

# Contrasting French Anarchist Memoirs of the Algerian National Liberation War

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While anarchists continue today to debate whether or not to support national liberation movements, discussion of the issue often refers back to French anarchists' experience during the Algerian war (1954–62). Among the half dozen or so detailed and useful French anarchist memoirs relating to that period, three especially stand out for their self-revelation and retrospective self-critiques. It is their honest admission of questioning, imperfection and vulnerability in the midst of and after the challenging crisis, I believe, that makes such accounts especially accessible. The more forthright the account, resisting the claim of a singular unified self, the greater is its potential relevance for readers' own engagements as they make history, in their own ways, within the struggles of the present.

Following 120 years of French colonial violence, racism, land expropriation and generalised exploitation and, specifically, after massacres of thousands of Algerian nationalist demonstrators at the end of World War II, elements of the most activist nationalist movement (MTLD) moved to create a militant underground direct action branch. In 1954, some from this network joined with others to create a new National Liberation Front (FLN), bypassing MTLD leaders, to prepare a national insurrection. Inspired by the recent independence of neighbouring Morocco and Tunisia, the new radical nationalist Nasser regime in Egypt, and the defeat of French colonial forces in Indochina, the FLN launched its first wave of violence in November 1954.

Dozens of thousands, primarily rural peasants, joined the guerrilla movement over the next several years in Algeria, while large numbers of the hundreds of thousands of Algerian workers in France were also mobilised. French forces launched heavy repression in both contexts and eventually sealed Algeria's borders to prevent new guerrilla recruits and arms from revitalising interior FLN forces. By the war's end in July 1962, French repression killed some 300,000 to 1 million of the ten million Muslim population while millions more were wounded or were traumatised by torture and mass relocation to guarded camps. Up to five/six per cent of the one million European settlers were also killed or went missing in the war.

The largest components of the French left, the Communist and Socialist parties, supported military repression for most of the war. Only the independent or far left, including anarchists, were critical and supported an end to the violence and colonial rule. At the same time, degrees of involvement and attitudes toward the FLN itself were influenced by several factors: principles of internationalist and class solidarity, perceived relative credibility of proclaimed FLN revolutionary socialist goals, and relative ignorance or underestimation of the depth of FLN internal factional rivalries and Islamist influence. Algerian students and emigrant workers encountered by leftists in France were generally more secular than the peasant majority in Algeria, thus no doubt influencing many French critics to be more optimistic about Algeria's post-independence socialist future.

Beyond their commonality in self-revelation, the lives of the three anarchist writers discussed here, André Bernard (b. 1937), Georges Fontenis (1920–2010) and Serge Michel [Lucien Douchet] (1922–1997), followed significantly different trajectories; they wrote with substantially distinct tones. Almost a generation younger than the other two, Bernard experienced the war years as a time of individual transformation and creative ideological synthesis. His account is thus highly personal, depicting his 'coming-of-age' politically and 'foundational' personal experience in the midst of and greatly hastened by the unfolding Algerian crisis. The memoir, he says, responds to others' requests to explain and recount his militant activism during the war. At the same time, he adds, now at an age when an end to one's life feels ever more imminent, 'we can revisit our past experience, look with astonishment at time past and feel ourselves in a strange and surely distorted objectivity, a sort of unreality' (Bernard 2010: 7–8).

Fontenis' memory of these years, in turn, is conveyed through three accounts: a 1992 article and a 2004 interview specifically on this topic, as well as one-fifth of a larger 1990 autobiography and history of the French anarchist movement over five decades. Though he wished his book to avoid personalising the story, 'that was found to be impossible ... the "memoir" or "memory" aspects appeared necessary for understanding the chain of facts since my own personal militant path was tied intimately with the history of the movement ...' (Fontenis 1990: 10–11).

Serge Michel, like Fontenis, already identified as an anarchist well before 1954, as indicated by the very pseudonym he adopted from prominent anarchist figures, Victor Serge and Louise Michel. While a journalist by profession, he was a poet by nature and his anarchist sensibility reflected the adage that 'anarchism is the poetry of politics'. Michel's memoir took the form of an autobiographical novel closely describing his own direct political involvement with the FLN (the Algerian National Liberation Front), punctuated periodically throughout with outcries of

poetic revolutionary consciousness. The contexts and main characters described by Michel were documented as genuine in a recent biography by his daughter. No doubt because of its form, Michel's memoir also gave far more attention to the divergent personalities and motivations of those he met within the movement. By thus personalising issues, he made the internal conflicts of other activists much more vivid and understandable, ranging from the views of Islamists, reformist politicians and ex-Leninists to Fanon's radical Afro-centric anti-colonialism and idealist FLN *maquisardes* angered by traditionalist sexism experienced in the ranks.

