

Chapter 6

National Consciousness: History and Culture

Nationhood and National Identity

The demarcation of a territory and the establishment of the authority of a national state in this territory represent only part of the process of constructing the nation, which is as much to do with the subjective as with the objective factors involved in nationhood. The cluster of elements that make up the subjective side of nationhood are most often discussed in terms of the concept of 'national identity'. The notion of national identity, however, can be something of a catch-all basket into which all sorts of notions can be thrown. While there is no doubt that it can be used to cover many different aspects relating to the collective consciousness of a nation, its use is somewhat limited as an explanatory tool of analysis, and even less as an actual motive force in the development of the nation's history.

Indeed, the notion of national identity remains predominantly a static one, in which the nation is presumed to be what it is. In its turn, this usually, but not invariably, implies a degree of uniformity, in which national identity is taken to be the same for all citizens of the nation. National identity is thus often invoked with a conservative purpose in view: to maintain, or restore, the traditional elements that constitute this 'identity'. As such, it should be distinguished from the more dynamic, mobilising concept of 'national consciousness', which defines the coming together of the people as a collective subject with the common goal of a collective future project.

This is not to say that history and the way it is interpreted and evaluated have no role to play in constituting the national consciousness. Indeed, on the contrary, the understanding of the relation to history is a major, if not the most important, factor determining the way in which the nation perceives itself.

These issues were not merely academic ones for the colonised peoples engaged in struggles for national liberation. The success of the nationalist movements was closely connected with their ability to awaken national consciousness amongst their populations. In this, the definition of the nation and the national identity was of paramount importance and equally problematic in very many, if not most, of the colonies. Sometimes the question of national identity was articulated in bald terms

as a choice between the return to the past, to some kind of original, precolonial model, on the one hand, or the forging of a radically new nation with a project oriented towards the future.

In the different context of Basque nationalism, Aurélio Arteta has expressed the same basic choice thus:

History is the realm of the dead; what matters is the present day. This is why I don't see the point of engaging in a historical debate, where, in any case, the separatists indulge in melancholic nostalgia for something that has never existed. Also, it is perverse to say that, as we have been in the past, so must we remain forever. In this scenario, there would no longer be any plurinational states and it would mean that the 'ethnic' or 'geographic' identity of 'peoples' is placed above any political, democratic identity. Democracy is not defined through the notion of belonging, but by that of election, or choice. (*Le Monde*, 5 March 1999)

In the reality of the national liberation struggles, this type of simple dualistic opposition was not at all appropriate. There was never any clear-cut choice between returning to a past that was already constituted and constructing a new vision of the nation. Even the past was constantly reconstituted through the work of memory and the appropriation and re-appropriation of history by successive generations. Moreover, the new could only be constructed on the basis of existing reality, in which the collective strands of the national memory had an important role to play. It was equally true that the 'difference', the particularity that defined the subjective view of the nation, could not be defined solely in terms of the past.

Nowhere was the question of nationhood more complex than in Algeria, where the issues raised during the development of the nationalist movement are far from being resolved today. Some of these issues have already been raised in the previous chapter, particularly in the context of the organisation of the national territory. There is also the question of the composition of the population occupying this territory, whose diverse origins reflect not only a varied indigenous population, commonly known as Berbers, but also the comings and goings of a succession of invaders and settlers, who have come to the Maghreb lands from ancient times, including Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Jews, Arabs bringing Islam from the East and, more recently, Jews and Muslims, expelled from Spain at the end of the fifteenth century, followed by a period of rule by the Ottoman Turks until 1830. Each group brought different cultural traditions, historical myths and narratives, which, together with significant geographical differences between the coastal communities, based in cities or farming on the fertile plain bordering the Mediterranean, and those living in mountainous and desert regions of the interior, led to a varied society, largely self-governing in tribal communities, with a measure of control through the administration in power at the time. The conquest of Algeria by France from 1830 and the subsequent introduction of a large settler population, not just from France, but from other countries on the northern borders of the Mediterranean, not only

made a further contribution to the ethnic diversity of the population, but also significantly disrupted and dislocated the traditional structures of the Algerian society and economy.

