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Sohail Daulatzai, *Fifty Years of The Battle of Algiers: Past as Prologue*, University of Minnesota Press, 2016, xxi + 81 pp., \$7.95 US (pbk), ISBN 9781517902384.

What follows is a critical review of Sohail Daulatzai's assessment of the groundbreaking film *The Battle of Algiers*. In his book *Fifty Years of The Battle of Algiers: Past as Prologue*, Daulatzai brilliantly connects social history, cultural aesthetics, and political memory to demonstrate the contemporary resonance of Gillo Pontecorvo's film in the context of the War on Terror. My review aims to be a generative, productive engagement with first Daulatzai and then Pontecorvo at the level of conceptual analysis, film content, and ideology. I argue that if we are to identify the film's relevance today—decades after the Algerian war—we must read it in a register slightly outside the discourse of decolonization. In the contemporary War on Terror, we are not only confronted with the racialization of Muslims, but also the religionization of race. While a specific material designation of Islam to dark bodies and societies is central in this war, conceptualizing Islam through the prism of colonial-racial domination overlooks how the War on Terror's dis-/re-articulation of Islam is ultimately about reorganizing the internal architecture of the religion. The film cannot fully capture this dimension of the contemporary war—neither can (de)colonization as a political discourse.¹

In the introduction of his short book, Daulatzai discusses the immense power of Pontecorvo's film in not only representing the reality of colonial history and its consequences in Algeria, but also, in foretelling the de-subjection and subjugation of non-European Others beyond the mid-twentieth century. Daulatzai remarks,

...[T]his is not the conventional book that would celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of a film... Instead, this book marks the fifty years since the film's release to reveal that *The Battle of Algiers* is more than an artifact or relic of the past; it is a prescient and telling testament to the present. (xv)

¹ By (de)colonization as a political discourse I mean sets of arguments, engagements, negotiations that operate within the logic of colonialism, and responses to it.

For Daulatzai, the film captures even the contemporary history of the War on Terror—the post-9/11 world order. It is not only considered immaculate in its depiction of Algeria during the anti-colonial struggle of the late 1950s; its relevance stretches out of Algiers into the larger Maghreb, into contemporary societies throughout the global South dominated by the logic of the War on Terror. This expansion of the temporal limit of the film assumes its capacity to represent and reflect on what is taking place in the Islamic world today. However, Daulatzai decries a post-9/11 tendency to specify the film to Muslims and Islam, and claims such a “narrow reading” may disrupt the “solidarities and alliances that are vital to challenging...current structures of power” (xx). For Daulatzai, “overdetermined” (68) approaches that fixate on the figure of the Muslim are easily absorbed within the logics of contemporary counter-terrorism and the security state. He cites the Pentagon’s 2003 screening of Pontecorvo’s film to illustrate how such readings not only transform the film into a tool for counterinsurgency, but also erase how the violence of colonial history was “*the* [emphasis added] determining force for Algerian resistance” (68). Instead, he emphasizes the film’s “radical universality,” and its “broad appeal” for “leftists” and “revolutionaries” (xix) in an effort to emerge from the “particularist” (68) readings of *The Battle of Algiers* he describes. While it is true that Pontecorvo’s film, when read only through the lens of today’s War on Terror and its security apparatus, may prove useful for the structures of Western security power—it is not entirely clear why the film’s “utopian demand” (xx) remains relevant in relation to contemporary regimes of the postcolony, which are reproduced through networks of secular power. In the aftermath of the independence of various former colonies and the formation of new nations, have we not witnessed the end of utopias? More importantly, why should we not transition from thinking about the general problems of colonial rule to the problem of a global war that targets Islamism? It remains apparent that the war, particularly following 9/11, has not only targeted Islam’s ethico-political and intellectual repertoire critical of secularism, but also, its world-making project, grounded in its own systems of jurisprudence, law, and moral imperatives.

