

Retrieved from:

The European Journal of Psychoanalysis

Oct 3, 2023

<https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/book-review-essay-colonial-trauma-a-study-of-the-psychic-and-political-consequences-of-colonial-oppression-in-algeria-by-karima-lazuli/>

Christopher Chamberlin

## **Book Review Essay: “Colonial Trauma: A Study of the Psychic and Political Consequences of Colonial Oppression in Algeria” by Karima Lazuli**

**Review of *Colonial Trauma: A Study of the Psychic and Political Consequences of Colonial Oppression in Algeria* by Karima Lazali, Polity, 2021, pp. 272**

Few in number are those books whose force of first reading leave their reader concussed, stunned by how ruthlessly the said of the text constantly modifies the field of its saying. That is what it is like to absorb Karima Lazali’s *Colonial Trauma: A Study of the Psychic and Political Consequences of Colonial Oppression in Algeria* (2021).

For me, such a rare experience recalls that of first reading Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection* (2022). That is because Lazali does for the discourse on colonialism in Algeria what *Scenes* did for the discourse on slavery in the United States: a liberation of the field from both vulgar historicism and the fantasies of historical recovery, a critical sobriety made possible by an unwavering attention to how violence writes itself in the letters of the body. This precision creates a cut in the critical discourse; there is a “before” and “after” *Colonial Trauma*. Lazali forges a path all her own, parenthesizing (suspending without annulling) all extant theoretical references in order to listen to her subject, as if for the first time. Such a phenomenological reduction clears the space to pose the two fundamental questions of psychoanalysis: What is it that the human suffers? And what sort of freedom does that leave us?

These questions are elaborated through a knowing (*savoir*) derived from Lazali’s experience working with analysts in Paris and Algiers and from her bewilderingly comprehensive knowledge (*connaissance*) of the Algerian social fact—its history and Francophone literature, especially, but also its politics, geography, media, religion, law, myths, everyday life, and nearly anything else that can go under the name of “culture.” One of Lazali’s many feats lies here, in finally providing the missing piece to Frantz Fanon’s attempted reform of psychiatric practice in Algeria. After all, it was Fanon who, in 1954, blamed his mistranslation of the methods of psychoanalysis and institutional psychotherapy at the Blida-Joinville Psychiatric Hospital and its resulting failure to have any effects on the Arab men in his care on lacking a “grasp [of] the North African social fact” (Fanon & Azoulay, 2018, p. 363). But what Lazali (2021) discovers would dash even Fanon’s most circumspect hopes for therapeutic success and realize his worst fears about the fate of post-revolutionary Algerian social and political life. With *Colonial Trauma*, there is no going back to how we thought about colonialism before, just as it is now unclear how we go forward from here—theoretically, clinically, or politically.

A writer tasked with evaluating a book that shifts the criteria for its own evaluation is caught in a bind, but let me proceed by first describing what *Colonial Trauma* is not: Lazali is a clinical psychologist and analyst in private practice, but she makes only indirect references to her patients. In addition to concerns about confidentiality, Lazali to a certain extent does not have many details to divulge. Indeed, the book is driven by a desire to understand why her work with Algerian analysands, despite having some therapeutic effects, does not really go anywhere. That is because the “revolution in the private sphere” that must accompany psychoanalytic treatment is “systematically and tirelessly stalled by the Other: family, politics, religion...” (p. 1). The Other is re-deified through a resurgent Islamic religiosity—one that goes hand-in-hand with the spectral, mystical form that the exercise of power takes in Algeria—that hurls the subject back into mythical time and crowds out the atheism of the psychoanalytic procedure. Algerians turn to god to flee social institutions that imperil instead of aid and a law that endangers instead of protecting. But the withdrawal from a predatory public existence leads to an “aggressively internalized” (p. 23) censor that only fortifies moral and ideological taboos on the psychical level. In those critical moments of the treatment in which the Other is exposed, Lazali’s analysands are gripped by a fear of separating from “their” dictates. Ultimately, the offer of the cure is bankrupted: “What to make of a freedom deprived of the social space where it can be exercised?” (p. 23).