Ethnic and regional diversity in itself is not necessarily an obstacle to national consciousness and identity. Indeed, most modern nations have populations with diverse origins, as well as pronounced differences between the regions. Some, such as the United Kingdom, even incorporate several different nations within a broader British identity, though not always without problems. Different historical narratives and myths can complement each other to build up a hybridised version of the nation's history. This was undoubtedly the case in Algeria, where the burgeoning nationalist movement could call on myths of resistance relating to the Berberist past, such as those surrounding Jugurtha (Haddour 1999: 30–32), or the warrior queen La Kahina, as well as the resistance of the nineteenth-century national hero, Abdelkader. However, there was also no doubt that differences and divergences existed, which had the effect of perpetuating the fragmentation of Algerian society, as well as the lack of an overarching national historical narrative on which the emerging nation could draw, not to mention the fact that a sizeable section of the population was still prepared to work with the French, not least in the army and related formations.

At the same time, a number of factors were producing conditions favourable for a national consciousness to develop. Two factors were of particular importance, both of which were the result, direct or indirect, of French colonisation. On the one hand, the economic and social dislocation brought about by colonialism had the effect of taking many Algerians away from their tribal communities in the countryside and bringing them together with people from different villages and regions in the urban centres of Algeria, as well as, significantly, in France itself, where they realised that what differentiated them was of far less importance than what they had in common. Moreover, an important part of what they had in common derived from the collective negative category into which they were placed by the French, to whom all were, without differentiation, 'Muslims', 'natives', *'bicots'*, *'bougnoules'* and other derogatory epithets.

With the new stage in the nationalist struggle launched by the establishment of the FLN and the insurrection of 1 November 1954, the need for a more deliberate policy of fostering national consciousness through the promotion of a national political ideology became more urgent and required the adoption of clear-cut choices, regarding the form and content of this ideology.

Given the conditions that applied, it was not possible to posit a simple return to the precolonial past, given the lack of a truly national heritage. Neither was it possible to mobilise the nation around a modernist, political ideology alone, given the connections of this type of ideology with the rationalisation of French colonialism itself. To galvanise the nation and prepare it for the struggle, its specific characteristics, in terms of ethnicity, culture and religion, were also brought into play. Given that the French settlers also claimed to be Algerians, the Algerians themselves could only fully assume their nationhood by appropriating those elements of their

identity that had been pinned upon them by the colonisers to mark their difference. In other words, they built their identity on precisely those characteristics that the French had used against them to deny their Frenchness, and consequently citizenship – their religion (Islam), their ethnic origins (Arab) and their language (Arabic). These were the basic elements upon which they were mobilised to coalesce against the French common enemy, in a reversal of the terms in the polarised, binary opposition of coloniser and colonised.

The promotion of the notion of Algerian national identity as ‘Arabo-Islamic’ was a key mobilising tool throughout the period of the war and thereafter. On the one hand, it appealed to the religious sentiments of the vast majority of the population, as well as drawing on links with Arab nationalist struggles elsewhere in the Arab world, notably in Egypt, where Nasser’s successful struggles against the British and French were a major source of inspiration. It was not, however, an unproblematic choice. Not only was the Nasserite type of secular nationalism at odds with Islamic revivalism, thus making the Arab–Islamic couplet an unstable, contradictory and, indeed, volatile mixture, but also other ingredients that went into the unstable national brew did nothing to tone down the potentially explosive nature of the recipe. The latter included elements borrowed from socialism and communism, including the powerful notion of the ‘new man’, as part of a modernist, progressive political agenda, in which links to the past were to be sundered in the transition to a fundamentally new historical phase. However, there was not just the problem of the incompatibility of some of the elements that went into the hybrid definition of Algerian nationalism. There was also the fact that this definition fell short of reflecting the specific realities of the Algerian nation.

