

The Sportive Origin of Revolution: Youth Movements and Generational Conflicts in Late Colonial Algeria

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Starting in the 1920s and 30s, youth came to be seen, in colonial Algeria as elsewhere in the Arab world, as a social category that educators, academics and politicians had to deal with in one way or another. Modernizers and many young men and women established a host of youth movements from the 1920s onwards: cultural circles and student associations, sports teams and scout troops as well as youth wings of political parties. In this contribution I examine such youth movements and the generational conflicts they brought with them in

French Algeria from around 1930 until the achievement of independence in 1962. Based on theories by Johan Huizinga and José Ortega y Gasset about the generative potential of generational communities centered around play, I will demonstrate the importance of allegedly non-political youth groups for the social and political transformations in late colonial Algeria.

Keywords: Algeria; Anti-colonialism; Youth Movements; Play-communities

Youthful Potentials

Starting in the 1920s and 30s, youth came to be seen, in colonial Algeria as elsewhere in the Arab world, as a social category that educators, academics and politicians had to deal with in one way or another (see also Pursley 160-2). Young men and women were often regarded by their elders as potentially troublesome, a group that had to be controlled and molded into the right form so as not to follow a deviant path and put the functioning of society at risk. Pedagogues and psychologists began publishing articles in the press about the problems of adolescence and how to deal with them (e.g. Sellal; Bouamrane). On the other hand, the young represented the future, especially in the view of social and political activists, ranging from Islamic reformism to communism and radical nationalism (e.g. “Et la Jeunesse!”; “Niḍāl al-shubbān”; Yazid). In short, youth represented the dangers of disturbance and decadence as well as the hopes of modernizers, or, as El Shakry has put it with regard to Egypt, both “peril and promise” (591). To actualize the promise of youthful potentials, these modernizers and many young men and women themselves established a host of youth movements in Algeria from the 1920s onwards: cultural circles and student associations, sports teams and scout troops as well as

youth wings of political parties (as an example see the account by Amouchi).¹ In this contribution I examine such youth movements and the generational conflicts they brought with them in French Algeria from around 1930² until the achievement of independence in 1962. Based on theories by Johan Huizinga and José Ortega y Gasset about the generative potential of generational communities centered around play, I will demonstrate the importance of allegedly non-political youth groups for the social and political transformations in late colonial Algeria. Historical research on this period still largely focuses on the various political movements, their doctrines, evolution and relations between them, and ignores the social importance of organized youth and generational conflict.³ I argue instead that youth movements, particularly sporting *play-communities* with a marked generational dimension, were major harbingers of anti-colonial nationalism and the main sites of socialization for revolutionary activists - maybe even more than political parties.

Generational Conflict and State-Building

During the 1930s, colonial Algeria witnessed a growth in associational life, with newly established cultural circles, labor unions, charitable associations and sports

teams complementing the rising number of political movements. At about the same time, two influential European cultural theorists, José Ortega y Gasset and Johan Huizinga, posited youth movements with their playful elements as the main builders of state and culture.

In his 1930 essay "The Sportive Origin of the State" ("El origen deportivo del estado"), the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset called into question the utilitarian understanding of human creativity and emphasized the importance of seemingly self-referential activities, such as sports. He argued that generational communities of young men and not kinship ties had been historically instrumental in the creation of the first state institutions. Young men, organized in brotherhoods and "glowing with solidarity like a football team" (26), would not, according to Ortega, realize a preconceived plan to establish a political community, but rather act for the sake of action itself, out of their youthful energy:

We have seen, then, that the first human society is precisely the opposite of a reaction to imposed necessities. It is an association of the young [...]. Rather than a parliament or a cabinet of bigwigs, it resembles an athletic club (30-1).

Ortega sees state-building as a deliberate creative act, carried out by a community that is, first of all, defined by generation. The philosopher even views the nation not as a historical given with a basis in a group's common past, but as an active construction, "as a splendid programme for the morrow" (*Revolt* 174).

This idea is particularly important for the case of colonial Algeria, where no indigenous state-structure existed at all. In contrast to the protectorates and mandates that characterized colonialism in the Arab world to a large extent, Algeria was divided between a northern part legally incorporated into metropolitan France as regular *départements*, and the territories of the south under military rule (with a superimposed colonial administration headed by the governor-general in Algiers). Hence, there was no proto-nation state as in the Sultanate of Morocco or the Syrian Republic, which, though also under French colonial rule, enabled nationalist leaders to be active within the institutions that served as a blueprint for the independent state to come. As a consequence, actors of civil society and generationally defined groups were much more important and the voluntarist approach to state-building much more pronounced.