*Colonial Trauma* is also neither a “decolonization of psychoanalysis” nor a “psychoanalysis of colonialism”—it is perhaps best described as a clinical ethnography of violence and an anticolonial myth of the origin of politics. Lazali thereby draws a horizon across psychoanalysis, which strikes me as an urgent task. As it stands, the Lacanian field (psychoanalysis as such, if we’re being generous) has a robust metapsychology for linking the body to language, for constellating the chess pieces of the analytic relation, and for describing the direction and power of the treatment, but it has always relied on the adjacent human sciences for a theory of the symbolic order (i.e., linguistics and anthropology) and to ascertain the sociohistorical conditions of its practical efficacy (i.e., sociology and history). New inputs from these fields, especially research about non- or infra-European social and political dispositives, are needed to keep psychoanalysis alive and receptive, but this internally exterior knowledge (the “horizon” that crosses it) has not been sufficiently refreshed by theoretical practitioners who, seemingly content to run the hamster wheel of exegesis, have retreated from the transdisciplinary encounter and given up on theoretical reinvention. Perhaps a lack of necessity has left the mother of invention infertile. That luxury is unaffordable in Algeria, where the inapplicability of some of the basic tenets of the European human sciences is blindingly apparent. *Colonial Trauma* explores the “politico-subjective ‘matter’ of coloniality” (p. 6) by taking stock of the absence or perversion of the very symbolic institutions that psychoanalysis otherwise takes for granted (in theory) and that are needed for it to work (in practice).

One other thing that *Colonial Trauma* is not is a meditation on sexual difference—but why not? After all, psychoanalysis is in one sense nothing *but* a theory of sexuality, and even if Lazali investigates concerns beyond the strictly clinical, including the role (or absence) of the paternal function in politics, other studies that have mined a similar subject matter, from Juliet Flower MacCannell’s *The Regime of the Brother* (1991) and Renata Salecl’s *The Spoils of Freedom* (1994) to Achille Mbembe’s *On the Postcolony* (2000), found a thinking of sexual difference indispensable. In a word, the feminine seems to be censored in *Colonial Trauma*. Is this erasure a symptom of colonial violence? And if so, has Lazali unwittingly contracted that symptom by staying silent about its erasure? At the moment, I remain undecided.

As for what *Colonial Trauma* is: in the first instance, a treasure trove of new clinical-critical signifiers—such as the “LRP bloc” (a fusion of language, religion, and politics in Algerian governmentality that both produces social subjects and forecloses a field of subjective indeterminacy) (pp. 22-8), *hogra* (a mix of imaginary humiliation and real contempt that archives an unavowable history in the body) (p. 90), and, what I think is Lazali’s most important psychosocial concept, terror. Beyond trauma,<sup>[1]</sup> terror is a psychic state that “doesn’t reveal itself in speech” and cannot be repressed but “seizes physical bodies and, at the same time, in the same indistinguishable impulse, the social body as well” (pp. 152-3). Lazali is guided in her theoretical decision-making by a carefully selected sampling of passages from touchstone works of French-Algerian literature, with fiction affirmed as a “vehicle for censored languages and

confiscated dreams” (p. 17) and thus as the royal road to—no, not the Freudian unconscious, because repression (condensation and displacement) is disabled by colonial terror, but to the real of colonization, insofar as the fictional ruses of language amount to exercises in an “art of *detournement*” (ibid.) that reveal the traces of the erasure of colonization’s exterminating force. And in more ways than I can name, Lazali’s work is arguably the worthiest—dare I even say the *only*—successor to Fanon’s clinical problematic, bathing his psychiatric innovations in the light of a previously invisible segment of the electromagnetic spectrum. On top of all that, it must be repeated that *Colonial Trauma* is a revealing, meticulously researched history of modern Algeria in its own right.

But in the time I have here, I want to lay out the basics of what Lazali claims, quite late in the game, to be the thing the whole book is building up to: the theory that “the political order is founded on an endless conflict between [...] fraternity and fratricide” (p. 174).

The law of murder at the heart of a regime founded on exception in colonial Algeria wiped out the culture to such an extent that this legacy can only appear as a blank space – a blank space expressed through a lack and excess to memory. (Lazali, p. 72)

This phrase, “blank space,” is repeated over thirty times in *Colonial Trauma*. It forms the pathogenic nucleus that depersonalizes the Algerian subject and delegitimizes public life in the colony, turning a real and imagined Other (i.e., alterity) into both hunter and prey. It is the non-space of an extermination, a *tabula rasa*, a violence without traces and without tombs. In Algeria, that violence is a product of the accumulation of those events that have made it into the historical record (the initial French conquest in 1830, the resistance between 1830 and 1847, another uprising 1871, World War II, the War of Liberation between 1954 to 1962, the Internal War of the 1990s, etc.) and those that remain unwritten yet unrepressed (genocide, massacre, disappearances, rape, torture, incest, suicide, etc.). At times, we may lull ourselves into believing (or maybe hoping) that knowledge has so immured us to the horror of human machination that words are no longer capable of conducting the charge of an irreconcilable image—but that is not so, as the leaden facts this book compiles, and the rifled prose through which Lazali accelerates them, have proven once again. The worse is always worse than one can imagine. Read, and despair.