National Consciousness and History

It was not only the official discourse of the dominant nationalist movement or the post-independence state that provided the input into the debates about the question of national identity. The dominant ideas were challenged by dissident forms of expression. A developing literature also proved a potent vehicle for articulating reflections and representations on this issue, developing characteristic images and metaphors that gave figurative substance to the idea of the nation. Amongst these, the national earth or soil, the sea, the age-old tree, the ancestors, ancient myths and legends, archetypal personifications, such as the Mother or the Woman, all have had an important part to play in bringing together a symbolic web representing the imagined consciousness of the nation and mapping some of its fault-lines.

A key work in this connection was Kateb Yacine’s seminal novel about the Algerian nation, *Nedjma*, published in 1956. The author himself made the connection between the mysterious female character of the title and the Algerian nation, which had still to find, or rather construct, its ‘elusive identity’. This had as much to do with re-evaluating the past, as projecting a vision of the new nation’s future (Salhi 1999a, b). In this interpretation, Nedjma’s own hybridity, resulting from the question mark hanging over her parentage and the circumstances of her

conception and birth, involving the rape of her mother and her putative four fathers of different ethnic origins, reflects the composite, hybrid character of the Algerian nation itself. Salhi claims that, in the end, all the characters reject Nedjma and this rejection should be seen as the rejection of the composite nation:

This discourse demonstrates the characters' failure to recognise themselves in Nedjma, whom they reject when she represents a threat. However, rejection of her as a woman is also a rejection of her as an image of Algeria. This is what Kateb Yacine intended: the failure of the friends to recognise themselves in the Nedjma of four fathers is symbolic of the Algerians' failure to see themselves as inheritors of the Algeria of the Romans, Arabs, Turks and French. (Salhi 1999a: 54)

Kateb Yacine draws on many of the traditional myths and symbols, in conjuring up the complex web of Algerian representations of its past, to include real and mythic ancestors:

History is at once lived and told by way of prose and parable. It is experienced and received as already symbolic, already mythic. Since the characters hold double roles as representative historical actors and as interpreters of that history, they create their history even as they are living it. Motifs from the tradition of the ancestors are continually adapted and reinterpreted to construct a contemporary account which is at once historical, political and parabolic. Imagery drawn from collective experience is used to evoke ideas of historical displacement and replacement. (Salhi 1999a: 54)

Thus, Algeria is portrayed as a land of tribes, in which a real national consciousness has not yet come to exist. At the same time, the emphasis is also on the process of giving birth to this nation. This enterprise was fraught with ambiguities and difficulties. On the one hand, history is always much more than 'myth'; historical reality is grounded in real economic, social and political processes, not to mention the personal experiences of individuals. Kateb Yacine was well aware of the ambiguities of returning to ancient tribal culture as a source of modern nationhood. However, as Salhi says, this return was seen as a necessary passage:

The ancestors, in fact, are the only force that will unite the Algerians and overcome their disunity as separate squabbling tribes: 'Ce n'est pas revenir en arrière que d'honorer notre tribu, le seul lien qui nous reste pour nous réunir et nous retrouver' (*Nedjma*, p. 128). It is in the past that Algerians will find the key to their present, the key to future success and the survival of their country. (Salhi 1999a: 44)

As Si Mohktar says in the novel, Algeria was not yet a nation, but rather the remnants of decimated tribes (Kateb Yacine (1956)/1981: 128). There is no question of

glorification of ethnic purity, limited by the closely defined boundaries of the tribe. Rather, it is the hybridity, characteristic of the composition of the nation, which is highlighted. The nation may thus be symbolised by the tree (Kateb Yacine (1956)/1981: 102). However, this is not to suggest a linear evolution. Although it stresses that the nation's roots go back to the past, they are not restricted to the tribe, but in fact go back beyond this, to a mixture of different elements. Just as tree stock is strengthened and improved through hybridisation, so the national family tree has benefited from the influx and incursions of different ethnic groups, painful though the grafting process has been: 'The roots of the "nation's tree" go back far beyond the tribe's boundaries into the vast continent of Africa. In spite of their myth of blood purity, the Keblout are a microcosm of Algeria in which different ethnic elements, Berber, Arab and African, are mingled. The Algerian nation derives its vitality from this mixing of races and traditions' (Salhi 1999b: 44).

