RESEARCH ARTICLE

After the Apocalypse: Catastrophizing Politics in Post-Civil War Algeria

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of the civil war (1992–1999) in Algerian politics. It draws on Adi Ophir's notion of catastrophization and Walter Benjamin's conception of history to understand the fragile status quo under the presidency of Boutelika (1999–2019). Post-conflict stabilization led to the emergence of a political system in which the "Dark Decade" served as a regulatory framework supporting the existing political equilibrium. The war became a key element in a common political repertoire that shaped discourses, oriented policies, and conditioned the strategies of actors. At the same time, the persistence of structural issues that led to the violence of the 1990s (terrorism, political crisis, economic inequalities) legitimated the idea that the past could repeat itself at any moment. Thus, while ensuring the short-term resilience of the regime, catastrophizing politics also contributed to the pervasive revolutionary situation that characterized post-civil war Algeria.

KEYWORDS: Algeria; Catastrophization; Civil War; Authoritarian Upgrading, Revolution.

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1. Introduction

"You want me to tell the people to wake up and rise up against the Generals,
So you'll see me as a tough guy and call me a hero.
So I accept this role and if it's not enough
I will give a speech as did al-Qaradawi against Qaddafi [1]
To destroy the country and return to the time of the disaster"
Lotfi DK – Wesh Heb (2013)

Lotfi Double Kanon is a major figure in North African rap music and a fierce critic of the Algerian regime. His repertoire covers a wide range of social and political issues, from the absurdity of local politics to the denunciation of American imperialism. In 2013, in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, Lotfi DK released *Wesh Heb.* In this song, he departed from his usually inflammatory tone to address his audience directly and deliver a limpid message: beyond the widespread expression of discontent and the desire to rise up, lies an obvious threat. In Algeria, any popular uprising harbors the possibility of a return to the Dark Decade that once plunged the country into mourning and devastation.

Between 1992 and 1999, Algeria experienced a civil war that caused the death of more than 150.000 people. Situated at the crossroads of a protracted economic crisis, a tense political opening, and longstanding socio-cultural grievances, the conflict resulted in forms of extreme violence that were exceptional in the region. Moreover, the fragmentation of belligerent parties and the psychological confusion inherent to asymmetric conflicts resulted in a durable uncertainty for local and foreign actors (Martinez 1998; Moussaoui 2006; Mundy 2015). Yet, following the ceasefire announced by the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS) in 1997 and Abdelaziz Bouteflika's election in 1999, official discourses have systematically rejected the la-

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[1] During the 2011 uprising, the Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an Egyptian member of the Muslim Brotherhood living in Qatar, advocated for the killing of Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi on Al-Jazeera. Qaddafi was captured, tortured and killed by insurgents in October 2011.

bel of civil war.[2] Instead, they have employed the apolitical term of "National Tragedy" (*al-masâa al-wataniya*). Meanwhile, Bouteflika has based his legitimacy on his ability to pacify the polity, notably by promoting national reconciliation (*al-musâlaha al-wataniya*). While successive governments have portrayed stability as the ultimate goal of politics, the possibility of a new catastrophe remained an underlying theme shaping discourses, orienting policies, and conditioning the strategies of actors.

The Dark Decade has been a crucial milestone in the reconfiguration of the Algerian security-state. Following, this article studies the role of post-conflict stabilization in the reconfiguration of governance in Algeria since 1999. Resulting from a series of structural transformations and contingent upheavals, the civil war contributed to a process of "authoritarian upgrading" that aims "to accommodate and manage changing political, economic, and social conditions" (Heydemann 2007, p. 1). The extreme violence perpetrated by the state and Islamist insurgents was not merely a deviant act. Instead it allowed for the restructuring of state power in a way that prefigured the gruesome reordering currently at work in Bashar al-Assad's Syria (Heydemann 2013).

At the same time, the Arab uprisings of 2010-2011 have shown the limits of an analytical framework centered on authoritarian resilience and its "other", democratization. This approach tends to focus on the flexibility of the structures of power. Thus, it overlooks the contradictory dynamics that accompany social, political and economic restructurings (Cavatorta & Haugbølle 2012; Hinnebusch 2012). Successive transformations do not only strengthen ruling coalitions, they also have unintended consequences. New groups are integrated in networks of power, acting both as supporters of the prevailing political equilibrium and agents of dissent undermining the system's cohesion (Pierret & Selvik 2009; Boubekeur, 2013; Werenfels 2013). In the Algerian case, post-conflict reconfiguration was also characterized by residual terrorism, socioeconomic unrest, and political uncertainty. The fragile status quo resulted in a popular uprising in February 2019.

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[2] The AIS was the armed branch of the FIS, an Islamo-populist party whose stunning success in the 1991 legislative elections led to a coup in early January 1992.

This article analyzes the reconfiguration of governance and the persistence of revolutionary possibilities after the civil war by drawing on Adi Ophir's theory of catastrophization (2010) and Walter Benjamin's conception of history (1940). While both authors discuss the notion of catastrophe, Ophir's approach elucidates the function of the Dark Decade in the reproduction of structures of power, while Benjamin allows us to grasp the unbearable experience of those confronted with this system of domination. After presenting this theoretical framework, I describe the role of the civil war in the reconfiguration of the Algerian political order and the advent of new form of governance based on catastrophization. The ensuing policies aimed to suspend an unfolding disaster. In the name of preserving stability, economic reforms contributed to the insertion of the country in transnational regimes of security. While catastrophizing politics undoubtedly ensured the short-term resilience of the regime, they also contributed to the pervasive revolutionary situation that has characterized post-civil war Algeria.