However imperfectly formulated in Bernard and Michel, all three writers brought anarchist ideals to the Algerian war years. But the implications of that orientation for these three, as for the French anarchist movement generally, differed drastically. Bernard, Fontenis and Michel represent three distinct positions of engagement in the anarchist spectrum at that time – respectively: anti-militarism/ antiwar, 'critical support' for the insurgents and full and direct immersion in FLN-directed activity. These strongly differing degrees of personal investment in the case of Algerian national liberation (and, by implication, the outcome of independence), unsurprisingly are then reflected in overall different tones of the writers in dealing with that period. The degree of personal investment in the Algerian cause was related directly to the need to show retrospectively second thoughts about original commitments.

## **BEFORE 1954**

Early socialisation is a theme only in Bernard's memoir since most of his account focuses on why and how he gradually evolved the ideological perspective that led him to take his anarchist direct actions during the war. As he states, 'To try to clarify the past well, one must retrieve the state of mind at that moment, provide numerous details about one's life at the time, search one's memory, yet explain and develop' (Bernard 2010: 9, 16–17). While the same process was demanded for the other two writers, their anarchist orientation was a given, already formed before 1954.

Though Bernard was emotionally moved by his father's and others' dangerous participation in the French Resistance (Bernard 2010:10–14), it was partly, he says, later to escape the restrictive bonds of his family and social conformism that he gravitated as a youth toward anarchism and to the eventual decisive step of defying French military conscription in 1956 (Bernard 2010: 9). Almost by accident in the early 1950s, Bernard discovered the Bordeaux Sébastien–Faure anarchist group of the anarcho-individualist Lepeyre brothers and soon felt at home with the nature of their

discussions. Nevertheless, he says, it was a brilliant talk by a free thinking defrocked priest one evening that brought coherence to his ideas and, without doubt, inspired his decision never to accept the military service (Bernard 2010: 17–19), despite his older anarchist friends' warnings of severe penal consequences (Bernard 2010: 20). Admitting the difficulty of remembering clearly the nuances of his decision-making after so many decades, this choice in his late adolescence, says Bernard, was 'more visceral than loaded with seriously elaborated theories; quite simply, one fine day, I became conscious that it would not be possible to accomplish what the State demanded of me: to march in step and blindly obey' (Bernard 2010: 8).

Young teacher Georges Fontenis became secretary-general of the new post-war *Fédération Anarchiste* in 1946 and led its takeover in the early 1950s by members frustrated by the organisation's all-inclusive 'umbrella' position and effective veto power by anarcho-individualists. Desiring a more structured and disciplined organisation with focus on the working class and openness to non-dogmatic Marxism, Fontenis and others converted the *Fédération* into a new *Fédération Communiste Libertaire* (FCL). At the same time, the FCL was openly critical of the ongoing French colonial war in Indochina and supportive of North African independence generally.

Serge Michel, in turn, left France for Algeria in the early 1950s, disgusted with the rot of French politics and society and the restraints he felt personally. Algeria seemed a place where his own free spirit could flourish and the potential for an egalitarian revolution was far greater, hopefully then encouraging social transformation in France itself (Michel 1982: 31, 51, 63–64). Describing his ensuing close friendships with writer Kateb Yacine, poet Jean Sénac and painter Sauveur Galliero, among others in pre-insurrection Algiers, Michel also details his journalist work for the Algerian nationalist UDMA newspaper.

