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The End of Empire and the Transnational System

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The Algerian war was more than an episode of French-Algerian history: it brought about the emergence of the transnational system in which we now live. Matthew Connelly, a member of a cohort of diplomatic historians who have struggled to change our view of international relations, invites us to see this conflict for what it really was: the end of empire, but certainly not that of decolonization.

Reviewed: Matthew Connelly, *L'Arme secrète du FLN: Comment de Gaulle a perdu la guerre d'Algérie*, translated by Françoise Bovillot, Paris: Payot, 2011 (originally published in English as *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origin of the Post-Cold War Era*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

The 2011 French translation of Matthew Connelly's work, *L'Arme secrète du FLN: Comment de Gaulle a perdu la guerre d'Algérie* is quite timely in view of the plethora of scholarly colloquia, conferences, and publications in France and elsewhere that have recently re-examined—or will do so in the course of this year—the Évian accords and Algerian independence, as well as many other critical dimensions of the colonial past. Rather than being a classic book review, this article discusses both the book and its author in order to provide an intellectual genealogy as well as to assess the scholarly impact that the 2002 appearance of *A Diplomatic Revolution* exerted upon historians, mainly but not exclusively in North America and the English-language academy. However, Connelly's work was not unknown to French scholars

of Algeria before now. The introduction to the American 2002 edition was translated in *Esprit* (Octobre 2004) and he published an earlier version of some of his arguments in *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer*.

An influential rupture with "traditional" diplomatic history

A student of Paul Kennedy, a Yale University historian whose research has principally focused upon the rise and fall of great powers, Connelly sought to prove that the Cold War and its sequel could only be fully grasped by looking beyond super-power conflicts and rivalries. Moreover, the historian had to delve into new sources and approaches to history—social and cultural—as well as novel problems, such as women, demography, media and propaganda, etc. These were historical sub-fields and topics into which most "traditional" scholars of US diplomatic history had rarely ventured. Connelly was part of a generational and disciplinary shift caused by the embrace of social and cultural history in the US and elsewhere from the 1980s on; indeed this "turn" came largely under the growing influence of French historiographical research, trends, and methods. For more traditionally trained scholars in US diplomatic history, this shift tended somewhat to marginalize their sub-field in ways that paralleled the increasing marginalization of military history and historians.

Indeed, the annual programs of the Organization of American Historians reflected the growing distancing of mainstream history and historians from those remaining faithful to the paradigm of "the history of US foreign relations;" scholarly panels devoted to that older paradigm were less in evidence. In effect, diplomatic historians had removed themselves from conversations with other mainly social and cultural historians, the latter became the prime movers of the discipline, the most innovative and creative. The "exceptionalist insularity" of US diplomatic historians finally became recognized as a serious matter reflected in the 2009 issue of the *Journal of American History* which features exchanges between Mario Del Pero and Thomas

W. Zeiler on the state of the field.[1] One absolutely critical element in the practice of diplomatic history was the issue of evidence and primary documents.

In terms of sources, Connelly cast his net much wider than conventionally trained diplomatic historians which conferred a markedly cosmopolitan dimension to his work relative to those in his field. Because of "American exceptionalism"—as extraordinary as it might seem—, some eminent scholars in US diplomatic history did not generally, until recently, acknowledge the need for serious foreign language study and the use of foreign sources! Moreover, decision-making and policy positions at the highest levels of US government at times drew upon the work of these same diplomatic historians, although the precise degree and nature of their influence is subject to debate. Indeed some students of US imperialism were as imperialist in their thinking as super-power practitioners and strategists. The title of a 1992 book by historian Melvyn P. Leffler encapsulated the mindset of the field and its practitioners: *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration and the Cold War*. Paradoxically, these same scholars were noticeably coy when the need arose to acknowledge and name the American "Empire," although examining, deploring, and writing about the British and French Empires obviously did not disquiet them.

Connelly's book was widely acclaimed, winning numerous awards, including two book prizes from the American Historical Association in 2003 and one that same year from the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations. The latter recognition provides an important window into the impact that Connelly's approach to the history of foreign relations exerted upon American scholars and scholarship in that field, although he was symptomatic of a general shift among younger scholars.