2. Catastrophization and Messianism

The aftermath of the civil war allowed the Algerian government to implement an extreme form of securitization, as national politics were centered on the prevention of a new conflict. Securitization studies, which examines the social construction of problems as a threat for a polity, highlights that this process is not merely fearmongering. Rather it is also rooted in objective factors (Buzan et al. 1998; Balzacq 2005; Wæver 2011). This body of work demonstrates how securitization has become a mundane way to shape public policies around the world. Yet, the exceptional nature of the threats associated with the Algerian civil war convokes an "social imaginary of emergency" based on the anxious waiting for a disastrous turning point (Calhoun 2004).

The notion of catastrophization proposed by Adi Ophir helps elucidate post-conflict Algerian politics in relation to such an imaginary turning point. Indeed, governance was based on the prevention of – or the preparation for – an impending disaster, that is to say the repetition of the Dark Decade. Like securitiza-

tion, catastrophization is at the crossroads of subjective and objective factors. While it is largely discursive, it is also a response to concrete social, economic, environmental, or political conditions (Ophir 2010, p. 63-64). However, if securitization often describes the management of specific risks, catastrophization is a total operational framework for policy-making that aims to prevent a single existential threat. As such, state and non-state actors monitor the unfolding disaster, quantify the rise of "evils", and fix a threshold above which the catastrophe can no longer be prevented (p. 70). In so doing, a government can maintain catastrophic conditions, suspend the unfolding disaster before the turning point, and allow for the daily management of a population and a territory (p. 66-67).

Local and foreign actors both seek to avoid crossing the threshold of catastrophe (p. 80-81). In the name of stability, they facilitate the insertion of the polity in the global system. The shared imaginary of emergency encourages concrete interventions, merging managerial, humanitarian and security-oriented approaches in order to preserve the linearity of development (Calhoun 2004, p. 378-392). State and non-state actors (NGOs, private companies, international organizations) thus partake in the edification of "transnational regimes of human security" that aim to manage populations and limit related risks (Amar 2013).

Ophir's work, and critical security studies more broadly, allow us to apprehend the rationale that underpins the reconfiguration of structures of power and their insertion in transnational networks. Yet, we must also pay attention to the limits inherent to any system of domination. While the prevention of the disaster allows for a form of top-down exercise of power, this situation is also a lived experience at the grassroots level. The cumulative temporality of the state and the fragmented temporality of the individual collide. This tension is captured by Walter Benjamin's historical materialism that draws on the opposition between the ideology of progress and the tradition of the oppressed (1940). Informed by the trauma of WWI and the violence of modern society, Benjamin describes another emergency. Not that of the government, but the emergency of the fragmented and melancholic individual, trapped in a traumatic mental space (*denkraum*) created by war, technolo-

gy and poverty (Stewart 2010). This entrapment has long been characteristic of the Algerian youth. It is expressed in the widespread discourse of "*dégoûtage*" ("*rani karah hayatî*" – "I'm disgusted by my life").

Complementing Ophir's notion of catastrophization with Benjamin's historical materialism allows us to account for the indeterminate nature of the process of restructuring. The catastrophic existence of the oppressed keeps open the possibility of a messianic zero-hour (*stillstellung*), which is a revolutionary moment connected to past struggles (Benjamin 1940, XVII). Indeed, forms of popular messianism have been part of the grammar of uprisings and revolutionary movements in Algeria since the colonial era (Clancy-Smith 1997).

Accepting the possibility of a messianic moment also forces us to consider another aspect of Benjamin's philosophy. His critics argue that messianic politics call for a form of pure violence, which may result in an apocalyptic moment marked by intolerance rather than utopia (Rabinbach 1985). Again, the recent history of Algeria illustrates the possibility of sectarian violence inherent to the zero-hour. Between 1988 and 1992, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) revisited the messianic tradition of Sufi insurgencies, coupled with violent policing, in the name of freeing Algeria from corruption and saving the "Muslim people" (Carlier 1992). The FIS's intolerance legitimized the military coup and contributed to the advent of the civil war. This episode exemplifies the subtle dialectic between catastrophe and catastrophization, as well as between popular revolt and the resilience of the regime (Luke 2015).

3. The Civil War and the New Order

Algeria is a country with a strong revolutionary tradition. The war of independence (1954–1962) remains a foundational reference in Algerian politics (Carlier 1991; Pervillé 1996). The FLN, the Army and the associations linked to the "Revolutionary family" are essential components of the regime. Similarly, political discourses are infused with populist, egalitarian and sovereignist references. Neverthe-

less, under Bouteflika, the reshaping of the political order was intrinsically based on a second founding moment: the Dark Decade.

Many key features of the order are inherently linked to the conflict. The first set of transformations was the advent of a pluralist institutional framework. After a popular uprising that was violently suppressed in October 1988, the single-party system collapsed rapidly. A new constitution was adopted in February 1989, which allowed for the burgeoning of dozens of political formations. In addition, the government passed a new law on information in April 1990 that resulted in the rapid growth of a remarkably diverse print media landscape. According to then minister of Interior El Hadi Khediri, this process of rapid opening is what led the authorities to underestimate the risks associated with the legalization of new Islamist challengers (Semiane 1998, p. 109). Indeed, the political liberalization contributed to the rising dramatization of the political game. It laid the groundwork for the confrontation between the newly legalized FIS and a divided regime and, ultimately, for the military coup of January 1992, which marked the beginning of the civil war. Institutional transformations continued during the war. After the adoption of a new constitution in 1996, the passing of a new law on political parties in 1997 prohibited references to "fundamental components of national identity" such as Islam. At the end of the civil war, a series of elections (1995, 1997, 1999) aimed at restoring the constitutional order, and ended with the appointment of president Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who remained in power until the uprising of February 2019.