The Algerian historian Mohammed Harbi, then a young nationalist activist, recounts

the ideas which influenced him in the late 1940s:

Voluntarism occupied an important place in my political approach. I was fascinated with the dream of modernization. My generation did not hesitate to try and engage our people, if necessary by force, against those who refused our cult of science, our belief in reason and progress⁴ (81).

He even seems to echo Ortega's assertion that "in the beginning there is vigor and not utility" ("Sportive Origin" 31) when he writes about his engagement in the major nationalist party at the time, the Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Freedoms (*Mouvement pour le Triomphe des Libertés Démocratiques*, MTLD):

[...] the MTLD did not have any doctrine [...]. The life of the movement, its history depended entirely on the activities of its members. [...] Like for the young people around me, my engagement was spontaneous, so to say natural. (75, 77).

The growth of Muslim civil society as well as the radicalization of anti-colonial nationalism were the results of a new generation leaving their mark on social and political

movements. In many cases this generation was also the first to belong to the emerging indigenous middle class: many nationalist activists and intellectuals born in the interwar years were actually the first members of their families to acquire a modern education in French schools (M'Hamsadji 84-7, 96-9; Drif 26-30, 58-9; Ighilahriz 27-8; Bin Jadid 34). At least as important as fighting French colonialism, for them, appears to be the break with the older generations within their own community. Zohra Drif, an undergraduate student at Algiers University in the 1950s, emphasizes that the "radicalism of the youth" (77) led to a conflict with their elders, who were marked by fatalist quietism, as exemplified by her friend's father, a well-established *cadi* (judge in an Islamic court):

Samia's father believed neither in Man nor in his ability to change the course of History, let alone in the principle of free will. [...] For him, the colonial system with its host of evils inflicted on our people on a daily basis was a multitude of trials which Allah sent us to test our faith; our liberation was subject to divine will. This philosophy constituted a great point of disagreement with his wife and daughter (195).⁵

According to Harbi, the American invasion of 1942 had already ushered in a period of youth revolt against traditional authorities that were seen as backward, timid and accommodating towards the colonial power. When talking about the local elections of 1947, he contrasts the new generation's activist style to the traditional politics of notables:

The electoral campaign was marked by a rare violence. The young generation did not follow the practices of the notables (banquets, meetings between the heads of clans, distribution of gifts and other clientelistic practices) anymore, but militant models (marches, rallies, leaflets, posters, use of symbols, anthems and the flag ...). (54).

Carlier has analyzed the generations of nationalist activists during the 1940s, who laid the basis for the National Liberation Front (*Front de Libération Nationale*, FLN) and the war of independence it started in 1954. The definite rupture with the older moderate politicians had occurred with the riots of May 1945 and the following repression (Carlier 140-9).⁶ The new generation of nationalists now drew the conclusion that only full independence could be the goal and only armed revolution the way to achieve it (Ben Khedda 97-107;

Harbi 43-5, 81; Bin Jadid 46-9; Drif 45, 72; Mizyani Madani 12-3). Hocine Aït Ahmed, one of the historic leaders of the FLN, who was 19 years old at the time, sees the significance of May 1945 in the rising political consciousness of young people:

Forced to fly by our own wings, we became more attentive to the effervescent realities of a society in search of expression, a youth trying to organize. (44).

From Play-Communities to Revolution

While Ortega used “sportive” in a rather vast sense, the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga in his work *Homo Ludens*, originally published in 1938, demonstrated the social significance of playfulness. He went beyond the definition of play by its staying outside of normal life: on the contrary, he affirmed that play was “an integral part of life” and even “a necessity both for the individual [...] and for society” (9). Taking examples from ancient history and present societies deemed to be archaic, Huizinga saw games and ritual feasts involving young people as constitutive for social interaction (46-75). A central aspect are enduring communities which evolve out of a game:

The outlaw, the revolutionary, [...] indeed heretics of all kinds, are of a highly associative if not sociable disposition, and a certain element of play is prominent in all their doings. A play-community generally tends to become permanent even after the game is over. [...] the feeling of being “apart together” in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game. [...] It would be rash to explain all the associations the anthropologist calls “phratría” – e. g. clans, brotherhoods, etc. – simply as play-communities; nevertheless it has been shown again and again how difficult it is to draw the line between, on the one hand, permanent social groupings [...] and the sphere of play on the other. (12).