An internationalized view of the Algerian war

Employing a multi-vocal and multi-focal approach, Connelly argued that the Algerian war constituted an increasingly internationalized series of events, processes, and shifts whose

[1] Mario Del Pero, "On the Limits of Thomas Zeiler's Historiographical Triumphalism," and Thomas W. Zeiler, "The Diplomatic History Bandwagon: A State of the Field," *The Journal of American History* (March 2009): 1079-1082 and 1053-1073.

dynamic forged the post-Cold War world order. In that order, not only states and state elites but also a diverse range of non-state institutions and actors participated—with the result that even the most "powerful" nations or players were compelled to recognize various forms of media, international opinion, and other global forces. In addition, Connelly looked beyond France, Algeria, and the super powers to include trans-Maghribi, Pan-Arab, and global imbrications. Regional and trans-regional inter-connections were what he was after, something that conventional diplomatic historians, with their binary focus and gaze, had trouble dealing with.[2] The book's organizational scaffolding revolves around three major paradoxes: first, the inverse relationship between France's military might and its bargaining power during the conflict; second, the inherent contradiction in French attempts to "contain" or manage the Algerian uprising by claiming it was a purely internal national issue, which only served to further internationalize it; and finally, the paradox of globalization itself. In Connelly's own words: "the Algerian war was not just an episode in international history but was emblematic of an emerging transnational system"—it was a war that incubated that system.

Connelly proposed the idea that the conflict between 1954 and 1962 involved not merely a single colonial nation striving for liberation but rather two states seeking independence as well as recognition on the world stage: Algeria from France and France from the US. French readers will probably be most interested in Connelly's nuanced interpretation of de Gaulle's changing—and quite complex—stance toward Algerian independence about which the General at first assumed a cautious and thus ambiguous position. We also realize that de Gaulle was somewhat less of a visionary in foreseeing empire's inevitable demise in the post-World War II era than earlier historians portrayed him. Connelly's research questioned work constructed upon mutually exclusive binaries that tended to conflate the "end of empire" with "decolonization," which are now viewed as complex and overlapping, but also contingent and distinct processes. In many respects, decolonization is still underway because of the post-colonial clout still

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[2] The problem of "regions" as an analytical category of analysis has been most thoroughly addressed by the contributors to the *Journal of World History* in its most recent issue, vol. 22, number 4 (December 2011). The *Journal of world History* is the flagship journal for the World History Association. Some of the most sustained resistance to the introduction of world history courses as part of the curriculum in American history departments came precisely from US diplomatic historians because American exceptionalism was no longer tenable when adopting a world historical framework for thinking about humankind's past.

maintained by former imperial powers over the economies (and often cultures) of formally "independent" nations.

"New colonial studies"

Connelly and other like-minded scholars have produced a growing corpus of first-rate studies in transnational historical scholarship, whether specifically on Algeria, the Maghreb, or other regions: James Le Sueur, *Uncivil War: Intellectuals and Identity Politics During the Decolonization of Algeria* (2001), Paul Silverstein's *Algeria in France: Transpolitics, Race, and Nation* (2004), Todd Shepard's *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (2006), James McDougall's *History and the Culture of Nationalism in Algeria* (2006), and Jennifer Johnson Onyedum's very recent examination (2010) of the politics of medicine, humanitarianism, and international intervention during and after the Algerian war. This new field or convergence of fields also integrates women and gender theory into its problématique, and even takes women as the principal subject of investigation; for example, Neil Macmaster's *Burning the Veil: The Algerian War and the 'Emancipation' of Muslim Women, 1954-62* (2009). And one could cite many more titles.

Another "spin-off" from these trends is the attention now focused upon violence in general, and colonial violence in particular, as a subject in need of theorizing and redefinition; for example, the special issue of *Réflexions historiques* solely devoted to that topic.[3] Finally, it could be said that the "new colonial studies" which have come to the intellectual foreground in the past decade or more both influenced work by Connelly and his cohort and were shaped by it. In turn colonial studies signaled a marked intellectual trend among scholars in the social and historical sciences to favor the "web" as much as the "line," the voiceless and marginal, and history from "below," wherever that "below" might be situated.