Now, this jarring formulation—the *law of murder*—expresses, for Lazali, Algerian politics in the absoluteness of its predicament, and for that reason, Lazali takes the country to “offer an exemplary case study for understanding democracy via its limitations and gaps” (p. 147). As we know, in *Totem and Taboo*, Freud speculates that the first act of society is the murder of the father by a band of brothers, and that the subsequent law of fraternity rests on prohibiting the repetition of this founding violence. “But the political (and subjective) situation in Algeria counters the very premise of this myth” (p. 116). In its stead, Lazali offers a new myth of the primal scene of colonization, where there is not a murder of the father by his jealous sons but the disappearance of the father by the colonial invader. A disappearance is not a murder—the Algerian “father” was not recognized by his vanquisher (Lazali says that the belief that North Africa has no history or culture is the “founding myth of colonialism,” which the violence it justifies makes real), and he is consequently incapable of being either commemorated or forgotten. The primal scene of colonization blanks the space where the name of the (dead) father otherwise would be, foreclosing the Freudian act that prepares the way for the fraternal order. Instead of prohibiting the repetition of parricide, the law in Algeria *commands* it. The founding violence of the colony (the extermination of the illegitimate father; “colonial trauma”) is then repeated as the internecine violence of the postcolony (the mutual extermination of illegitimate sons; “social trauma”) (pp. 98-101).

The Algerian social bond is thus repeatedly founded on, and undone by, the death drive, on an interminable war among fatherless brothers (a culture of bastards) to become an absolute father in an impossible bid for legitimacy. No, this is not a political order at all but the repeated attempt and failure to establish a society after colonization: a voiding of symbolic lines of force, an elimination of folkways, and a dispossession of names so complete that it “didn’t so much repress history as *preclude* it, which is to say erase it irremediably” (p. 54).

On top of the Freudian myth of the repression of parricide, Lazali grafts a political dialectic between democracy and civil war while introducing a new notion, that of a primal foreclosure/preclusion. In this myth expansion pack, fratricide is posited as the “origin” of a post-patriarchal politic that is both canceled and preserved within it. In a democracy, that origin is (neurotically) repressed, accommodating alterity as difference to allow conflict to be mediated without open violence (and this is an immanently reversible process, with Lazali showing that civil war is a “regressive” potential in any democracy). In a totalitarian regime, on the contrary, fratricide is (psychotically) foreclosed, generating an *inability to forget fratricide* (p. 147). That foreclosure undoes the instantiation of the paternal function (i.e., it kills the dead father) and unleashes a totalitarian violence that targets any alterity. Totalitarianism “undermines fundamental taboos” against murder and incest and undoes “the symbolic world of subjects” (p. 149). While these neurotic and psychotic mechanisms may operate side-by-side in a given political order, neurotic repression does not work at all in Algeria. When “foreclosure [*forclusion*] is the law” (p. 168), there is only amnesia.

But why the lack of repression in Algeria, and its occupation by a blank space? The colony is “abnormal” in the strictly Freudian sense, as only a heightened version of the normal—the exception to the “norm” of Europe. And so, if the colony is the “rogue child of the Enlightenment” (pp. 33-6), a chapter in metropolitan history marked by a blank or occupied by a lie, something *more European than Europe itself*, that is because coloniality is the precondition and consequence of the symbolic constitution of republican France, which rested on a foreclosure of monarchical despotism. After the French Revolution, the violent consequences of this foreclosure (i.e., “the inability to forget fratricide”) are not suffered directly by metropolitan French subjects—as they were during the Reign of Terror and periodically are in times of major political upheaval—but are effectively offshored *through* colonization, returning *in and as* the colony.<sup>[2]</sup> Coloniality midwives the European separation from monarchy (and arranges the wedding of modern democracy and empire) while retaining its anti-democratic force as both a disavowed reality and unlimited potential, enabling the French “hatred of republican principles” to find in the colony a timeless space for its expression (p. 34). Through the racial segregation of the territory of French civilization (my word—Lazali never discusses “racialization”), totalitarianism returns in the colony with a vengeance, marking not a restoration of pre-Enlightenment despotism but its transformation into something worse, and historically unprecedented: post-Enlightenment terror.