## THE IMMEDIATE AFTERMATH

With the outbreak of the November 1954 insurrection, Bernard admits self-critically that he was completely disconnected with the Algerian cause. Following November 1954, he says, none among the Bordeaux anarchist group showed any interest in Algeria and he himself at the time chose not to explore the matter as well. 'The nationalism of the Algerian independentists was totally foreign to me; I didn't see the need to create one more State, one more nation. I must say that I was totally ignorant of the reason for and conditions of that revolt' (Bernard 2010: 26). His refusal of military service was 'above all a personal affair' (Bernard 2010: 28). Later, however, he came to understand how Algerians were completely marginalised

in their own country and thus that ‘that revolution had its internal necessity, independent of all ideology’ (Bernard 2010: 27). However, at the time, his self-admitted ‘lack of political maturity’ (Bernard 2010: 28) was complemented in effect by articles in the Fédération Anarchiste’s *Le Monde Libertaire* where Maurice Joyeux, André Prudhommeaux and others critiqued the FLN on grounds of its nationalism and ‘Islamic obscuratism’, thus encouraging the majority of French anarchists to refuse collaboration with that movement (Bernard 2010: 26–27). *LML* articles also sharply critiqued the FLN terrorist violence against *pieds-noirs* and fellow Algerians who failed to support the movement.

By contrast, Fontenis (whose personal stance in his memoir is largely subsumed within that of the organisation), reports from the beginning the FCL gave ‘critical support’ to the insurrection in its newspaper, *Le Libertaire*. This followed from its general internationalist position that ‘the people who rise up against the same adversary as those exploited in the colonizing country thus allow us through class analysis to establish an anti-colonial solidarity that can have a revolutionary significance both in the métropole and the uprising country where unity behind “leaders” of the insurrection are neither inevitable nor necessarily enduring’ (Fontenis 1990: 58). ‘One can’t deny any value, even transitory, to a “national independence struggle” or against a dictatorial regime so long as authentic struggle for social revolution can and should take its place eventually within the popular struggles against an oppressor–occupier, without neglecting to denounce bourgeois nationalist illusions or the interests of privileged categories’ (Fontenis 1990: 69–70).

In turn, Michel reports his own excitement and the generally electric public atmosphere in Algiers upon first reports of the insurrection. Nevertheless, he states that Algerian militant and attorney Ali Boumendjel ominously warned him that though the anti-colonial revolution was necessary, power-hungry politicians would produce a future authoritarian regime (Michel 1982: 68–69).

## ACTIVISM

As he describes it, Bernard’s political journey in the first two years of the war was still primarily individualistic. He quit school, moved and trained as an electrician, believing that for the coming social revolution, one should immerse oneself in the working class (Bernard 2010: 29–30). In October 1956, nearing draft age, he crossed the border to Switzerland, personally determined and sensing a point of no return, while dreading the likelihood of his death because of state repression. In Geneva, however, he unexpectedly and happily connected with older Swiss anarchist comrades, including André Bösiger, who assisted him with housing and work

(Bernard 2010: 33–34). In turn, Bernard reciprocated by joining in similar efforts of the group to assist the continuous stream of new draft resisters and military deserters. ‘In the turbulence of activity, one didn’t ask Juan, Mohammed or Michel for their *curricular vitae* or anything else or to ask who was who. [Thus] I found myself quite naturally engaged [briefly] in the Jeune Résistance network, annexed to the Algerian FLN’s support network’. Once or twice, Bernard himself dangerously re-entered France with luggage bearing tracts and other materials against the war (Bernard 2010: 40).

Despite constant harassment and repression by the police, Fontenis’ FCL engaged in a continual stream of blistering statements in its press, posters and public meetings supporting the Algerian national liberation cause and denouncing the severe violence and torture by French authorities in Algeria (Fontenis, 1990: 189–194). In the first few months, the FCL were in contact with MNA officials (the Algerian National Movement, the FLN’s major nationalist rival) and provided ‘equipment’ (including light arms) to MNA units in the National Liberation Army (ALN). The FCL did the same for the FLN as it grew in importance, but ‘never approved of the bloody massacres in which the militants of both organizations took part’ (Fontenis 2006: 7). Storage and transport of forged identity documents, clothing and propaganda were also provided to the movement. ‘I have to say that, in the meetings we had with representatives of the MNA first and the FLN later, we never hid our concerns over the political inadequacies of Algerian nationalism’. The FCL’s position, that ‘a socialist direction’ was needed for independent Algeria ‘resulted in affecting a certain number of our correspondents’ during and after the war (Estève 2005).

In an effort to gain further publicity for its position on Algeria and other issues, the FCL also adopted the highly controversial tactic (among anarchists) of participating with its own slate of Paris candidates in the January 1956 National Assembly election (a circumstantial ‘form of class struggle agitation’) (Fontenis 1990: 200). Electoral abstention was the traditional anarchist position, he points out, but past anarchists had sometimes supported tactical participation in certain contexts (Fontenis 1990: 200-201).