In the chapter “Third World Dreams,” Daulatzai describes the relationship between the political struggles of the Third World and the aesthetic principles of Third Cinema. Daulatzai explains how the latter worked ideologically to support and promote struggles against colonialism. He cites Aimé Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism* to discuss the master race philosophy common in both fascist German thought and their British and French opponents’ thought. Here, Daulatzai adroitly connects fascism and colonialism, demonstrating that internal diversity within Europeanism is not a guarantee of its de-essentialization, and that the two political positions are “kindred spirits” (5) that emerge from a singular positionality. Perhaps what is missing in this analysis of “European modernity” is an identification of its core: secularity. It is through establishing secularity—which arises from a Judeo-Christian genealogy—that Europe organizes itself as the “enlightened” center of the world against darker peripheries.

Anthropologist Talal Asad argues that secularism is not simply the doctrine of separation of public and private, but rather, a form of “transcendent mediation”² organized around the concept of the citizen that transcends various social markers of difference: race, class, religion, among others. Asad writes:

In an important sense, this transcendent mediation is secularism. Secularism is not simply an intellectual answer to a question about enduring social peace and toleration. It is an enactment by which a political medium (representation of citizenship) redefines and transcends particular and differentiating practices of the self that are articulated through class, gender, and religion.³

Daulatzai’s analysis overlooks the “transcendent mediation” of the secular that helps orchestrate European domination. On the other hand, inversely speaking, Daulatzai relies quite heavily on terms like “the colonized” or “the Third World” to describe how vast domains of human life, in what Malcolm X called “the dark world,” live under Western rule. These categories, however, themselves function as transcendent terms for Daulatzai. They come to signify a dimension larger than social and historical markers of difference, including religion. In this sense, Daulatzai’s analytical lens also carries out a secular operation: decolonial, but secular nonetheless. Theoretically speaking, the problem with ignoring the social markers of difference is not the non-recognition of identities, but rather, the disabling effects in understanding what it is that creates these historical differences in the first place. In this sense, the difference between Europe and Islam—as historical ontologies, not as stagnant essences—is probably not best described or analyzed through categories like “colonizer” and “colonized.” The differences are actual and have historical legacies without the recognition of which it becomes impossible to understand the materialization of the content of today’s antagonisms. For this reason *The Battle of Algiers*, which analyzes the resistance against French colonialism through the lens of Algerian nationalism and decolonization, is unable to represent the War on Terror—a global war specifically against certain orthodoxies of Islam.

Daulatzai reiterates Césaire’s point about how Hitler’s crime against other Europeans was originally “reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the ‘coolies’ of India, and the ‘niggers’ of Africa,” and rightly identifies the hypocrisies of Europe in condemning fascism while simultaneously maintaining colonialism. He asks, “If the war was about making the world safe for democracy, freedom, and self-determination, then what about the Third World?” (5). This articulation appears less a question than a moral appeal to white civil society, embedded in European epistemic conceptions of politics. While the author treats categories like democracy, freedom, and self-determination as proper “universal ideals,”

² Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

³ *Ibid.*, 5.

perhaps we should instead call into question the foundational histories of these very categories themselves, and deconstruct the political genealogy of the West.

Asad discusses the paradoxical, contradictory nature of the project of modernity by suggesting that, “the West contains many faces at home [but] it presents a single face abroad.”⁴ In other words, modern secularism’s political project—in which categories like democracy, freedom, and self-determination create a conceptual map—works through a fundamental paradox and basic contradiction. In this sense, it is not hypocritical, but rather, self-consistent that black soldiers who fought for freedom against fascism in Europe were on the receiving end of repression and subjugation when they returned home. Daulatzai, however, laments how such soldiers were given “certain promises” (5) that were left unmet after the war. Here, not only does Daulatzai’s approach treat structural paradox as moral hypocrisy, but it also precludes a critique of the politics of colonized and black subjects who participated in imperial wars. In his speech “Message to the Grassroots,” Malcolm X demonstrates that it is possible to conceptualize blackness as an ontological positionality, while maintaining a political critique of black soldiers who “bleed”⁵ for white wars instead of the black revolution.⁶ Further, the heterogeneity of American discourse—what Asad calls “many faces at home”—has been structurally untrue in relation to black life in the United States. The objectification of blackness remains within what Saidiya Hartman calls the afterlife of slavery—a singular condition of social death.⁷ One must differentiate, then, between charges of hypocrisy—which lend themselves to moral pleas—and paradox or contradiction. Paradox—when it unfolds within white supremacy—is not the same as hypocrisy because it emerges as a structural necessity of the workings of white power. Response to this paradox—which is an immanent contradiction—must also be orchestrated from the base of social configuration and the materiality of structures, not through idealistic moral appeals to white secular power. Assata Shakur—the Black Liberation Army icon—famously articulates this precise point: “Nobody in the world, nobody in history, has ever gotten their freedom by appealing to the moral sense of the people who were oppressing them.”⁸