This is an argument that comes close to those put forward, as has been seen, by some on the Left, who see a beneficial side to colonialism, as a spur to improvements and progress. However, the real input into the process of understanding how the nation will be built is in the linking of the concepts of continuity (through the land, but also through the ancestors) and that of hybridity, with its emphasis on the diverse origins of the different components of the nation, not as discreet, separate elements, but through their fusion, via the grafting process, into a new hybrid entity. The repudiation of Nedjma is thus the rejection of a heterogeneous version of nationhood, based on the inclusion of the legacy of all those who had made their mark on the land, be they Berber, Roman, Arab, Turk, Jewish or French; it also symbolises the rejection of the female half of the nation.

The complexity of this synthetic approach has often been at odds with that of others with a more rigid, linear view of the nation's history. In many of these approaches, there are two key elements: the desire or need for a return to the precolonial past and, secondly, the notion of a watershed, or founding moment, which may be situated in the past, as, for example, the colonial conquest, or, more recently, in an event, such as the national revolution.

For those engaged in the national liberation struggles, there had been a clear-cut choice, broadly speaking: on the one hand, the legitimacy of the newly independent states could be founded on the basis of the restoration of a former, precolonial state; the other alternative was a radical break with the past and the founding of the postcolonial state on the basis of the fundamentally new, the act of liberation itself, the national revolution.

Both of these options were beset by problems. In the first case, as we have seen, the existence of a precolonial state could not be taken for granted, certainly not in a form that encompassed the whole territory and peoples that had come together to form the new nation. In some instances, French colonisers had supplanted previous rulers who had in their turn come from outside to assume control of the territory. Often, there had been no overall state to administer the territory as a whole, but a fragmented system of local fiefdoms and tribal power.

In the second case, the problems inherent in founding the state's legitimacy on the national revolution itself were compounded with the passing of time. The new

start, so full of promise, was inevitably destined to become part of history, and indeed particular interpretations of that history, in which the elements of the new were ossified into a worn-out rationalisation of the status quo and a blanket alibi for the actions of an increasingly ageing generation of independence leaders.

In the case of Algeria, these problems were compounded by the adoption of an approach to nationhood that attempted to combine the two options. On the one hand, the history of the new nation and of the nationalist movement was deemed to begin with the launch of the insurrection on 1 November 1954. As Benjamin Stora has put it:

The 'Algerian Revolution' was conceived by those who provided its inspiration and leadership as the founding act of a new era. The initiators of 'November 1954' ... declared that they had made a total break with the past. They had no intention, in the course of the war, of building up an overall, unifying picture of a movement based on its precursors. They institute the belief in the radical break separating the Algerian nation, 'regenerated' through revolutionary violence, from the former colonial society. In the process, they restart the history of Algerian nationalism from zero. (Stora 1992: 151)

At the same time, the Declaration, made by the FLN in November 1954, had as one of its stated aims the restoration of the Algerian State. While the leaders of the insurrection made a clean sweep of the past and initiated a new beginning, there was also recognition of the need to muster the forces of conservatism in the cause of national liberation. Yet the movement was also imbued with the ideology of revolution, in which the struggle marked the beginning of a new phase in Algerian history. As Hugh Roberts has pointed out,¹ there has been widespread borrowing from the terminology of the French Revolution to describe the Algerian historical processes, including references to the different stages of the Revolution, though without a general consensus as to which year or set of events these should relate to. The title of Fanon's *L'An V de la Révolution algérienne* bears further witness to this borrowing. Roberts has also suggested that the notion of 'stages' has been a common feature of Algerian political discourse concerning the Revolution, though this has been applied in different ways. On the one hand, there has been an important theoretical strand according to which Algeria was moving, in stages, towards modernisation. On the other hand, the Revolution has been theorised as a process of moving, again by stages, towards purification or 'authenticity'. It is clear that these two theoretical perspectives offer very different, indeed conflicting, approaches to history, even if these differences were fudged, mainly on the grounds of political expediency, in the Algerian context.