Gilles Deleuze (2004) once proposed a tidy distinction: “[T]yranny is a regime in which there are many laws and few institutions; democracy is a regime in which there are many institutions and few laws” (p. 20). When people are unprotected by institutions, they are directly targeted by the force of the law. Is Algeria exemplary of such a tyranny? The steady refrain of the “almost” signifier in *Colonial Trauma* (and many other phrases to the same effect) suggests that Deleuze’s distinctions do not apply everywhere: Lazali (2021) notes that in Algeria, the community *almost* cancels out the individual (p. 9); the subject *almost* merges into the social (p. 153); past, present, and future are *almost* indistinguishable (p. 10); the confusion between ally and enemy is *almost* complete (p. 107). And in a particularly vertiginous section of the book, Lazali leans on the observations of Sándor Ferenczi to conceive of colonization as a form of violence that fries the human nervous system, forcing the “body as a presence in the real” to take over from a psyche that is “kept in a state of deprivation” in order to “avoid shattering entirely” (p. 163). And there the “living organism becomes the *equivalent* [emphasis added] of the psychic unconscious” (p. 164). “People” in Algeria seem to be neither protected from the law nor exposed to it directly but trapped between the organic and the political and crushed in the collapse between psychic interiority and social exteriority. We could add a variation of Lazali’s “LRP bloc” concept and propose the existence of an “RSI bloc,” a fusion (instead of knotting) of the real, symbolic, and imaginary that supersedes any neurotic, perverted, or psychotic construction of existence—instead, the subject of colonial violence lives on the constant verge of dissolution.

I want to end by briefly touching on the psychoanalysis of power through a text by Daniel Koren (2017), in which he asserts, as a principle of methodological restraint, that “any power in a human society, however brutal, arbitrary or violent it may be, encompasses these three registers that define human reality, in variable doses and through various manifestations: the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary.” *Colonial Trauma* demands a reappraisal of this proposition, which I previously assumed to be true beyond any reasonable

doubt. Between Koren's definition and Lazali's findings, does colonization even qualify as a form of "power"? Would it be ignorant at best, deceitful at worst, to call Algeria a human society? Is the postcolonial subject a human, and I mean that in the psychoanalytic sense—a subject of the unconscious (with a psyche relatively freed of their organism, with access to a social space to exercise their indeterminacy)? That we even need to ask these questions raises another: What sort of human ("European" or "non-colonial" or otherwise) do we have on our hands who is born in a democratic society based on a *political foreclosure of fratricide*, a foreclosure whose effects are neither socially avowed nor subjectively assumed but systematically exiled to the real of the colony and displaced onto its almost human avatars? Can we even call a subject that so avoids the potential of a real dissolution human? Do we want to?

## **Bibliography:**

Deleuze, G. (2004). Instincts and institutions. In D. Lapoujade (Ed.), *Desert islands and other texts: 1953-1974* (M. Taormina, Trans.) (pp. 19-21). Semiotext(e).

Fanon, F., & Azoulay, J. (2018). Social therapy in a ward of Muslim men: Methodological difficulties. In J. Khalfa & R.J.C. Young (Eds.), *Alienation and freedom: Frantz Fanon* (S. Corcoran, Trans.) (pp. 353-372). Bloomsbury Academic.

Hartman, S. V. (2022). *Scenes of subjection terror, slavery, and self-making in nineteenth-century America*. W.W. Norton & Company.

Koren, D. (2017). Apocalypse now? Barbarism and psychoanalysis: On an apocalyptic tone adopted today in psychoanalysis (C.G. McKenna, Trans.). *European Journal of Psychoanalysis* 2(2). <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/on-an-apocalyptic-tone-adopted-today-in-psychoanalysis/>.

Lazali, K. (2021). *Colonial trauma: A study of the psychic and political consequences of colonial oppression in Algeria* (M.B. Smith, Trans.). Polity.

MacCannell, J. F. (1991). *The regime of the brother: After the patriarchy*. Routledge.

Mbembe, A. (2000). *On the postcolony*. University of California Press.

Salecl, R. (1994). *The spoils of freedom: Psychoanalysis and feminism after the fall of socialism*. Routledge.

## **Notes:**

[1] I find the title of the book slightly misleading, as Lazali does not focus on trauma in any conventional sense of the term, and it is only one part of a much more elaborate theoretical apparatus.

[2]As Lazali notes, France occupied Algeria during the First Republic, in the same year as the July Revolution (1830).

## **Bio:**

**Christopher Chamberlin** is the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Psychosocial and Psychoanalytic Studies at the University of Essex. His work examines the history and afterlife of racial slavery from a variety of clinical, theoretical, and historical angles, with an emphasis on the work of Frantz Fanon, Jacques Lacan, and Willy Apollon. Chamberlin is an active member of a number of psychoanalytic organizations based in Berlin, Quebec, and California, and serves on the editorial boards of *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* and the *European Journal of Psychoanalysis*.

## **Publication Date:**

June 1, 2023