The chapter “Fanon as Prophet, Algeria as Revolutionary Mecca” provides a rich history of the political culture of Algeria, and Fanon’s role as a theorist and analyst of Third Worldist and decolonial struggles. Daulatzai emphasizes the significance of Fanon’s ability to articulate an ethical paradigm for the counter-violence of Algerians, as well as that of the

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, George Breitman, ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1994).

⁶ Malcolm X exclaims: “As long as the white man sent you to Korea, you bled. He sent you to Germany, you bled. He sent you to the South Pacific to fight the Japanese, you bled. You bleed for white people, but when it comes to seeing your own churches being bombed and little black girls murdered, you haven’t got any blood. You bleed when the white man says bleed; you bite when the white man says bite; and you bark when the white man says bark. I hate to say this about us, but it’s true” (Ibid., 7).

⁷ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). See also Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

⁸ Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2001), 139.

Black Power movement and other internationalist formations. The chapter is erudite in identifying various international scenes of rebellion as parts of a shared decolonial paradigm. Daulatzai effectively assembles a montage of resistance that links political and cultural responses to colonialism with simultaneous uprisings against black subjugation in the United States. In this sense, much of the chapter derives its meaning through a political-epistemic commitment to the concept of solidarity. Though it is an extremely informative chapter for readers of leftist political history, scholars serious about genealogies of secularism and its de-Islamizing effects may find such dependency on the concept and value of solidarity limiting. The title of the chapter itself de-theologizes the terms “prophet” and “Mecca.” Solidarity as an operative concept guides the reader to de-specify and minimize the ethical imperatives by which many Islamic Algerians were inspired to resist French rule.

The chapter “The Camera as Gun” connects the histories of national liberation struggles with the emergence of Third Cinema. Daulatzai demonstrates how the figure of Fanon comes to signify both political struggle and aesthetic production, particularly cinema. He emphasizes the dialogic dimension between the two, suggesting that Third Worldist films “seek to close the gap between artists and the people by creating dialogue through cinematic practice that engaged popular struggles” (23). Here, Daulatzai emphasizes Fanon’s ideological influence on Pontecorvo’s *The Battle of Algiers*, and provides an image of collaboration between decolonial theory, film, and politics. In the following chapter, “Taking Aim: Shooting the Revolution,” Daulatzai provides incisive analysis of film form. He discusses the docudrama style, use of voice-overs, newsreel aesthetic, and “musical score, close-ups, and long takes” (28) to illustrate the realism of the narrative structure of the film. He also elaborates on the influence of Saadi Yacef—an actual military commander of the FLN—on the Pontecorvo film. Daulatzai asserts, “Yacef not only acted in the film (playing Djafar, a character based on his own role in the war) but also coproduced the film as part of his Casbah Films entity” (25). The author also provides important information on how Yacef found Pontecorvo’s original script, *Para*, too European in its perspective, while Pontecorvo found Yacef’s version “too celebratory of the FLN” (26). Thus, what became *The Battle of Algiers* emerged from an entirely new script that used Yacef’s memoir, as well as actual on the ground guidance from him.

In “The Battle Everywhere,” Daulatzai gives the reader a brief history of the global influence of the “French School of counterinsurgency” (38). While decolonization in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s took place on a global scale, so too did coordinated intelligence and security operations. European powers and the United States engaged in counterinsurgencies throughout Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The Pontecorvo film became a “training tool” (39) for French initiated imperialist security networks, military, propaganda and covert tactics, and coordination with collaborator regimes. But like earlier chapters in the text, Daulatzai quickly sets aside the opportunity to critique the film’s instrumental value to Western imperialism and, instead, transitions into cultural and aesthetic praise and political celebration of *The Battle of Algiers*. Even when he is critical about the uses of the film for intelligence communities and security apparatuses, Daulatzai does not critique the film itself,

but rather, the way power structures utilize the film to benefit imperialist political geographies. In this sense, the criticism becomes an engagement about the political context rather than the film itself. Is there something in the film form itself that allows for its easy use by colonial forces? Is the realism—through the documentary style, the soundscape of music, voices, screams, and the anxious silence of guerilla fighters and ordinary Algerians, the grainy black and white look, and the uses of actual Algerian bodies—too immediately and authentically open to the French and other Europeans? Is the mechanical veiling and unveiling of Muslim women in Algeria as represented in the film, itself a colonial tactic, a secular reduction of Islamic embodiment and ethical sensibility?