There was, however, one important idea that was common to both these strands, unlikely though this may have seemed. This was the concept of the 'new man', which was seized upon to articulate the aspirations born with the Algerian Revolution to found a new nation and a new society. It was through the notion of 'regeneration'

that the 'new man' could resonate to those inspired by secular modernism, such as Fanon, who considered that this regeneration would come about through the medium of revolutionary violence as a purifying force. It could also form part of the perspective of those looking for salvation via a return to the purifying force of a revitalised Islam. Although the notion of the 'new man' could thus appear to mean all things to all men, the values attached to the notion were profoundly different according to the political perspectives.

Fanon explicitly warned against the illusion of seeking salvation through an impossible return to a glorious African past, at the same time as he called for a rejection of European values as irrelevant to the struggles of the colonised (Fanon (1961)/1987). His own thinking, of course, for all its originality, was nonetheless based in part on the revolutionary tradition in European thought and can be seen as its continuation.

The notion of the 'new man' notoriously lends itself to a variety of political content and has made its appearance within the ideologies of fascism and Nazism to denote the emergence of a 'superior' type of human being, or *Übermensch*. In Algeria, it was subsumed into the notion of a homogenised, uniform national product of the Revolution, in which all differences would be merged in the interests of national unity, with a single national culture, a single party and a single state.

This notion of a homogeneous nation was flawed from the beginning. Nabile Farès has referred to the 'hiatus in the national consciousness' represented by the position of the Berber population and culture within the national body (Farès 1971: 32–33), though the cracks are manifold and were to become more marked once the common, colonial enemy could no longer play a unifying role, or not to the same extent in the post-independence scenario.

On the one hand, a façade of homogeneity was achieved by the denial of difference. It was claimed, for instance, that the Berbers had been totally assimilated with the Arabs for many centuries and that no cultural differences remained except those that had been exacerbated by a French policy of divide and rule. On the other hand, any remaining differences would be ironed out. This could take place as a necessary part of the liberation struggle. Already in 1958, Krim Belkacem had written in *El Moudjahid* of the Revolution as a 'melting-pot, in which men of all walks of life and conditions, peasants, artisans, workers, intellectuals, rich or poor are undergoing a process of intermixing, which will lead to the birth of a new type of man' (quoted in Stora 1992: 162). However, this notion of the hybridisation of Algerian society was soon replaced by a voluntaristic cultural policy with uniformity as its aim.

Moves to homogenise Algerian society and culture began in earnest under the regime of Houari Boumedienne after 1965, with Arabisation as a key instrument of the policy, justified as an exercise in breaking with French colonial culture. In effect, the attempts to establish a 'normalised', homogeneous national culture allowed no space for difference and even less for dissidence in the political arena. The notion of the 'new man' was yet again brought into service. In Boumedienne's definition, this was not so much the marker of a new stage of humanity, but a return to a more authentic version of Algerian man, a true son of the Algerian soil and the African

past, divested of all the ideological and cultural apparel left behind by French colonialism: 'not a man borrowed from elsewhere, but a real man, just as he has been fashioned by the history, geography, economy and blood of his forefathers. Refuting the untruths spread by colonialism and highlighting evidence of the African past and cultural presence' (quoted from *Symposium d'Alger* (1969) in Stora 1992: 231).

Cultural policy as formulated by the influential figure of Ahmed Taleb Ibrahim, minister in various capacities in both the Boumedienne and the Chadli Benjedid periods, was seen in terms of a 'cultural revolution'. Writing in 1973 Taleb Ibrahim made this explicit: 'The cultural revolution consists of working to create a new man in a new society, encouraging the adoption of a new way of life more in tune with the ideals of the Revolution and geared to consolidating and furthering the success of this revolution' (Taleb Ibrahim (1973)/1981: 219).