While sometimes described as a "cosmetic democracy" (Benchikh 2003, 2016), the pluralistic framework shaped during the Dark Decade bears many consequences. The ability for journalists or politicians to express criticism in the public space is an integral part of a system of domination that discredits opponents rather than controlling them. Similarly, the fragmentation of the political field is another crucial factor that explains the ability of the ruling coalition to win pluralistic elections. During the 2017 legislative elections, more than 50 parties were able to secure at least one seat in the National Assembly. The ruling FLN dominated the race with only 25% of the votes, with a participation rate of roughly 35%. As a result of the

pluralist framework inherited from the civil war, the regime is championed by two political parties instead of one: the National Democratic Rally (RND) compensated for the temporary defection of the FLN during the 1990s. Thus, the violence of the 1990s appears to have oriented a selective appropriation of the canons of liberal democracy. Yet, as scholars have noted since the early 2000s, such strategic openings do not necessarily question the overall balance of power (Carothers 2002; Camau 2006).

In addition to this new institutional framework, a process of economic restructuring in the 1990s transformed the Algerian state and contributed to the enlargement of the ruling coalition. After an agreement with the IMF in April 1994, the government implemented a program of "structural adjustment". The devaluation of the Algerian dinar contributed to the rapid growth of the external debt of public companies. Their privatization was facilitated by the creation of a national council of privatization in August 1995, which was put under the control of the government. As this new legal framework allowed for direct contracts, it largely benefited entrepreneurs who were protected by the administration, the government or the army. In other words, the transition to a mixed market economy favored the rise of new businessmen who invested in lucrative markets in the food industry, in the pharmaceutical sector, and in construction (Aidoud 1996; Dillman 2000). As the violent context prevented labor mobilization and peaceful social movements, power networks penetrated a growing private sector and crony capitalists were included into circuits of governance. A handful of these new businessmen acquired a genuine power in the decision-making process. For example, former entrepreneur Abdeslam Bouchouareb, who founded the country's first employer organization, served two terms as the minister of Mines and Industry (1996–1997, 2014–2017).

At the same time, the reconfiguration of the Algerian order is not limited to the inclusion of crony capitalists. As the restructuring weakened the state's ability to redistribute wealth, peripheral actors became central in mitigating the economic violence of the system, especially in more rural areas. Post-civil war stabilization also relied on the inclusion of former militias, Sufi brotherhoods, and NGOs in the new

political economy of the country. From this perspective, the Algerian case demonstrates how conflicts facilitate the co-option of local actors, businessmen, and parastatal groups. Coupling violence with economic restructuring, the 1990s upheavals allowed for the preservation of the prevailing political equilibrium in ways observed in other Arab countries, such as Tunisia (Camau & Geisser 2006; Ben Hamouda 2012) or Syria (Pierret & Selvik 2009; Haddad 2011).

Finally, the civil war remains a crucial factor for understanding Algeria's place in the region. Rather than being completely defeated by the Algerian army and its affiliates, the most radical fringe of the Islamist insurgency was displaced from the Northern part of the country to the Sahara. The infamous Armed Islamic Group re-branded itself and formed alliances with Tuareg factions that opposed their governments in the Sahelian space. It ultimately became a franchise of Al-Qaeda (AQIM, for Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) (Pernin & Sayad 2011), which is now operating in the whole region. It crosses porous borders to perpetrate terrorist attacks and participate in more ambitious operations, such as the invasion of Northern Mali in 2012 that triggered a French intervention on the ground. In a framework where anti-terrorism is intertwined with energy-related issues, the Algerian regime enjoyed a dramatic reversal of fortune. Once subjected to an arms embargo by Western countries, it now benefits from a geopolitical rent. Over the last twenty years, the Algerian regime has positioned itself as a forerunner to the anti-terrorist struggle. As the main regional military power, it has become an important ally for the United States and hosts the headquarters of the Joint Operational Army Staffs Committee (CEMOC), which coordinates the actions of the four member countries (Algeria, Mali, Niger, Mauritania) in Tamanrasset (Tisseron 2011; Ammour 2012). In turn, the official press never misses an opportunity to present the country as a reference for anti-terrorism and national reconciliation, or to repeat the praises sang by foreign partners. Indeed, once extrapolated from the Algerian polity and inserted into the transnational space of the "war on terror", politically motivated violence became a mere issue of security and stability. In so doing, the

war contributed to the insertion of a fiercely sovereign national order into the global system.

4. Post-Conflict Catastrophization

The footprint of the civil war on Bouteflika's Algeria was also visible in the country's political culture. The rationality that dominated public discourses gave a central role to apocalyptic prophecies and conspiracy theories. Each major electoral milestone, terrorist attack, or controversy was interpreted by a myriad of civilian observers who competed in the public space by announcing the incoming catastrophe and promoting rumors of struggles within the regime. The political life of the country was marked by uncertainty and punctuated by the anxious longing for a decisive event (Silverstein 2002; Serres 2017).

It is worth noticing that this narrative was shared by past and present members of the ruling elite. For example, the 2014 re-election of a mute and paralyzed Bouteflika was accompanied by discourses warning the people of an existential threat for the nation. In February, General Secretary of the FLN Amar Sa'adani publicly denounced the powerful head of the intelligence services, general-major Tewfik Mediene, and accused him of contributing to international maneuvers aimed at destabilizing the country (Mehdi 2014). A month later, Mohand Tahar Yala, the former head of the Algerian Navy, publicly attacked Bouteflika's supporters. He claimed that they represented a threat for the Republican order and could trigger Algeria's implosion.[3] Around the same time, former reformist Prime minister Mouloud Hamrouche repeatedly warned in private media of "a crisis inside the regime" that could once again destabilize the nation (El Watan 2014). Taken together, these declarations show the widespread catastrophization of Algerian politics. Various political figures described the unfolding of a potential catastrophe. At the same time, they objectified the risk by pointing at real tensions within the ruling coalition. This situation echoed the memories of the late 1980s, when a lasting political crisis paved the way to the explosion of violence of the 1990s.