In sum, the conceptualizations, discourses, and tropes for understanding "international" processes and exchanges have progressively been folded into the notion of trans-nationalism,

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[3] *Historical Reflections/Réflexions historiques*, vol. 36, 2 Summer 2010, "Colonial Violence," edited by Samuel Kalman.

thereby changing the profession and practice of history in certain sub-fields. This intellectual shift has also "made room" for scholarship excluded in large measure from the "older" order of things. Thus, researchers in "area" studies, those with deep knowledge of, and competency in, foreign languages and culture currently have entered debates on US power and policy, whether in the Middle East/North Africa, or elsewhere in the globe. One salient example of a new voice in conversations about American exceptionalism is the Arab-American historian Ussama Makdisi. In his 2008 *Artillery of Heaven: American Missionaries and the Failed Conversion of the Middle East*, he argues (among other things) that scholars in US diplomatic history have failed to appreciate, and thus explore, the long-engrained tradition of American evangelicalism in foreign lands and the palpable impact that imperial missionary activities exerted upon American views, policies, postures, and foreign interventions across the globe.[4]

Connelly's first book largely shaped his second monograph, *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population* (Harvard 2008).[5] Among the issues addressed in his earlier study of the Algerian war was colonial propaganda that stirred up fears of the rising specter of "Third World" *natalité*. Drawing upon French archival collections devoted to demography in a post-colonial world, Connelly demonstrated how rapid population growth in Algeria was deployed as a persuasive argument for France to remain in the country—to stem the rising tide of Arabs and Muslims. In his latest book, he begins with 19th century movements to control fertility and brings the story up to the present, assuming a radical stance by critically analyzing contemporary theories, programs, and policies on global population growth. He argues that these programs have assumed that disparities in wealth and power can be unproblematically tied to "differential fertility" which has been cast in some quarters as a looming, almost apocalyptic, international security risk. Connelly's 2008 book was chosen by *The Economist* and the *Financial Times* as one of the best publications of that year.

[4] See also, Nathan J. Citino, "Between Global and Regional Narratives," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43 (2011): 313-325.
[5] See Paul-André Rosental, "Testing Biopolitics against World Population Growth," *Books & Ideas*, 21 March 2011. http://www.booksandideas.net/Testing-Biopolitics-against-World.html

Connelly also has contributed a chapter entitled: "The Cold War in the *longue durée*: global migration, public health, and population control" to the long-awaited, much heralded, *Cambridge History of the Cold War* (2010) in three volumes edited by Odd Arne Westad whose research incorporates new approaches to the Cold War and to diplomatic history in general.[6] It should be noted, however, that "Cold War" and diplomatic history remains very much a male-dominated sub-field—over seventy scholars participated in the *CHCW* but only a handful were women in a discipline that has been greatly feminized in past decades. And the sub-field has been notably resistant to incorporating gender theory and analysis into its narrative and perspective, despite the well-documented importance of cross-cultural gender stereotypes to transnational perceptions of different societies/states and thus to the policies that might result from those perceptions. Yet, in the past decade, other venues have appeared that continue to nudge "neo-diplomatic histories" in new directions, notably the yearly seminars on decolonization world-wide established by the National History Center in Washington DC under the capable guidance of William Roger Louis.[7]

Finally, the French edition's title, with its allusion to the National Liberation Front's "secret weapon" in the Algerian war, seems somewhat off the mark, which raises a question. Connelly contends that growing public, indeed global, awareness of the nature of the Algerian War as well as the internationalization of FLN strategies and propaganda eventually transformed the conflict's terrain and dynamic. International visibility was transformed into a powerful "weapon of the weak" that rivaled guerrilla insurgency, the redoubtable French military, and state terror with its industrialization of torture. Thus the reader is somewhat perplexed by the idea of "*l'arme secrète*,*"* although as is universally true in today's publishing market – *hélas!*—editors must concoct "sexy" titles to attract attention and sell books. Thus, my remark should in no way be construed as critical of Connelly's fine work.

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[6] Odd Arne Westad and Melvyn P. Leffler, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, 3 vols., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
[7] William Roger Louis, "The National History Center Today: Some Questions and Answers," *Perspectives on History* 50, 1 (January 2012): 34-35.