Meanwhile, as Michel waited in Algiers for the FLN to request his special talents, he worked in a Bab el Oued underground print shop that produced FLN tracts. Warned of imminent arrest, Michel returned to Paris and was soon asked to keep a safe house apartment for meetings and for FLN militants hiding out. But new police threats forced his clandestine move to Switzerland where he helped with the FLN publication, *Résistance Algérienne*, and then to Tunis for further support work for the movement. Despite inherent suspicions because of his French origin,

Michel considered himself Algerian and his reliability was vouched for by militants who knew his anti-colonial commitment and political work before the insurrection. In Tunis, Michel was directed to join the editorial staff of Frantz Fanon and others for *El Moudjabid*, the movement's periodical, under the direction of Abane Ramdane. Additionally, over the next two years, Michel became the voice of French-language FLN radio broadcasts into Algeria and also helped arrange propaganda films about Algerian guerrilla warfare.

While partly accepting the 'revolutionary logic' of organisational discipline, Michel emphasised the need for correct framing, for the FLN not to abuse its idealistic myth:

One can't fabricate a people. One can only make them dream. Despite everything one can say, the FLN has surmounted every challenge. It seems indestructible. Perhaps because it is a myth? If objectives more precise than those of freedom were formulated, wouldn't this risk it falling to the level of a party? Let people dream! Poets should be helped to make history instead of abandoning them between the feet of politicians and the military (Michel 1982: 134).

For example, in his role as radio voice of the FLN, Michel once denounced French army claims of generously lending a sewing machine to a Muslim Algerian war widow, accusing it instead, with his own fantasy account, of having forced a victim of repression and mother of an FLN *moudjabid*, to sew French army uniforms. He then briskly congratulated the FLN for its success in unmasking this falsehood and for its coming eventual victory. Immediately switching to the taped first measures of the national hymn, he thought, 'the listener will be impressed with the omnipotence and determination of the FLN. When [Michel] left the radio office, exhausted, [he was] satisfied that he had worked hard for the death of colonialism ... Serge [was] persuaded of it. Doubt is counter-revolutionary' (Michel 1982: 148).

## COMRADESHIP IN SOLIDARITY

All three men report the intense positive sense of comradesly solidarity within their respective activist contexts and satisfaction from important political work. To his surprise, Bernard had found not isolation and despair, but meaningful ways to support others as he had been supported and, in doing so, to contribute to a wider defiant anti-militarist resistance movement. In this atmosphere of intense mutual aid provoked by the Algerian war, Bernard also found the opportunity to immerse

himself in classic anarchist literature, to collaborate with several other anarchists in a short-lived grassroots anarchist journal and, simultaneously, to develop more methodically and passionately his own coherent principled synthesis of anarchism and non-violence. This growing political education continued in his subsequent 1960 exile in Belgium.

There Bernard learned of communities of draft resister support within France itself. Quite beyond his initial fearful individualist revolt and border crossing of 1956, he now felt confident that he could proactively defy the state openly and be supported by a strong activist network, the ACNV (Non-Violent Civic Action), committed to intense mutual aid even for those sentenced to prison (Bernard 2010: 60–61).

The originality of ACNV was that adults, no longer with military obligation, would engage physically in total solidarity with some 30 or so resisters [each assuming the same resister name], ready to accompany them to the jail cells of the Republic. This happened with almost every arrest. The affair would be brief or last several months, the time it took to separate the real one accused from the rest of the group.

Solidarity funds were provided for spouses if needed and many letters of praise for the resister's action were sent to their families (Bernard 2010: 72–73). At the same time, the ACNV also engaged in non-violent demonstrations against French use of torture in Algeria and the use of internment camps in France for 'suspect Algerians' (Bernard, 2010: 152–153).

In retrospect, Fontenis underlines how personal and political frictions within the FCL earlier in 1954 were transcended by the new context of struggle after November of that year. 'In a sense, the Algerian war which cost us so much and which soon would cost us yet more, on all levels, constituted the cement of the organization' (Fontenis 1990: 208).

Michel, in turn, is elated to hear the idealistic vision of a young Algerian political commissar and to view wartime Algerian guerrilla fighters for the first time. Before beginning his work in Tunis, Michel visited an Algerian border training camp and was warned there by a young political commissar *maquisard* to trust no one in the highly competitive FLN headquarters where political clan chiefs and their clienteles vied for power while peasant guerrillas died inside Algeria. Despite the warning, Michel was greatly inspired by the egalitarian ideals of his new friend. 'Finally, thought Serge, I have not dreamed. I have not fooled myself. There are some true and pure revolutionaries, who make the Revolution' (Michel 1982: 122).