[3] Public declaration of retired general Mohand Tahar Yala, Algiers, 3 March 2014.

Catastrophization is not merely a rhetorical device or a representation, it is also rooted in objective factors and concrete events. For instance, in early January 2013, a combat unit belonging to *al-Muwaqiyun bid-Dima*, an offspring of AQIM, launched a surprise attack on the Tingentourine gas facility, near the Libyan border. The attack rapidly evolved into a massive hostage crisis, as more than 100 foreign nationals were held captive by the terrorist group who demanded the end of the French intervention in Mali. Put on the spot by this sudden emergency, the Algerian security forces ended a two-day siege with a brutal assault, resulting in the killing of 38 civilians (37 of them being foreigners) and most of the hostage-takers. This attack was a major blow for the Algerian government: it revealed the resilience of terrorist groups that were officially defeated during the Dark Decade, the many tensions fracturing the military and security forces, and the vulnerability of the hydrocarbon sector. It also drew criticism from Western partners who denounced a poorly managed operation (Ammour 2013).

Invoking the continued threat of terrorism, political parties, labor unions, and associations linked to the regime highlighted the need for the people to show cohesion and praised the security forces for their swift response to the crisis (Ettouahria 2013). A more paranoid form of discourse responded to international critiques. Following a familiar pattern, rumors denouncing manipulations from foreign elements circulated online and in the private press. They pointed to the undercover actions of a "multinational oligarchy" that aimed at subjugating Algeria and plundering its hydrocarbon riches by instrumentalizing terrorism. Official news outlets also repeated this conspiracy theory. For instance, the official magazine *El-Djezair* dedicated a full issue to the one-year anniversary of the attack, casting Southern regions as vulnerable places where foreign agents manipulated locals and discredited the security forces. One of the journalists highlighted the Algerian commitment to fighting terrorism and the continuous sacrifice of the military. He added that "9/11 has been going on in (the) country for more than 20 years" (Mebarki 2014).

While these discourses bolstered the Algerian regime, in particular by updating the colonial era's anti-imperialist rhetoric, they also described objective aspects of the catastrophization process. When singling out the South as problematic, politicians and journalists also identify a set of concrete "evils" that could destabilize the country. The region has been plagued by unemployment, failed urban development, and regional inequalities. It has also been the epicenter of a movement of socioeconomic unrest that resulted in the creation of a National Committee for the Defense of the Rights of the Unemployed (CNDDC) in 2011, at the height of the Arab uprisings. The CNDDC directly challenged the dominant nationalist narrative and postcolonial social contract, while also calling for a reorganization of state power in the periphery (Belakhdar 2015). Moreover, while the movement appeals to national solidarity, elements of the regime cast its actions as evidence of the risk that the South might secede. If secessionist discourses are marginal, they are nonetheless very real. For example, after discussing the mismanagement of national wealth and the alleged contempt of "Northerners" for the South, a member of the Committee told me that he did not believe in "this borderland called Algeria".[4] The convergence between socioeconomic unrest in the South and political and security risks is certainly not a mere fiction. In the early 2000s, the "Movement for the Children of the South" publicly called for more equal development and economic opportunities. As it was met with fierce state coercion, a fraction of the movement formed an armed group in the neighboring Tassili n'Ajjer. A former member of this *maquis* participated in the terrorist assault in Tingentourine.

Finally, catastrophizing discourses after the attack also emphasized the role of geopolitical factors. An editorial published by the private newspaper *El Watan* argued that the possibility of the country's "descent into hell" was linked to a destabilized regional environment, notably in Mali and Libya (El Watan 2013). From this perspective, the accumulation of "evils" that could lead to a new disaster is particularly tangible in the south, where resilient Jihadism, growing geopolitical uncertain-

[4] Interview with a former journalist from Ouargla, unemployed, member of the CNDDC, Algiers, Spring 2011.

ties, and longstanding socioeconomic grievances are rampant (Hamadouche 2014). In other words, various catastrophizing factors associated with the decade-long civil war were still at work in Bouteflika's Algeria.

5. Mitigating Policies and Suspended Disaster

After the end of the conflict, the Algerian authorities implemented mitigating policies to maintain stability and prevent a new descent into chaos. By intervening in the fields of reconciliation, security, democratization, and economic redistribution, the regime adapted local governance and restored its sovereignty. Catastrophization is a rationale for the management of population and territory, and it relies on "sovereign and biopolitical apparatuses" that allow for the reconstruction of order and the management of life (Ophir 2010, p. 75).

Post-civil war politics in Algeria were still marked by a state of exception. Yet it was not systematically associated with state violence, but rather with the return to a pacified and neutralized political life. After Bouteflika's first election in 1999, the presidency was at the forefront of a strategy of reconciliation based on a mix of amnesty and amnesia. While the first law on *Rahma* (forgiveness) crafted under former president Zeroual barred violent insurgents from amnesty, the notion of Civil Concord (*al-W'iam al-Madani*) that Bouteflika promoted was more ambitious in its aims of reintegrating former rebels in the citizenry. Adopted after a referendum in September 1999, the presidential project benefited from widespread popular support (Lamchichi 2000). A decree extending the possibility of pardon for those who gave up the armed struggle soon followed. The most important step on the way to national reconciliation was taken during Bouteflika's second mandate, with a second referendum to adopt a charter that allowed for the release of more than one thousand prisoners. The charter offered state subsidies to the families of war victims and full amnesty to members of the security forces. In so doing, it also put an end to legal proceedings linked to the war. Article 46 criminalized any public statement that could "instrumentalize the wounds of the national tragedy". This censorship created a rift between the process of reconciliation and the search for justice. It enforced an

official amnesia and strengthened the institutional grip of the presidency (Djerbal 2005; Bustos 2007). The pacification was organized from above by bending the law. It never laid to rest the many questions that surrounded the Dark Decade. Consequently, human rights activists continued to denounce an obfuscation of war memories that prevents a genuine reconciliation.[5]