This is far removed from the hybridity of the syncretic version of the nation favoured by Kateb Yacine, who saw the nation as the product of the many different men and women who have left their mark on the Algerian soil, in opposition to the single, uniform approach, on the one hand, and, on the other, the myth of the colonial pioneer, as trailblazing 'first man', set out by Camus, for instance, in his posthumous novel *Le Premier Homme* (Camus 1994: 256–58). In *Nedjma*, one of the characters, Mourad, explicitly rejects the illusion of the 'first man', speaking of 'the world which is no longer that of the first woman, or the first man' (Kateb Yacine (1956)/1981: 19–20).

Kateb Yacine quite characteristically stresses the role of women here. Indeed, there is a strong case to be made for the actual emergence of the 'new woman' through the part that many Algerian women played in the War of Liberation and the profound effect that their involvement was to have on their lives (Amrane 1991). The choice of the female character, Nedjma, to represent the nation is also significant in this respect. This does not seem to be of the same order as, for instance, the role played by Marianne in the French national iconography and imagination, as symbol of the Republic. Neither is Nedjma a mother figure, with a single lineage, symbolising the common origin of the nation and the care of its future citizens. On the contrary, she is a hybrid figure, of uncertain origins, with a multitude of different roles, as daughter, wife, lover, elusive symbol, providing a complex set of links between the nation's hybrid past and its national future.

This is also true of the equally fluid woman figure associated with the sea in Mohammed Dib's *Qui se souvient de la mer* (Dib (1962)/1990), though there is an ambiguity and interchangeability here between the mother, 'la mère', and its homonym of the title, 'la mer'. The figure of the 'mother' is certainly very present in Algerian fiction of the nationalist period and carries a complex set of meanings, reflecting some of the key ambiguities and tensions of the colonial situation and anticolonial struggle. On the one hand, the 'Mother' conjured up family roots and loyalties, not least with regard to the 'mother tongue'. At the same time, colonial ideology portrayed France as the 'mother country', an ideal, spiritual home. Farida Abu Haidar has written about this dichotomy, as articulated by Dib in another of his novels, *La Grande Maison* (Dib (1952)/1996):

Writers, moreover, were surrounded, throughout their childhood, by images of an absent spiritual mother (France), as well as a physically present one (their own mother). At school, it would have been instilled into them that France, *la mère patrie*, was their mother. This concept must have been a difficult one to grasp for some of them, as is shown by Dib in *La Grande Maison*, where the boy Omar cannot understand how his mother, Aïni, can be on the other side of the Mediterranean, when she is in fact at home. (Abu Haidar 1996: 72)

The importance of women's role in the transmission of memory is a constant theme of much of the fiction of this period, and particularly of the postcolonial period, where migration became a widespread phenomenon, bringing in its train new figures of the 'nomad', in which the lack of roots is experienced as displacement or loss rather than a celebration of 'rootlessness'. Malika Mokkedem, for instance, has referred to her grandmother's rejection of the idea of roots in favour of '*des jambes pour marcher et une mémoire*'.² Much of Leila Sebbar's work relates to the important role of women in preserving and relaying the memory of the family and wider community. In the last volume of her *Shérazade* trilogy, for instance, there is an old woman in war-torn Beirut who is kept going by this duty of transmission, to pass on the heritage, the rites and rituals, the memory she derives from her female ancestors for the future generations of women:

The mother repeats every day, every time all three of them are together, no one comes to visit any more, because the mother no longer invites people like before, she repeats, and the daughter and the maid servant wait for the prophecy: I shall die on my feet in my own house, I am my house and the children of my children will not leave it empty, I know this as my mother knew it, and the mother of my mother. I will not abandon my house to the jackals, they will not loot and pillage here, if my house collapses about me, my body buried in the ruins, covered in the silk and red carnations of the sofa, will not allow robbers to engage in shame and dishonour and they will flee, as if pursued by the fire of the divine judgement. The maid servant says that she will also be dead under the stones, and the daughter promises that, if she does not die, she will take care of the remains under the stones, the marble, the blue and green mosaics ... Only then do they drink their tea, together, with solemnity. (Sebbar 1991: 119–20)