As tired ALN soldiers hiked into the camp, Michel was also struck by their appearance: 'these destitute, sluggish and scrawny men were the indomitable peasants who stood up to a modern army entirely mobilized for their extinction? ... It was true, not an argument of propagandists, a militant self-suggestion, the FLN is the people' (Michel 1982: 126).

## REPRESSION AND ITS RESISTANCE

While Bernard temporarily escaped prison for draft evasion by crossing the border, he describes how he gradually developed the will to resist openly within France itself and to convert personal courage, with a supportive community of non-violent activists, into a public direct action designed to educate and inspire others. Though indeed arrested at a Marseille demonstration in May 1961 and imprisoned for twenty-two months, even in prison Bernard felt the steady support of resistance community activists on the outside and was released in early 1963 (Bernard 2010: 67–69).

By mid-1956, continuous FCL activism in support of the Algerian insurrection had resulted in seizures of newspapers, heavy fines against the organisation and its leaders, and jail sentences for the latter, with every expectation of more still to come. Organisational and individual financial resources were strained beyond limit. Thus the FCL's national council voted to suspend the periodical and go underground. Beyond the issue of repression, says Fontenis, that decision was also rooted in other factors. 'There was unquestionably some romanticism, indeed adventurism, though encouraged by some facts'. The resistance of reservists recalled to the army, with the spread of demonstrations in their support, as well as 'numerous insubordinate soldiers and deserters and formation of maquis', all led us to imagine that an underground organisation could become valuable. The older ones of us remembered the Resistance and everyone shared 'a deep revolutionary aspiration that one believed to be seeing', notwithstanding their small numbers (Fontenis 1990: 214–215).

Successful efforts to develop an active underground network with its own clandestine publications were halted by devastating repression in early 1957 after a group of FCL comrades bombed the office of the 'fascistic and colonialist Poujade movement' in Paris (Fontenis 1990: 226). 'This action was poorly prepared and probably infiltrated by an agent provocateur, thus allowing the police to arrest several comrades'. Within several months, the underground network was broken and various comrades, including Fontenis, went to prison for a year until de Gaulle's amnesty (Fontenis 2006: 8)

Fontenis and other militants of the ex-FCL then continued meeting and by late 1958 went on to participate primarily with the Voie Communiste group in sustained efforts to support Algerian liberation and other social causes. Because of its diverse far left membership, says Fontenis, his VC experience led him to revise his earlier view of Trotskyists and dissident Communists as ‘adversaries or enemies’ (Fontenis 1990: 234).

Michel successfully escaped police arrests in Algiers and Paris and was smuggled successfully into Switzerland before eventually flying to Tunis. Yet the atmosphere of competing nationalist elites and clans, as described by the young political commissar, was a constant reality. The latter eventually warned that Michel himself was in danger of being purged, just like the formerly-powerful FLN director of propaganda, Abane Ramdane. He accused Michel of ‘sleeping on a cloud, fragile, without protection and belonging to no clan’ (Michel 1982: 152). Michel recognised his position and soon thereafter accepted a convenient opportunity to serve the revolutionary ideal elsewhere by joining the personal/political advisor entourage of Premier Patrice Lumumba in the newly-independent Congo in August 1960 (Michel 1982: 180–181). After Lumumba’s arrest and barely escaping his own assassination, Michel returned to Tunis but stayed more removed from his previous roles, eventually flying to Algiers on the first plane delivering GPRA leaders to the capital after independence (Michel 1982: 238, 241).

## CRITIQUES

Bernard is self-critical of his own ignorance of Algerian realities when the war broke out, but also retrospectively criticises the French anarchist movement of the time. He side-steps the direct dispute between the Fédération Anarchiste and the FCL as well as the FA’s negative images of Algeria’s future. Instead, following the logic of his own anti-militarism, Bernard thinks that anarchist groups and personalities should have called for ‘a collective refusal’ of the military, right after November 1954. Though many would have gone to prison, ‘the final balance sheet, for our ideas, would have been positive. As well, there would have been less question of collaborating with Algerian nationalists, or it would have been differently posed’ (Bernard 2010: 23).