Mitigating policies also sought to contain socioeconomic unrest and prevent the outbreak of a major cross-sectoral mobilization. The egalitarian political culture inherited from the war of independence and the widespread feeling of *hogra* (contempt, injustice, dispossession) fueled a continuous movement of "*protesta*" that took the form of sit-ins, strikes, occupations, and riots (Bennadji 2011; Davis & Serres 2013). The regime limited military interventions while bolstering the institutions in charge of police repression (General Direction of National Safety – DGSN – and National Gendarmerie), complemented by the intelligence services (Department of Surveillance and Security, DSS). Security forces routinely blocked access to the capital or key infrastructures, preemptively arrested activists or, conversely, permitted the expression of discontent in peripheral spaces, for example in Southern and High-Plateaus regions. This is what the former head of the DGSN, retired general-major Hamel, labeled as "democratic crowd management". The securitization of social unrest also allowed for exceptional forms of coercion that accompanied more mundane acts of regulation. In the name of preventing chaos, groups of protesters were sometimes violently dispersed while isolated activists were abducted and held in administrative detention. Meanwhile, security forces monitored social unrest and produced alarming statistics that amalgamated all forms of protests. In January 2012, after the regime spent a year containing the wave of unrest that followed the Arab uprisings, the DGSN announced that it had intervened 10.910 times for "public-order related issues" in 2011. General-major Hamel praised his troops for being able to "canalize [the population] without impairing its dignity" (El

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[5] In an interview with the author, the general secretary of the Algerian League for the Defense of Human Rights (LADDH), Abdelmoumène Khelil, explained: "We know that the civil war has left important traces. We need to go toward an externalization of our traumas, with a genuine process of reconciliation. As long as we don't have it, fears will remain omnipresent. Algeria cannot do without an analysis of its recent history to start a process of change" (Algiers, Spring 2011).

Watan 2012). By monitoring the multiplication of a specific set of "evils" (i.e. protests) and staging a situation of emergency, the DGSN took part in the depoliticization of social unrest. It introduced the idea of a threshold above which the repetition of the civil war could no longer be prevented. By securitizing and quantifying social unrest, the Algerian regime aimed to manage pervasive insurrectionality and to maintain its control despite the popular rejection of systemic injustice (Luke 2015, p. 836-842).

The return to order after the 1990s was also closely tied to the process of democratization, which itself is an appropriation of pluralistic electoral procedures rather than an acceptance of popular sovereignty. The legacy of the civil war limited the scope of the competition. According to article 26 of the Charter for National Reconciliation, all individuals "responsible for the instrumentalization of religion that led to the national tragedy" are banned from any political activity. Thus, when former head of the Islamic Salvation Army Madani Mezrag proclaimed his desire to found his own political party in September 2015, he was met with a swift rebuttal from then Prime minister Abdelmalek Sellal (2012–2017), who declared that "it will not be possible for anybody to replicate the crisis experienced by the Algerian people during the 1990s" (Chennafi 2015). Rather than a genuine competition for political power, the ballot box has become a key feature of the civilizing process undertaken by the regime. Following, while electoral boycott is often politically motivated, it has been defined as a technical and cultural problem that requires a solution. After the legislative elections of 2007, the ministry of Interior sent more than 4 million letters to alleged nonvoters to inquire about the reasons for their nonparticipation (Dris-Aït Hamadouche 2009). Before the 2012 elections, public figures repeated their injunctions to vote, some of them even calling for sanctions against nonvoters. A few days before the vote, young activist Tarek Mammeri was arrested in the middle of the night and taken into custody for posting videos calling for a boycott of the election. He was condemned to a suspended sentence of eight months and fined 50.000 dinars. Boosting participation rates was framed as a way to instill the values of civility in an undisciplined national body. Yet democratization

also served a more mundane form of redistribution. In 2014, an opposition delegate at the Chlef local assembly described how he positioned himself as a vector of popular demands. He told me that his job was to organize the distribution of public funds with the help of those of his colleagues who were affiliated with ruling parties and had better access to government officials.[6] Indeed, the electoral game remained active at the local level and is an essential component in a system of clientelist mediation that prevented conflicts and incorporated new constituencies in the power structure (Hachemaoui 2003).

This set of policies restored the sovereignty of the state and contributed to the management of the population, therefore mitigating the unfolding of a new catastrophe. As a response to an imminent emergency, catastrophization also served as a tool for depoliticization (Vázquez-Arroyo 2013). At the same time, the process of national reconciliation never addressed the social, political, and cultural conflicts that led to the civil war. The securitization of unrest evacuated the socioeconomic grievances that fueled the ongoing movement of *protesta* and negated its political dimensions. As for democratization, it resulted in a pluralistic yet discredited and fragmented representation. Short of economic retribution, it was thus unable to attract popular support. Far from only mitigating the suspended disaster, these policies also fueled uncertainty and discontent. After participating in a sit-in that was disbanded by police forces, a syndicalist underlined the difficulty of remaining peaceful in the face of systemic injustice. At the end of our discussion, he added bitterly: "The *hogra* and corruption drive people crazy. They are angry. One should not be surprised if one day, everything burns once again".[7] In other words, the Algerian regime was both a catastrophizing and mitigating actor. It fed the unfolding disaster while at the same time trying to prevent it, resulting in a "equilibrium of instability" (Werenfels 2009). As the disaster remained suspended above the polity, the threat

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[6] Interview with a representative at the People's Provincial Assembly (APW), member of Jabha al-Mustaqbal (nationalist party, opposition), Chlef, Spring 2014.
[7] Interview with an employee of the direction of public equipment, member of the SNAPAP (autonomous trade union for public servants), Algiers, Spring 2011.

of a new apocalypse persisted and catastrophization became a rationale for routinized governance.