The telling of tales is a vital tool in this onward transmission of the folk memory, providing continuity with a communal past, whatever the degree of fictional creativity involved. Memory can thus be transmitted through oral or written records, involving the direct or indirect relaying of first- or second-hand source materials and the weaving of such material into stuff for the imagination, with a greater or lesser input of fictional elements. The old reliance on oral transmission, written material, monuments, images in sculpture and paint and other forms of art, has been augmented by new 'direct' records, first-hand photographic, cinematic and audio

material. Yet, as with the older forms, all this material requires interpretation and re-appropriation by later generations, which bring their own personal imaginary and symbolic codes to bear on it, as well as the collective ideological and cultural frameworks of interpretation of their group or society. Whether this is done consciously or subconsciously, the incorporation of the telling or retelling of history into a political agenda leads inevitably to their transference to a different plane.

Problems of Postcolonial History

These issues surrounding the question of history cannot be simply relegated to the past, but have a crucial impact on the political choices, regarding the nature of the future projects of the formerly colonised countries. Moreover, it is not simply a question of acknowledging that there are different interpretations of history and leaving it at that. This is not an option for two main reasons: first, because the way in which history is represented actually matters. It matters because representations of history are not just more or less believable stories or narratives of a nation's past, but are often used to found the legitimacy of particular political movements and institutions. Nation-states have used history in different ways to legitimise the form, content and operating mechanisms of their systems of power, as have groups and movements that seek to challenge this power and replace it. Thus, there are clear political implications attached to the different versions of history, whether these are acknowledged or not, and therefore, if history matters, so do the particular ways in which it is represented.

However, there is a second reason why accepting these differences along with the assumption that they are all equally valid is also imbued with political significance. It implies that objective knowledge of history is not possible, because historical reality is always an ideological construction for political or other purposes, according to the lights of the person narrating it and the language employed. According to this perspective in its extreme version, universally valid scientific knowledge of historical reality has become an impossibility. The political implications of this are immense. On the one hand, it denies the possibility of any understanding of the interconnectedness of the human species in its historical evolution. On the other hand, it opens the floodgates to any number of particularist versions of history, which can be pressed into the service of any cause or group of people, regardless of the implications and dangers they may present to others. As Eric Hobsbawm has recently argued, in a piece criticising postmodern trends in modern history:

The major immediate political danger to historiography today is 'anti-universalism' or 'my truth is as valid as yours, whatever the evidence'. This appeals to various forms of identity group history, for which the central issue of history is not what happened, but how it concerns the members of a particular group. What is important to this kind of history is not rational explanation but 'meaning', not what happened but what members of a collective group defining itself against outsiders – religious, ethnic, national, by gender, or lifestyle – feel about it. (Hobsbawm 2005)

Of course, there are many objections to this argument and some of the others raised by Hobsbawm in this text. It is notoriously difficult to arrive at the objective or scientific 'truth' about history, given the extent of ideological interference, both conscious and subconscious, which takes place, and the complexities of meaning deriving from the language used in its writing. This does not necessarily mean throwing in the towel and abandoning the search for universally valid knowledge. However, it does entail the recognition of the difficulties that one may encounter in this search if it is going to be successful, and the development of strategies for overcoming them.

Moreover, as Hobsbawm himself recognises, not all of these 'identity group' histories are irrational, politically motivated distortions of history. Much of the work done has contributed to a much needed rectification of the understanding of historical reality as experienced by subordinate groups and peoples, including the working class, whose role has been consistently underplayed in histories written for the dominant. In the context of imperialism and colonialism, there has certainly been a place for the writing of history, as well as literature, that sets the record straight in terms of revalorising and reinterpreting the precolonial past in a way that may serve to destroy preconceptions relating to the backwardness of precolonial societies. Indeed, some of the great political leaders of the independence generation felt it important to turn their hand to this kind of historical writing, such as Jawaharlal Nehru, with his *Glimpses of World History* and *The Discovery of India* (Nehru (1934)/1989, (1945)/1989). It has also proved to be an important theme for writers of fiction to set the record straight, to re-appropriate the historical imagination or give voice to the forgotten and dispossessed. Assia Djebar is a prime example of this type of writing, not just in her efforts to give voice to the silenced women of previous generations, but also to reclaim the history of her country (Chikhi 1997), in novels such as *Les Alouettes naïves* (Djebar 1967), *L'Amour, la fantasia* (Djebar 1985), *Ombre sultane* (Djebar 1987), *Loin de Médine* (Djebar 1992), *Vaste est la prison* (Djebar 1995), or stories and essays, such as those in *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (Djebar 1980).³