While in Geneva, Bernard also elaborated in his co-edited anarchist journal, *Ravachol*, a critique of typical anarchist proclivities toward violence as the assumed inevitable means to confront and defeat oppression. For example, in one article reprinted in his memoir, he said: ‘Quick-tempered and hateful physical force is the easiest form of rebellion, of protest expression and the closest to human nature

... This exertion of strength seemingly became identifiable with anarchism, and militants did not see the need to review this point. When they did, it was to lock themselves into a non-revolutionary egoist individualism ... Violence, the sister of authority, is essentially statist'. Implicit here as well, it seems, was a prefigurative critique of the violent form of revolution chosen in Algeria, though Bernard never states this judgment explicitly in the memoir and addresses his plea for non-violent revolutionary action to the 'Western proletariat' (Bernard 2010: 36–38).

One of Bernard's book reviews in the same volume as his memoir, however, endorses the Fédération Anarchiste's refusal to support the FLN military campaign during the war and starkly assesses the political reality of post-independence Algeria to prove the point.

The revolt of colonial people is just. The problem posed is the means used to liberate themselves and thus the new society to be put into place that will result from these means ...: in the case of Algeria, it is a state capitalism and capitalism period, supported by an extreme militarized structure as well as the re-emergence of a fanaticized religion. An idealized vision of colonial revolts, as later of Guevarism and now of neo-Zapatism, caused the disappearance of anarchists' clear and critical perspective, a perspective that they had from the beginnings of the Russian revolution in 1917 (Bernard 2010: 155–156).

In reflecting on the Algerian war years, Fontenis is strikingly critical of himself and the FCL for three major mistakes. First, he regrets the decision to participate in the 1956 electoral campaign. 'I will reproach myself for a long time for such an error' (Fontenis 1990: 201). 'Without being disastrous, the result was less than mediocre' (Fontenis 1990: 204). Even the Algerian voters in the electoral district abstained from voting because of the recognised political farce involved. He regretted also that the electoral decision caused some in the FCL to break off on their own. 'What sadness when one knows that for having committed this blunder, some active [anarchist] groups moved away from us!' (Fontenis 1990: 205).

Two more errors, according to Fontenis, were in adopting so vehement a tone in the headlines and articles of *Le Libertaire* and in deciding in mid-1956 to go underground. Concerning the latter, 'Today, 35 years later, I question myself and with difficulty I understand how we threw ourselves into such an adventure'. Perhaps a month more of reflection would have prevented this 'enthusiasm'. 'But almost all of us were a bit too young' (Fontenis 1990: 215). Likewise, a bit more thoughtful moderation of our provocative tone, though not the substance, of our headlines and articles could have helped to lessen the repression we experienced

(Fontenis 1990: 215–216). ‘But undoubtedly it is a law of societies that the more a group engages in the path of overdone (especially verbal) intervention and action at all costs, at the pace of its impotence and frustration that result, the more it refuses to face reality and the more it throws itself into a suicidal headlong rush’ (Fontenis 1990: 216). With more moderation, the FCL could have survived (Fontenis 1990: 218), but the passion, ‘difficult to imagine today, developed in a period where a sort of incandescence reigned, at least in avant-garde circles, especially from the fact of anti-colonial struggle’ (Fontenis 1990: 219).

Despite energetically serving the FLN, Michel demonstrates his ambiguity by critiquing bureaucratic careerist behaviour in the FLN/GPRA (the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic) offices in Tunis as well as his own revolutionary integrity through his continued complicity in support. Michel disliked ‘the idea of finding himself in a ministry, even fictitious and provisional [the GPRA]. He knew too many in the entourage ... already behaving like State officials ... Was the Revolution no more than a memory? ... Wasn’t it too late [to reverse the situation] and to have a true Revolution?’ ‘Fanon and me’, he told himself, ‘had something in common. One made a mistake of Revolution. I know this and I remain on the side of the troublemakers and idlers. I made the choice long ago and lawyer Ali [Boumendjel] warned me. The Revolution of yesterday is not for tomorrow’ (Michel 1982: 169–170).