6. Catastrophizing Economics

While catastrophization in Algeria relies mostly on policies implemented by the state, these policies are supported and bolstered by other local and international actors who seek to prevent the suspended disaster. NGOs, businessmen, foreign governments and international organizations take part in the governance by catastrophization. This cooperation is especially visible in the domain of the economy.

Questions of political economy, broken promises, and market liberalization were central to the 2010–2011 uprisings (Hinnebusch 2012; Heydemann 2013). As the Dark Decade was imbricated with a major economic crisis, which resulted in increased unemployment and government debt, the issue of the country's financial health remains central in catastrophizing discourses. The question of wealth redistribution and material progress is thus especially sensitive in Algerian politics, whether formulated in a top-down paternalistic fashion[8] or in a more conflictual manner by engaged social groups.[9] This translates into a set of policies that range from public housing distribution to stipends for members of the "Revolutionary family", food subsidies, or state contracts for unemployed youth. To finance these policies, the Algerian state has benefited from high oil prices. It has also resorted to hoarding in order to prevent a budget crisis similar to the one that undermined government capacities before the civil war. In 2012, the government proudly announced that its currency reserves amounted to more than 200 billion dollars, as the IMF solicited its support for refinancing countries in crisis (El Moudjahid 2012). Shortly thereafter, oil prices began to drop, which resulted in a rapid decrease of currency reserves. This reversal of fortune, symbolized by the exhaustion of the Revenue Regulation Fund, led the state press to adopt a more pessimistic tone, and

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[8] In Bouteflika's 2009 program, entitled for an "A Strong and Serene Algeria", p 1 & 11-14.
[9] See the public statement of the CNDDC, entitled "Pain, Travail, Liberté", released on 1 May 2011.

to call for rapid "structural reforms" in light of a worrying situation (El Moudjahid 2017).

Non-state actors participated in the prevention of an economic disaster and used catastrophization to advance their own reformist agenda. For instance, Ali Haddad, the head of the Forum of Business Owners (FCE) and CEO of a major construction company, was at the forefront of the battle for the "economic trans-formation" (*at-Tahawûl al-Iqtisadî*) announced by the government. In newspapers under his ownership, he frequently posited an opposition between investors who wanted to develop the country through job creation, and individuals who sought unrest and a return to the years of terrorism (Le Temps 2015). He argued that improving the business climate was a national emergency (Le Temps 2018). Such non-state actors as NGOs and think tanks also played a key role in monitoring the rise of "evils" that could lead to an economic breakdown. They provided the techno-scientific expertise that depoliticized the national emergency by drawing on statistics and economic projections. For instance, the think tank Nabni, which is linked to pro-business circles, released various assessments of the deteriorating economic situation and prescribed urgent steps to "avoid the iceberg".[10]

Because Algeria is a key component in the regional system, any potential destabilization is perceived as a major threat. Following, international actors viewed an uprising in Algeria in apocalyptic rather than utopian terms. From their conservative perspective (Costantini 2018), a revolution would trigger increased migration flows, market destabilization, and terrorism. Thus, foreign governments and international organizations promoted reforms, which they perceived as essential to prevent an explosion. For example, shortly after Bouteflika's reelection in 2009, a cable sent by the US embassy in Algiers underlined the fact that the country was "sitting on a volcano" and emphasized the need to support reforms and privately influence local officials.[11]

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[10] Nabni, "Plan d'Urgence ABDA – 2016-2018".
[11] Cable 09ALGIERS370_a, sent in April 2009. Available at: <https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09ALGIERS370_a.html>.

The involvement of international financial institutions in the conceptualization of economic reforms in formerly socialist Arab states is limited by the ability of the latter to negotiate and preserve vested interests (Hinnebusch 1993, p. 161-162). These institutions are nonetheless essential in monitoring and mitigating the unfolding economic disaster. Both the World Bank and the IMF closely followed the economic reforms implemented by the Algerian government. For example, the World Bank provided economic and legal studies, as well as training sessions to encourage industrial diversification.[12] Yet again, these transnational partners have their own neoliberal agenda that conflicts with the state-centered rationale that is characteristic of Algerian politics. As a result, they criticized government policies, which they found to "entail significant risks to the economic outlook", including economic imbalances, inflation, and financial instability.[13] The intervention of international financial institutions also contributed to the production of the unfolding disaster. In the 1990s, their push in favor of structural adjustment conflicted with the fierce defense of sovereignty that is paramount in local political culture. It was also detrimental to the interests of the most precarious groups in society (Dillman 1998).

