weeks, when often it is wrongly insisted that silence followed.⁵ Shot at the time the events took place, *Octobre à Paris* did not need to revisit a context that was then

³ The *sections administratives spécialisées* in Algeria were created starting in 1955 in order to supervise rural residents with a view to administration and to health, but also to policing.

⁴ Paulette Péju, *Ratonnades à Paris and Les Harkis à Paris* [1961], 2000.

⁵ Sylvie Thénault, “Le fantôme du secret autour du 17 octobre 1961,” *Matériaux pour l’histoire de notre temps*, no. 58, April-June 2000.

familiar to everyone.⁶ Nevertheless it is interesting to note that the testimonials in the film refer to atrocities occurring since 1958, showing that the police violence on the evening of 17 October was then perceived as a continuation of existing practices. Directed by a Resistance fighter of Romanian and Jewish descent, the film explicitly placed 17 October in the lineage of the persecution of Jews during the Second World War. The film ends with images of the Charonne metro station, with a voice-over suggesting that “fascism” is the source of police violence.

By adopting a medium-term perspective, Emmanuel Blanchard stands out in the crowd of commentators on 17 October. In spite of the start date of 1944 announced in the title of his book, Blanchard actually takes his analysis back to the interwar period. This periodization helps him to emphasize that differential treatment of Algerian migrants was nothing new. At the same time, he relativizes the colonial aspect by emphasizing that the methods adopted by the police to manage Algerians were in some ways close to the treatment of other people judged to be undesirable, such as prostitutes, vagrants and foreigners.⁷ Blanchard also takes into account the fact that the Algerian war for independence began as early as 1945,⁸ and he recalls such little-known episodes as the suppression of the 14 July parade in Paris in 1953 (which left six Algerians dead) and the riot in the Goutte d’Or in July 1955 (which led to the deportation to Algeria of 400 alleged nationalist activists). The repression of 17 October 1961 thus appears as the climax of a process that had begun a long time before.

A Colonial Massacre

The work of Jim House and Neil MacMaster has already shown that the repression of 17 October 1961 was not an isolated incident, or an instance of things just getting out of control in the police force, as Jean-Paul Brunet⁹ sought to show; in fact, it had much in common with a “colonial massacre.” Blanchard echoes this view: it was both the colonial status of the repressed and Maurice Papon’s “blank check” to policemen infuriated by the FLN’s murders of police officers that made the massacre of 17 October 1961 possible.

⁶ An introduction directed by Medhi Lallaoui was added for the national premiere on 14 October 2011.

⁷ Fabien Jobard (<http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Anthropologie-de-la-matrasque.html>) cites Emmanuel Blanchard’s book in his review of Didier Fassin, *La Force de l’ordre*. He uses it to show that the police violence was part of a long history of the treatment of undesirables. However, it does not seem possible to conclude from Blanchard’s comments that there has not been a post-colonial dimension to contemporary police violence. Blanchard provides a very balanced conclusion on this point, and in particular reminds us that even in the 1960s and 1970s the police bore the marks of the Algerian War.

⁸ Sylvie Thénault, *Histoire de la guerre d’indépendance algérienne*, Flammarion, Paris, 2005.

⁹ Jean-Paul Brunet, *Police contre FLN: le drame d’octobre 1961*, Flammarion, Paris, 1999.

Blanchard aptly compares it to the massacre in the *Carrières centrales* slum in Casablanca in December 1952, in which hundreds of Moroccans were killed. As for the immediate circumstances, Blanchard also provides a new and persuasive analysis based on the archives of police unions: Maurice Papon showed no concern to protect the *gardiens de la paix* that he had sent into battle against the FLN, and afterwards he referred to their anger in order to promote the idea that the repression had been undirected. But Blanchard's contribution is less in the interpretation of the immediate causes of the violence than in his socio-historical analysis of the construction in the second half of the twentieth century of the "North-African problem" in Paris, the imperial capital.

Further Reading

(in French):

- [Interview](#) with Jacques Panijel in the journal *Vacarme*.
- Sylvie Thénault's [review](#) of Jim House and Neil MacMaster, *Paris 1961*.

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