

The response to certain names is strong in Algiers. Mention the moribund President, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, and brace yourself. “One hundred per cent American lackey”, says a retired police detective at the Brasserie Dome. “His house is down the street—in the shade!—of the US Embassy.” “He found religion after one of his heart surgeries in Paris”, says an editor at the national daily, *El Watan*. “That’s why he’s now building the tallest mosque in the world.” “The first ever homosexual president of an Islamic country”, laughs a Salafist, pounding his fist into a coffee counter in the Casbah. “He lived with his mother until she died and now, God willing, he’s going to follow her!” Other names are better used with caution. Mention General “Toufik” Médiène, and you can cast a room into silence. He has been director of Algerian intelligence for more than twenty years, the longest tenure of any intelligence chief in the world.

When I first went to Algiers three years ago, the history of the city seemed written in its street names: Avenue Ben M’hidi, Avenue Mourad Didouche, Rue Frantz Fanon, Boulevard John F. Kennedy. They told a story of revolution and torture; great hope and greater disillusionment. The old capital of anti-colonialism had welcomed everyone from Nelson Mandela to Timothy Leary into its training camps. But the more time you spend in Algiers, the more the traces of 1960s wear thin. The fresh highway that takes you to the city from Houari Boumédiène airport passes through a fringe of the alien *bled*, which is what Algerians call the countryside. In the distance, a semicircle of giant corrugated boxes gleams as a single speck of blinding whiteness. “That’s where the Chinese building the mosque live”, the driver tells me. “Some of them stay on, marry our women, but for most of them Algeria is just a word.”

Algeria is not much more than a word for me

THOMAS MEANEY

either, a word in the books of Paul Bowles, Albert Camus, Boualem Sansal, Alistair Horne. It’s still true what Camus said: that the sun knocks you down each time you look down the end of an avenue. But now the blazing views of the Mediterranean are crowded with tankers and cranes; the elevators are antique wood-and-iron contraptions that rattle up through cracked buildings; the subway is vast and sterile and always seems empty; the cab drivers are too unused to visitors or too honourable to know how to begin to cheat you.

Algiers is still scarred from its *années de braise*. Twenty years ago, an Islamist populist party was poised to win the country’s first elections, but the military wouldn’t have it, and went to war and won. The city still feels dicey at night; the habits of martial law die hard. Small groupings of men play dominoes for hours under the blue fluorescent lights of shopfronts. Sometimes you can hear the cries of couples on the beach. In the rich neighbourhoods, the ex-pats and wealthy Algerians pack into discos at the bottom of hotels to party. “People would rather talk about the 1960s than the 90s, haven’t you noticed?”, a French lawyer tells me at the bar of the “clan” restaurant, Cascade. That’s what I want to understand. I am back in Algiers for an academic conference, but I spend the mornings searching for a name.

Ali Benhadj was born in Tunis to Mauritanian parents in 1956. He was the rock star of 1970s Salafism, able to riff on the Qur’an, it was said, for ten or twelve hours at a time. By the time of the civil war in the 1990s, he could fill football stadiums with his fire sermons. “Ideologies must be irrigated by blood!”, he

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shouted. He was a natural with Algerian youth and became one of the leaders of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). The other FIS leaders had all eventually fled to the Gulf States, or been killed, but Benhadj stayed on. He was imprisoned for twelve years and has been sporadically jailed since, but the Algerian government now lets him run on a leash.

I hear rumours that Benhadj can be found preaching in the Kouba district on Fridays. An editor has asked me to try to speak to him about the fall-out of the Arab Spring, since Benhadj had helped instigate his own Spring in 1991. On YouTube I find videos of him still with the same wrinkleless face of his prime, the flapping arms, the wagging finger, the unblinking eyes, preaching to small gatherings on the side streets of Algiers. But I don’t know how to begin looking for him.

Each morning, I leave my room on the top floor of the seedy Hotel Régina and browse the books at the Librairie du Tiers Monde in the Place emir Abdelkader. Bourdieu gets pride of place on the tables. The speeches of Patrice Lumumba are stacked next to Camus and Fanon, but all are outsold by *Understanding English Grammar*. At the Milk Bar I order two chalky croissants. The waiter, Salim, makes a habit of reminding me every time we meet that he is not an Arab. He comes from Tizi Ouzo and claims to be 100 per cent Kabyle. I explain to him that I’m looking to meet Benhadj. Salim mumbles something and agrees to help. He goes through the shoebox he keeps in the backroom of the Milk Bar and hands me the grimy business cards of newspaper correspondents going back decades. He seems let down that I have no card for the collection.