The EU is directly exposed to the consequences of a potential destabilization. The civil war is an unspoken influence on cooperation programs implemented with the Algerian government. The lasting impact of terrorism and the risks of socioeconomic unrest are explicitly mentioned in European action plans. For instance, the document presenting the objectives of EU-Algerian cooperation for 2018-2020 stated that the "strengthening of Algeria's inclusive socioeconomic development [will improve] its resilience in the face of regional instability".[14] According to their own narrative, which views the market as a pacifying force in environments marked by disastrous conditions (Walters & Haahr 2005), European actors securitize the economy while seeking an equilibrium between neoliberal reforms and the prevention of social unrest (Serres 2016). As a result, EU programs in Algeria have led to a

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[12] See on the website of the ministry of Industry: <http://www.industrie.gov.dz/?Synthese-diversification>.
[13] IMF Country Report No. 18/168, 1 June 2018, p. 2.
[14] European Delegation in Algeria, "Cadre unique d'appui UE-Algérie (2018–2020)", Algiers, 20 May 2018, p. 2.

set of interventions that aimed at improving the competitiveness of local companies, the training of "human capital", and the inclusion of precarious groups in the labor market.[15] Implemented in partnership with the Algerian government, these programs contributed to population management, human flow regulation, and risk minimization.

Various local and transnational actors participated in the process of economic restructuring. These actors were brought together by their desire to prevent the repetition of the economic crisis that led to the civil war. The imaginary of emergency also allowed for the coexistence of contradictory interests and competing goals while prioritizing techno-scientific expertise and market rationality. It facilitated the insertion of the country in transnational regimes of security. Yet, mitigating policies did not erase the "evils" that could lead to an uprising (state violence, corruption, socioeconomic inequalities, bureaucratic contempt).

7. Progress and the Catastrophic Present

The aftermath of the 2010-2011 Arab Springs highlighted the ambiguous nature of the process of catastrophization. Each country responded to this revolutionary moment in accordance with its specific features and political dynamics (Bayart 2014). In Algeria, the ability of the regime to control change echoed a particular national temporality marked by the specter of the civil war. From 2011 to 2012, the country was progressively removed from the revolutionary momentum and reinstalled in a continuum of security and progress that was portrayed as the only way to prevent the suspended disaster. Governance by catastrophization imposed its political rhythm as well as specific representations of the past and future.

Following the outbreak of the Tunisian revolution and the wave of urban uprising that shook Algeria in early January 2011, the authorities quickly responded through discursive catastrophization. Systematically invoking the National Tragedy and the price of anarchy, Prime minister Ahmed Ouyahia (2003–2006, 2008–2012,

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[15] Over the past 10 years, various projects have been implemented in the framework of the following programs funded by the EU: DIVECO, PAPS-ESRS, PME I & II, and PASEA.

2017–2019) repeatedly cast the regional upheaval as an "Arab Winter" or an "Arab Downfall". In a similar vein, the government-owned magazine *El-Djezair* dedicated a full issue to the "Spring of the Arab Curse", which it also described as a "Spring of the Graveyards", in May 2013. These transparent threats echoed a recurring diagnosis, which presents October 1988 as the original sin that led to the civil war. The popular uprising is depicted as a mix of childish resentment and obscure manipulation that resulted in mass terrorism. In the words of then head of the intelligence services Lakehal Ayat: "October was the beginning of disobedience in Algeria, of the contempt for values, of the negation of institutions... A troublemaker gets used to confrontation. He just needs the means to turn into a terrorist, especially if he is supported by the dreadful enemies of Algeria" (Semiane 1998, p. 133). According to this reactionary narrative, radical critique is inherently untimely in a volatile configuration. As a childish strategy, it is opposed to the need to act in an orderly fashion, which is to say in a civil and appropriate manner (Brown 2005, p. 4).

As "'endangerment' became a new operational baseline assumption for making the advances of 'development'" (Luke 2015, p. 843), official discourses presented the 2012 legislative elections as an alternative "spring" that provided a civil and responsible framework for popular expression. It was time to return to the routine of participation, economic reforms and democratic consolidation, and cast away the evils that led to the civil war. As they were campaigning for the RND in the center of Algiers, a group of young men told me that the goal of this election was to finish "rebuilding a house" and that changing direction or leadership could only result in utter destruction.[16] Indeed, the imprint of the civil war has legitimized the paternalism of postcolonial elites, and bolstered bureaucratic structures of power. In the name of order, progress, and curing an "Algerian personality" (*Shakhsiya al-Jazairiya*) shattered by colonialism and the Dark Decade, the ruling coalition proposed the reestablishment of a continuum of development. Population and territory were thus to be reinstalled in Benjamin's homogeneous and empty time. This progressive and cumulative temporality is characteristic of modern governance and na-

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[16] Informal discussion with members of the RND, Algiers, Spring 2012.

tional (re)construction (Anderson 2006, p. 24). Benjamin opposes the homogeneous and empty time of positivism, capitalist accumulation and routinized oppression to the here-and-now (*jetztzeit*) (1940, XIV). This qualitative suspension of the present allows for the advent of a messianic zero-hour, for a new revolution that disrupts the time of progression and oppression.

During the presidential race of 2014, as opposition activists protested against the upcoming reelection of a paralyzed Bouteflika, the country was overwhelmed by rumors and uncertainty. While attending a protest organized in the center of Algiers, a member of the Socialist Forces Front pointed with concern at present police forces and explained: "They have Kalashnikov rifles in the center of Algiers. The last time we saw that was 1988".[17] In Algeria, catastrophization has seemingly deprived the here-and-now of its messianic potential. Limited to an apocalyptic meaning, the uprising of 1988 became synonymous with popular chaos and state violence. The catastrophic representation of the past limited the possibility of a revolution in the present.