Evidence for the importance of generational (and rather homosocial) play-communities can also be found in autobiographical accounts from the period. Several Algerian authors talk at length about childhood games and their function of community building and “teaching to think” (M’Hamsadji 171; see also Dib

63-8). The independence activist Louise Ighilahriz recalls:

We learned a sense of responsibility at a very young age, by playing *big*. Maybe it was not a game, but our personalities which were in the process of formation. (58)

And Si Azzedine, a prominent commander in the National Liberation Army (*Armée de Libération Nationale*, ALN) after 1954, claims he had been able to become a successful military strategist by his experience as an almost professional checkers player during his adolescence (38).

Another important aspect of Huizinga’s theory is the fact that games have their own sets of rules which cannot be questioned. Even someone who tries to cheat has to accept the rules in principle - otherwise there would simply be no game at all (11-2). In this context another particularity of French Algeria comes into play, namely its character as a settler colony. Even more than in other colonies, in Algeria the colonizers of European origin (approximately one tenth of the total population) controlled not only the administration and the economy, but also public and cultural life, especially in the big cities and in the productive agricultural areas. In this specific

colonial situation, games and sports were effectively the only realm in which colonizers and colonized competed on an equal footing. While the educational and legal systems discriminated against the colonized in a multitude of ways, on the sports pitch - where the rules were the same for everyone - it was possible for them to prove their abilities and to actually beat the French (on settler colonialism in Algeria see Stora 29-43).

Whereas the professional careers of the aspiring new generation of Muslim Algerians were regularly blocked by the colonial system - for example, indigenous teachers would normally teach only on the primary level, indigenous officers would rarely rise above the rank of captain (Faci 9-17, 23-7; Zerguini 30-1) -, Muslim Algerian athletes from the late 1920s on became part of the national and international sporting elite in various disciplines. Many autobiographical accounts attest to the importance sporting achievements acquired in the minds of young colonial subjects. The anti-colonial activist Mahmoud Abdoun reports at length the successes of Algerian athletes during the later colonial period (see also Zerguini 19-20) and recalls one of the earliest great triumphs of Algerian sports:

In 1928, just before the end of the Am-

sterdam Olympics, France, despite having participated in all competitions, had not yet won any medals. Everyone was waiting, on the last day of the Games, for the most beautiful challenge, the marathon. The frontrunners were the Finns and the Swedes, but the winner was the "French" El Ouafi, originally from Biskra [an oasis in eastern Algeria]. [...] That was the only medal won by France. (Abdoun 44).

The author does not conceal his satisfaction at the fact that the nation of Pierre de Coubertin,⁷ in this instance, needed a Muslim Algerian subject to procure it the only Olympic medal (see also Terret and Roger). In the same vein, the writer Kaddour M'Hamsadji singles out the first Algerian cyclist to compete in the *Tour de France* - a major symbolic event for the French national community (Vigarello) - as an example for indigenous achievement:

For us, this was proof, once again, for the physical and mental capacity of the *Arab* to rise, even regardless of his political stance to the Algerian problem, up to the sportive level of any French athlete of the colonial period (195).

But it was not only the admiration for top-level athletes and their function as role

models, putting into question colonial hierarchies, which drew the Muslim community towards sports. In a situation where there existed no indigenous political institutions and parties representing Muslim Algerians were repeatedly banned, sports clubs functioned as an important aspect of community life and the formation of a national identity. Harbi affirms: "It was in sport - as if it were a substitute for politics - where the sense of belonging to a community appeared the strongest." (68) In the settler colony, many teams represented an ethnic community - a lot of clubs founded by indigenous Algerians actually used the term *Muslim* in their denomination (Fatès) - and competitions between them became loaded with political symbolism and occasionally led to inter-communal violence (Dine and Rey 28-31). Azzedine describes the soccer matches of his youth in the early 1950s as such politically meaningful encounters:

I was part of a club, the USMMC, the Muslim Sportive Union of Maison-Carrée. Our "eleven" consisted exclusively of Algerians. Depending on the neighborhoods, the teams we played were European or mixed. Sport was for me a school of nationalism, and the pitches were my first battlefields. At the matches, we were defending an idea,

still vague, but we already had the consciousness of fighting for our country. (40; see also M'Hamsadji 209-18; Drif 41-2)

In short, sport was “one path among others leading towards nationalism” (Abdoun 32), or, in the words of Algeria's future president Chadli Bendjedid “an expression of belonging to a nation and a faith” (54).⁸