A week passes with no progress on Benhadj,

when Farid, a regular at the Milk Bar, tells me he knows someone who can take me to him. Adil Inshane is twenty years old, and he pours ketchup on his pizza in the Algerian way. “You’re not from CIA, are you?”, he asks with mild curiosity, as if it were a region in the US. He tells me his brother is close to Benhadj and he can take me to him tomorrow. When young Algerians meet a foreigner, it is only so long before they drag you to the mall. Adil insists we check out Bab Ezzouar in the east of the city. We sit in a food court that might as well be in Omaha, and Adil explains the dating game in Algiers to me. Because many of the girls come to the mall accompanied by their brothers, the key is to slip them your phone number hand-to-hand in a crunched sheet of paper. Then the girl calls you.

Once Adil has dispersed a few numbers using his system, we drive back to his family’s house in Mer et Soleil, a suburb on the outskirts, built as a project to relieve the congestion of the working-class districts of Algiers in their colonial heyday. Chez Adil, it’s a brief nod to the four women of the household, followed by quarantine in the main room. The view gives out to a large concrete lot, filled with half-decomposed cars. In the distance, I see men on their way back and forth from prayers, patting each other on the arms like friendly white ants. I sit three hours in the room, chain-drinking tisane, until the door opens. Laughing and grinning, his arms around Adil’s father and brother, stands Ali Benhadj. The name suddenly has a body. He asks: “So, we begin?”

And the interview? It barely gets off the ground. The old revolutionary is a masterly deflector. Every question, on whatever subject, receives a counter-question or a technical parry about politics. Only a magazine devoted to the Maghreb would be interested in it. There must be one out there somewhere, I tell myself.

IN NEXT WEEK’S

TLS

Edward N. Luttwak

Welcome home,
Edward Snowden

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THEN AND NOW

TLS February 17, 1978

Too cute

We look back to a review by Hugh Brogan of *Two Hundred Years of American Illustration* by Henry C. Pitz. To read this piece in full, go to www.the-tls.co.uk

Illustration means different things to different people. To me, as I suppose to most Englishmen, the word implies books; and whether the first name to come to mind is Blake or Potter, Bewick or Ardizzone, it stands for a great civilized tradition in which the English need not fear any comparison. Such assumptions make it natural to hope that a professedly comprehensive book on American illustration will begin at least to tell how that country’s work relates to ours, and to characterize its lively independent tradition of book illustration . . .

For one thing, there is this question of definition. Norman Rockwell, who contributes a brief foreword, thinks that illustration can dispense with books entirely. It tells its own story, “and must do so without demanding a great deal of scrutiny from the reader” (although he clearly delights in such scrutiny).

“Illustration is, simply, the presentation of the familiar face or scene, but with certain added overtones which the artist himself is able to suggest.”

That covers Mr Rockwell’s own practice very nicely; and when we add the role of the illustrator as reporter (in, for example, the nineteenth-century *Illustrated London News*) the alternative definition is complete. It is a very tempting one for Americans, because they are more concerned to illustrate their country than its books. Such an approach justifies the fact that this volume contains scarcely any illustrations of classical American texts, apart from Rockwell Kent’s excellent chapter-headings for *Moby-Dick*. It also justifies the decision to include posters, advertisements, magazine and record covers, and a few political cartoons . . .

This wildly eclectic assemblage stretches any definition of illustration until it breaks, so that the term becomes synonymous with any form of non-abstract graphic art. This tendency is particularly clear in the over-large section devoted to the 1970s. All too many of the works there included illustrate nothing much except the triumphant technique of the artist . . .

Worst of all, the organizers of the exhibi-

tion [to which this book is companion] appear to have suffered from three disabling anxieties. First, they could not cope with the critical difficulties raised by the coming of the camera, so there are no photographs, and there is no discussion of the effect of photography on the illustrators . . . Second, they could not cope with politics . . . One would scarcely gather that America is a great industrial and urban nation, built upon immigration, that she has known periods of economic failure, that she has a race problem, that she has fought questionable wars. True, there are lots of Indians, but mostly in the Chingachgook vein. (There are far too many cowboys.) Finally, although the back numbers of *Playboy* are called into service, it is not for any of the most characteristic presentations of that journal – nudes and lewds. The dominant ethos is that of the *Saturday Evening Post* . . .

There is too much charm. The artists are too uniformly winsome; some are cute. I was frequently reminded of Mary Cassatt’s oversweet paintings, and looked in vain for any trace of the wit, the masculine toughness and intelligence, the sheer horsepower we find in artists such as Daumier, Lautrec and Picasso. Nor was there anything to touch the poetic vision of the English school at its best. Instead, we are given lipstick: rare is the American colour illustrator which can resist the chivalrous impulse to give his pretty girls scarlet mouths.