The civil war remains a reference to regulate political behavior. Opposition activists "have seen what happens when the regime is challenged: it does not hesitate, it shoots".[18] Despite widespread discontent and permanent unrest, opposition actors feared that any attempts to start a revolutionary movement might lead to mass violence. Social movements thus prioritized apolitical claims and peaceful demonstrations in order to avoid confrontation. Consequently, at the peak of the student movement that shook the country in 2010–2011, protesters were cautious to limit their discourse despite the appeal of neighboring revolutions (Baamara 2013). Critiques of the regime thus sought refuge in the empty and homogeneous time of progress, as they emphasized the need to proceed incrementally and educate the population to foster more civil ways of expressing discontent.[19]

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[17] Informal discussion with a member of the FFS, Algiers, Spring 2014.
[18] Interview with Abdelwahab Serfaoui, president of the Youth Action Rally (RAJ), Algiers, Spring 2011.
[19] Interview with Abdelmoumène Khelil, general secretary of the Algerian League for the Defense of Human Rights, Algiers, Spring 2011.

Yet, governance based on catastrophization was not sufficient to completely erase the messianic longing for revolution. Indeed, from the vantage point of the population, the reinsertion of the country in the continuum of development was far from evident. If there was a socially shared discourse in Algeria, it was not one that replicated the mythology of a regime reforming the economy and democratizing its people in order to suspend the disaster. Rather, it was a constant lament in the face of frozen time, a political and social glaciation that prevented life from unfolding and entrapped the country in a present without history (Rahal 2013). This sharp criticism dismantled the positivist, nationalist and securitizing mythology of official discourses. It denounced the daily sufferings of a population that was confronted with precariousness, corruption and contempt. Lotfi DK, whose lyrics opened this article, is certainly one of the most iconic carriers of this discourse. In *Houkouma* (2011), he justified the widespread desire to emigrate of a "chained generation" abandoned by its government. A few years later, after declaring his opposition to Bouteflika's fourth mandate, he released *Kleouha* (2014), a violent lyrical charge against a regime that has "eaten" the country and stolen its wealth with the complicity of foreign companies. Far from accepting a reintegration in the continuum of development, this popular criticism revealed the out-of-jointness of time. It depicted a reality that was neither cumulative nor progressive, but disarticulated, dislocated, and shattered (Brown 2005, p. 8). What this popular discourse described was not the suspension of an unfolding disaster. It rather inhabited a catastrophic present that had been separated from a glorious past and where the future was inaccessible (Ophir 2010, p. 61).

While facing the emergency of the catastrophic present, opposition activists had not completely abandoned any references to radical change. Despite apocalyptic discourses and police repression, several organizations gathered every year to commemorate the anniversary of the uprising of October 1988. Some still longed for the moment of the insurrection. As they welcomed me in their room at the university campus of Tizi Ouzou in 2011, two students spoke emotionally of their participation in a protest in the center of Algiers. A few weeks earlier, they had helped

organize the first mass demonstration in the capital for more than a decade. Describing this unique moment, as he felt that the regime was "shaking", one of them stated: "Now I can die peacefully".[20] Indeed, by retaking the center of Algiers, the student movement had exploded the continuum of history (Benjamin 1940, XV). For a brief moment, it interrupted the catastrophic present, avenged past generations and realized the messianic potential of the here-and-now.

8. Conclusion: From the Catastrophe to the Revolution

"*We are the golden generation*"

Soulking & Ouled el-Bahdja – *Liberté* (2019)

As I write the conclusion of this article, protesters have been demonstrating across Algeria for more than ten weeks, demanding the fall of the regime. On February 22nd, millions of Algerians took to the streets rejecting Bouteflika's bid for a fifth mandate. Since then, the president has resigned but peaceful protests have continued. The discourse is radical. "*Yetnahou ga'a*" is their motto: "they [*ie* members of the regime] must all be taken away". This movement is revolutionary. It is festive, cross-sectoral, emancipatory, and full of risks. The army is still the most powerful institution in the country. A minority of radical actors might be tempted to use violence. Protesters, many of them students, are very aware of these risks. Yet they are collectively, massively demanding radical change and an end to an unbearable *status quo*. The resilience of the regime is not the only horizon. The masses are not "trapped in shells of passivity, dependency, and inaction" (*contra* Luke 2015, p. 845).

The lived catastrophe can still conjure utopia rather than cynicism (*contra* Rabinbach 1985, p. 124). In Algeria, the discourse of political sanctity associated with the people inherited from the war of independence never ceased to be relevant. The catastrophe was politicized in the name of the people's dignity, thus averting the depoliticizing dimension inherent to the process of catastrophization

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[20] Informal discussion with two members of the local student coordination, Tizi Ouzou, Spring 2011.

(Vázquez-Arroyo 2013, p. 757). Given the poverty of everyday life, the fall of the regime became the real emergency. In a country were more than 50% of the population is under 30 years old, a generation embraced its messianic mission. A sign at the Ecole Normale Supérieure of Algiers quoted Fanon: "Each generation discovers its mission, accomplishes or betrays it". While calls for a second Republic might seem utopian, protesters have also been pragmatic. Many of them grew up in a catastrophized environment. Following, they made pacifism, civility and patriotism their guiding principles. In so doing, they exorcised the demons of the Dark Decade. If the present revolution carries a set of utopian hopes, it still faces forms of catastrophization.

The civil war of the 1990s enabled the rise of a governance based on the suspension of an unfolding catastrophe. This form of rule relied on sovereign and biopolitical apparatuses, and it contributed to the insertion of the country in transnational regimes of security. At the same time, the possibility of an upheaval was ambiguous in nature. Behind the potential repetition of the conflict lied a genuine revolutionary situation. In this uncertain context, one must acknowledge the "social potential for ending as well as unending history" (Haugbolle & Bandak 2017, p. 202-203). Algeria was caught in a standoff between the emergency of a catastrophic present and the existential threat of a potential apocalypse. The current revolutionary moment is the outcome of this confrontation. The positivist order enforced by the national security-state and its transnational partners has collided with the messianic release made possible by a generation of revolutionaries. In the resolution of this tension lies the prospect of a political order finally liberated from the shadows of the civil war.

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