A particular play-community were boy scout groups where different games formed a central part of the pedagogical methods that aimed primarily at character formation and had their origins in 19th century British “games ethic” (Mangan 44-70). Harbi remembers about his adolescence: “The *medersa* [Islamic school] was less stimulating than scouting with its open air activities, its debates, the learning of patriotic songs [...]” He continues to specify the role of singing with the boy scouts:

Through songs, scouting had taught us patriotism. They exalted the role of youth: ‘We are the youth. We are the future with its sacred glory. We have religion in our heart and light in our eyes.’ (42, 45)

The Muslim scout organizations that had been developing since the 1930s, some close to the Islamic reform movement, others rather leaning towards radical nationalism, were widely perceived as the most effective means to educate a new generation which would be able to bring about a revolution against the colonial order (Kaddache). And in fact, young scouts were at the forefront of the May 1945 protests as well as in the ALN during the war of independence (Aït Ahmed 40-4; Azzedine 31; al-Hasani 20; Drif 70-1; Bouhassane et al.).

Sports and scouting thus functioned, for many young Algerians, as the first sites of association with their peers and as places where they first came into contact with the national idea. A focus on the strictly political movements of the time occludes significant aspects in the biographies of the young activists. They were not just members in one of the political parties, but were active in a whole variety of movements and initiatives, often starting precisely with the boy scouts, as some examples can illustrate.

‘Abd al-Hafiz al-Hasani, for instance, born in 1926, was a member of the Muslim scouts and the moderately nationalist party Friends of the Manifesto and Liberty (*Amis du Manifeste et de la Liberté*, AML)⁹ by the mid-1940s. At the same time, he

taught Arabic and religion in a private school adhering to Islamic reformism and founded his own reformist circle in a village close to Sétif (in north-eastern Algeria), the Progress and Advancement Club (*Nādī al-Taraqqī wa-l-Taqaddum*). Finally, al-Hasani settled in Paris, where he became secretary-general of the French section of the Association of Algerian Muslim ‘*ulamā*’ (al-Hasani 23-31).

Harbi, who was born in 1933, had attended a reformist private school. During the 1940s, he first became leader of a boy scout troop and then of a youth section in the radically nationalist MTLN (some of whose young cadres would later form the FLN). In his home town Philippeville (Skikda, also in the eastern Constantinois region), together with some friends and fellow activists he established a sports association, Widad Athletic Philippevillois. Like al-Hasani, Harbi then moved to France where he tried to organize nationalist cells among Algerian immigrant workers and came into contact with the labor movement (Harbi 42-3, 86-7, 108-9).

Towards a Transnational History of Youth
From today's perspective, informed by post-colonial and other critical approaches, it is easy to criticize Ortega and Huizinga, for instance for their mixing of ancient history with the ethnography of

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supposedly *primitive* societies in a general anthropological theory (implying civilizational hierarchies) or for their privileging of male agency. Still, their ideas about the "sportive origin" of state structures and generationally defined "play-communities" can offer valuable insights into the origins of Algerian anti-colonial nationalism. A perspective of social and cultural history which looks at the concrete experiences of young activists on an everyday level - a perspective I have tried to outline here - will contribute to a better understanding of social transformations underlying the history of political ideas and doctrines that has long dominated research on the subject. Also important is the fact that Ortega's and Huizinga's very insistence on the social role of play-communities at this specific historical moment hints at a transnational contemporaneity of youth movements.¹⁰

The importance of scout movements, in particular, for the formation of an indigenous middle class with a self-ascribed modernization agenda has been demonstrated for other parts of the colonial Arab world as well, especially for Egypt and Syria (Jacob 92-124; Watenpaugh). Sports on the level of local clubs and teams, on the other hand, seem to have been of special importance in settings where a confrontation between different ethno-reli-

gious communities took place on an everyday basis: besides French Algeria, the best example would be the British mandate of Palestine (Khalidi). In general, the emergence of a self-conscious middle class, of new nationalisms and also new gender relations, primarily among the young segments of the population, all formed part of the experience of colonial modernity (Jacob 186-224; Pursley) and the new mass society (analyzed by Ortega, *Revolt* 11-77). But the mushrooming of life-reform and scouting movements, the expansion of modern sports and the attraction of a mass audience to nationalist youth organizations were obviously by no means limited to the Arab world during the interwar years, nor were they simply adaptations of a pre-existing Western model. If we consider them instead as contemporaneous global phenomena, it is possible to move beyond the diffusionist Westernization paradigm and open up new perspectives for a transnational history of youth.