Returning to the Casbah on Algerian independence, Michel reflects: ‘The monopolizing of the Revolution, the eviction of militants in the name of the idealized people led to the disintegration of the Organization that no longer had anything revolutionary about it’ (Michel 1982: 243). Self-critically, it seems, Michel earlier uses the voice of a Tunis barkeeper to admonish: ‘You will not be a free man until you are capable of denouncing your new family if it is as rotten as the other. Otherwise, you will end up accepting anything from the regime you helped to put into place’ (Michel 1982: 173–174)

## OVERALL ASSESSMENTS

Despite their retrospective critiques of themselves and the militant movements they identified with, all three men maintained their strong commitments to the ideal of a non-hierarchical classless society. Bernard states that once he decided that he could never submit to the military, it was irrevocable and ‘was like a foundational action’. He also has never regretted it (Bernard 2010: 9). After the war, Bernard continued his commitment to explore and articulate a meaningful synthesis of anarchism and non-violence in his writing and movement activity.

Whatever its mistakes and excesses, states Fontenis, ‘One could say that “the FCL saved the honor”, the honor of the proletariat and of the anarchist movement. Its immediate and unequivocal position was followed only by that of the Trotskyist PCI (Internationalist Communist Party) while the “pure ones” of the *Monde Libertaire* and the revived Fédération Anarchiste of [Maurice] Joyeux had nothing to say and prudently kept quiet’. This ‘purism’, he says, that equated colonial violence and anti-colonial violence (under the pretext that two forms of nationalism were at stake), is in fact a cowardly capitulation before authority’ (Fontenis 1990: 190). Says Fontenis:

I regret none of the engagements of the period despite the disappearance of hopes and, surely, enthusiasm. Our ‘critical support’, during the years following liberation and the ’62 peace, is clearly valued since it helped the Algerian nation to come together, but there should have been a self-management system much more generalized and democratic, with elimination of military dominance and industrial officials (Estève 2005).

From the 1960s onwards, Fontenis himself remained actively involved in several successive French anarchist organisations, the last of which was *Alternative Libertaire*.

Michel’s memoir/novel was written after further years of activity in Algeria as the founder of the Algerian Press Service and an Algiers daily newspaper, and as facilitator of post-independence films in or about Algeria, including the famous *Battle of Algiers*. He ultimately chose exile in 1969 to escape Boumédiène’s authoritarian regime. Six years later, however, he revived his revolutionary dream when invited to create a newspaper and journalism school by the leftist Congo-Brazzaville regime of Marien N’Gouabi. Forced out by the military there in 1977, he moved on for awhile to the leftist regime of Guinée-Bissau as cultural advisor before resuming journalist activity for Algeria again in the 1980s in Algiers and Paris. Michel was honoured with an official state burial in Algiers upon his death in 1997.

As his continuously dialogical memoir makes clear, Michel was deeply conflicted about his role during the war. While prideful of his own dedication to the revolutionary ideal, he was all too well acquainted with the negative realities of the Algerian movement. Though continuing to serve for a number of years, not uncritically, the post-independence regime, he closed his novel with the poetic voice of a mythical figure, ‘Nour, le Voilé’, a ubiquitous and eternal revolutionary liberator of societies who insists that those who participate in revolutionary struggle only to later accept material rewards and power must reawaken their conscious-

ness and reassume the never-ending battle for egalitarian and free human existence (Michel 1982: 251).

**David Lewis Porter** grew up in Chicago. He studied political science at Oberlin College and studied in Paris after graduation, focussing especially on the radical political dynamics of the Algerian War. His research focused on the complex phenomenon of political and social revolution and was strongly influenced by the energy, critical analysis, and moral power of the antiwar movement in France. He completed graduate studies in politics at Columbia under the supervision of Immanuel Wallerstein. He taught for a number of years with the Womens' Studies and Innovative Studies programs at SUNY-New Paltz before teaching at SUNY-Empire State College for 25 years. His 1983 book *Vision on Fire: Emma Goldman on the Spanish Revolution* was republished in 2006 and has been translated into Greek, French, Spanish, and German. Other books include *Megamall on the Hudson: Walmart, Planning, and Grassroots Resistance* (with Chester L. Mirsky, 2003) and *Eyes to the South: French Anarchists and Algeria* (2011). Forthcoming with AK Press is his translation of Kadour Naïmi's *Freedom in Solidarity: My Experiences in the May 1968 Uprising*.

With thanks to his widow, Nancy Schniedewind.

The obituary published in Fifth Estate is online at <https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/403-spring-2019/david-porter-remembered/> and in RA Forum at <http://raforum.site/spip.php?article7770>

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