“The 9/11 Present: Perpetual War and Permanent Unrest” is the most relevant and significant chapter in the book not only because it historicizes the decolonization era, but also expands its political scope to include the condition of global warfare in the aftermath of the events of 9/11. He correctly identifies the “centrality and omnipresence of the figure of the Muslim” (65) in the contemporary war. He writes: “In many ways, the ‘War on Terror’ has used the pretense of ‘antiterrorism’ and the haunting figure of the Muslim to garner public support and generate political will to usher in new repressive measures on a global scale” (65). While it is obviously true that much of the propaganda against Islam today works through a material representation of its mode of life as “terrorism” so that counter-terrorism measures can be utilized for Western interventions, it is unclear if Daulatzai is able to see the actual threat Islamism poses to Western hegemony. Not only is it true that terrorism as a tactic—the ethical dimension of which Fanon himself was speculative—is at times used by practitioners of Islam against hegemonic, secular interventions and influence, but terrorism itself is being re-configured as a phenomenon since 9/11. At the level of the contemporary history of the psyche, one could ask questions in the manner Asad asks in his lectures, to interrogate the unique horror liberal moderns experience with regards to Islamic suicide operations.⁹

Daulatzai’s lack of conceptual specificity moves beyond Islam. When he attempts to historicize the “figure of the Muslim,” he suggests that the Muslim is placed in the “zone of non-being”—an ontological framing Fanon used in *Black Skin, White Masks*—in today’s imperialist demarcations. This kind of comparison and substitution may lead him to dangerous territory, given how texts in the black radical tradition—particularly, those engaged in the emerging school of thought of Afro-pessimism—dwell on the specificity of blackness, as in Fanon’s sociogenic analysis. For such scholars, because blackness is organized through the gratuitous violence of slavery, the social death of blackness is foundational for civil society’s emergence.¹⁰ Afro-pessimism would question the theoretical substitution of the black with the Muslim. This is not to say that modern racialization is only specific to blackness. But rather, that blackness via (neo)slavery materially organizes the history of racialization. Having said this, however, one wonders if it is in fact possible to

⁹ Talal Asad, *On Suicide Bombing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

¹⁰ See, for example, Frank Wilderson III, “Gramsci’s Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?,” *Social Identities*, Vol. 9, No. 2, (2003).

think about world history in a way that treats the targeting of Islam as foundational rather than incidental. If there is such a possibility, it most probably cannot be described through substitutions in the discourse of blackness and decolonization.¹¹

Returning to the question of Islam, Daulatzai continues particularizing and minimizing it in relation to the histories of decolonization. He writes, “Yes, the film stood for militancy and revolutionary action writ large, one that was only nominally about Muslims per se—as Third World decolonization and international solidarity gave *The Battle of Algiers* a more universal appeal that was so vital at the time” (67). True, the film itself was “nominally about Muslims per se” and did not highlight the theological imperatives with which many Algerians rebelled against the French, but isn’t the exclusion of Islamism as a paradigm from the film something we ought to critique? In the article, “Islam: The Elephant in Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*,” Fouzi Slisli demonstrates that Fanon’s revolutionary theory of spontaneity relied heavily on Islamic traditions and modes of organizing that were in existence for more than one hundred years in Algeria.¹² While Fanon partially describes—without citing—the Islamic influences on the formation of anticolonial resistance to Europe, Pontecorvo reduces Islam to a mere instrument of culture. For instance, in the film the veil is put on or taken off for the sole purpose of anti-colonialism. There is no consideration of Islamic law’s cultural effects in relation to attire, moderation, and exposure of the body. In *A Dying Colonialism*, unlike Pontecorvo’s film, Fanon describes the difficulty of the Algerian woman in adapting her body to colonial structures of unveiling. Fanon writes, “Having been accustomed to confinement, her body did not have the normal mobility before a limitless horizon of avenues, of unfolded sidewalks, of houses, or people dodged or bumped into.”¹³ Pontecorvo’s film represents these women as quite capable of wearing Western outfits without much difficulty and passing through checkpoints, conversing with male French soldiers, and walking into bars in the French quarters. Pontecorvo represents Algerian women as nervous in relation to racial-colonial encounters with the French, but mechanical and even casual in the way they instrumentally shift in and out of Islam. They seem to not suffer from internal conflict or “loss of ease”¹⁴ for having to transgress Islamic sensibility and bodily temperament.