Of course, this history of youth movements does not stop with independence. In Algeria, sports, particularly soccer, have played a role in the challenge that new movements, Islamist as well as Berberist, have posed to the FLN regime since the 1980s (Amara 41-7). In other Arab countries, too, soccer has once

again acquired political meaning, perhaps most prominently in Egypt around the turmoil of 2011 (Tuastad; Rommel). A major shift, though, consists in the fact that it is now the (again, transnational) phenomenon of ultra supporters and the stadium as a meeting place for the youth which delineate soccer's political potential: the play-community expresses its dissidence no longer through active sports, but rather as spectators in the structures of fandom (Amara 47-55; Bin Jalid). Nevertheless, the realm of sports continues to function as a central vehicle for the aspirations of a young generation.

Notes

¹ In many instances, the youth wings, such as the Islamic-reformist Youth of the Algerian Muslim Congress (*Jeunesse du Congrès Musulman Algérien*, JCMA) or the moderately nationalist Youth of the Democratic Union of the Algerian Manifesto (*Jeunesse de l'Union Démocratique du Manifeste Algérien*, JUDMA), actually appear as the most active components of movements and parties, if we follow the contemporary press (from the many examples see "Shubbān al-mu'tamar"; "Grande Excursion"; "La Vie de la J.U.D.M.A."). According to Ben Khedda, in 1944 the youth wing of the nationalist Algerian People's Party (*Parti du Peuple Algérien*, PPA) in the Algiers neighborhood of Belcourt had 500 members, while the regular section (made up of adults) had only 350 (129). A little later, the PPA even had its own central youth committee, parallel to the regular central committee of the party (Aït Ahmed 103-6).

² The year 1930 was marked by the colonialist triumphalism of the *Centenaire* celebrations, marking the 100th anniversary of French conquest, but the following years were crucial for the development of indigenous Algerian social and political movements that became more and more visible in the public (Jansen).

³ Standard references on colonial Algeria make no mention of youth movements (e.g. Stora), while a recent volume features only one brief article on the Muslim scouts (Bouchène et al.), which is actually a shortened version of previously published text (Kaddache). Some articles on youth movements can be found in two specialized collections (Bancel, Denis, and Fatès; Belabed-Mouhoub).

⁴ All translations from French and Arabic are by the author.

⁵ Although accounts on this period are often male-centered – including Ortega's theoretical approach – young women, too, played an active role in the new movements. By breaking with the older generations, young women also challenged a whole system of patriarchal social structures (Mizyani Madani 67-79; Ighilahriz 88-94) – a point famously highlighted by Frantz Fanon, the Algerian revolution's most prominent intellectual (105-16). Algeria here is no exception to other Arab countries, for which male-centered narratives of the period have increasingly been called into question (Efrati; Pursley 180-7).

⁶ On May 8, 1945, Algerian nationalists turned the celebrations of Allied victory in Europe into demonstrations for independence. In Sétif and other towns in eastern Algeria, these demonstrations turned into violent clashes between protesters on the one hand and French security forces and settler militias on the other. The repressive measures that followed over the following weeks left thousands of Algerians dead and many more imprisoned (Stora 91-2).

⁷ Pierre de Coubertin, founder and first president of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), was also interested in Algerian sports. He had even planned to hold African Games in Algiers in 1925 – a proposal blocked by colonial governments who feared precisely that sporting successes would lead to a rise in patriotic fervor among colonized populations (Bancel and Clastres; Jacob 127-35).

⁸ Maybe the best known instance of sporting nationalism during the Algerian struggle for independence was the national soccer team, formed in 1958 under the auspices of the FLN by professional players who had broken their contracts with French teams to publicize the Algerian cause. In contrast to the examples mentioned here, though, this was not an initiative at the level of mass sports stemming from the Muslim community, but rather a public relations campaign devised among political leaders (Krais 236-46).

⁹ The reference is to the Manifesto of the Algerian People, published in 1943 by the nationalist leader Ferhat Abbas, who founded two parties on the bases formulated there, first the AML, then the UDMA (Stora 90-1).

¹⁰ Ortega's "The Sportive Origin of the State" was first published during a time of revolutionary changes in Spain, between the demise of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship and the establishment of the Second Republic. In his major work *The Revolt of the Masses* (*La Rebelión de las Masas*), also published in 1930, the philosopher deals in detail with the social transformations that have led to the dominance of *common* attitudes and pastimes and their political implications. Huizinga, for his part, intimates his concern with the rise of fascism in Europe on the last pages of his work (210-11).

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