Daulatzai ends the chapter and the book with a short note on the role of gender both in the film and in the contemporary war. He summarizes nicely the engagement and connection between feminism and imperialism. He cites the works of Leila Ahmed, Lila Abu-Lughod, Saba Mahmood, and Charles Hirschkind to discuss how patriarchy is a global problem “rooted and maintained by institutions and state-building initiatives that are tied to larger political and economic questions” (77), and therefore, demonstrates how targeting “Islam and Muslim societies as the sole and exclusive sites of patriarchy and misogyny” (75-

¹¹ Hamid Dabashi does a similar substitution. He replaces the figure of black in Fanon’s text with brown to discuss contemporary violence. See Hamid Dabashi, *Brown Skin, White Masks* (New York: Pluto Press, 2011).

¹² Fouzi Slisli, “Islam: The Elephant in Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*,” *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1, (Spring 2008), 97-108.

¹³ Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 49.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

76) is colonial. But Daulatzai seems to think the Pontecorvo film—like the aforementioned scholars—is nuanced about its consideration of gender as a category. This seems too generous. As mentioned earlier, there is a clear theoretical distance between Fanon and Pontecorvo with regards to their conceptualization of the veil, the body, and the colonial psyche. Their differences become most pronounced as they encounter the Muslim woman—while Fanon tries to situate himself in the larger fabric of an Islamic society, Pontecorvo in many ways remains a white man with a secular gaze. In the 1992 documentary *Return to Algiers*, Pontecorvo’s commentary on Islam, fundamentalism, and gender in Algeria in the decades since independence reveal his secular assumptions. His commentary both in the documentary, and in an interview of him about the film focus on the internal ethico-political tensions in Algeria.¹⁵ The site of contestation is the role of Islam in postcolonial Algerian society in the early 1990s. In one scene there is an interview with a modernized unveiled woman who exclaims: “I hope people understand that fundamentalism is the same as fascism and racism.” Following the interview Pontecorvo revisits an area of the Casbah he captured for *The Battle of Algiers* decades ago. He explains, “The second stop on my return visit was to Bab el-Oued, a district at the foot of the Casbah where we shot numerous scenes 27 years ago. It was the stronghold of the French racists. Today, by a strange coincidence, it’s the stronghold of the FIS.” In other words, Pontecorvo supports the phobic assertions against fundamentalism (read: Islam) using documentary style footage and discursive sentences to chronologize European racism and Islamic fundamentalism. Interestingly, even in this representation the truth reveals itself in the utterances of Algerians critical of the regime and its foreign collaborators as Islamist Algerians resist Pontecorvo and his crew from filming them. Pontecorvo observes: “As soon as we arrived, a member of the FIS began shouting that we couldn’t film there. Our Arab guide tried to calm him down, saying we were friends. ‘Go and film somewhere else. The beaches, the seaside, city monuments. You can’t film here. There’s a mosque nearby. Go film somewhere else. All foreign journalists are accomplices of the government and are our enemies!’” When the Arab guide clarifies to the FIS member that Pontecorvo is Italian, and Italians are friends of the Algerian people he responds: “Italian, American, French...they’re still foreigners.” Beneath what appears to be conservatism or fundamentalism, the words of the Islamists in Algeria signify a pointed criticism of representation and solidarity, categories accepted *a priori* in Daulatzai’s review.

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¹⁵ To watch a video that includes Pontecorvo’s interview as well as parts of his documentary, *Return to Algiers*, see: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tQvOeJ1iRA&t=721s>>, (accessed May 14, 2017).

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