Given the extent of the denigration and denial of the positive achievements of the colonised peoples prior to colonisation, it would be hardly surprising if attempts to correct the negative portrayal did not sometimes veer into hyperbole about past glories and a lost golden age as part of the necessary stage in the process of rebalancing. However, there have also been theoretically sophisticated attempts to redress the balance. Samir Amin, for instance, based his theory of the development of capitalism on the premise of the backwardness of Europe in relation to certain more developed non-European societies. His thesis was that capitalism could develop more easily in the less advanced societies of feudal Europe, which exemplified peripheral forms of what he calls the tributary mode of production, and where state formation and ideological expression were less developed and thus represented less of an obstacle to the growth of capitalism than in more central tributary societies. As he says, 'this greater flexibility of the less advanced societies seems to us to be central to the theory of unequal development' (Amin 1989: 9).

Amin does not limit his theory to the development of capitalism in peripheral Europe; he also applies it to explain the development of capitalism in Japan, seen as peripheral to China (Amin 1989: 64). However, his theory gives a dramatic new twist to the notion of progress, with Europe coming to the fore of historical economic development, not because of its strengths, but because of its weakness. Other explanations of the development of capitalism in Europe normally stress positive factors, such as the primitive accumulation of capital, cultural and ideological factors stemming from the Renaissance and Reformation, along with the arguments of a more suitable or superior natural predisposition for its development, relating to the environment, such as the climate, or the people, including racial characteristics of temperament, morality, energy, etc. As Amin himself stressed, if his theory has universal validity, it demolishes all Eurocentric notions of European uniqueness (Amin 1989: 64). It also gives a new interpretation to what has been known by some Marxists as the Asiatic mode of production, redefined by Amin as the central form of tributary society, with European medieval feudalism as the peripheral. Interestingly, Ibn Battutah attributed European backwardness in the fourteenth century to the inhospitable European climate (Amin 1989: 96).

The historical development of capitalism had enormous implications for the reconfiguration of European and global space, as discussed in the Introduction. For Amin, this is closely related to the modern definition of Europe, which he sees as a construct of relatively recent origin, implying a reconfiguration of history to found Europe on its supposed origins in an ancient Greece, redefined with hindsight as the polar, 'civilised' opposite to the 'barbarism' of Asia (see also Bernal 1987–91):

The European culture that conquered the world fashioned itself in the course of a history that unfolded in two distinct time periods. Up until the Renaissance, Europe belonged to a regional tributary system that included Europeans and Arabs, Christians and Moslems. But the greater part of Europe at that time was located at the periphery of this regional system, whose centre was situated around the eastern end of the Mediterranean basin. This Mediterranean system prefigures to some extent the subsequent capitalist world system. From the Renaissance on, the capitalist world system shifts its centre towards the shores of the Atlantic, while the Mediterranean region becomes, in turn, the periphery. The new European culture reconstructs itself around a myth that creates an opposition between an alleged European geographical continuity and the world to the south of the Mediterranean, which forms the new centre/periphery boundary. The whole of Eurocentrism lies in this mythic construct. (Amin 1989: 10–11)⁴

It will be interesting to look at how this notion of centre and periphery has fared in subsequent developments in what is termed 'postcolonial' theory. Suffice it to say, for the moment, that, apart from some important exceptions, independence for the former colonies has not brought a fundamental reversal of the centre/periphery relation. However, in terms of perceptions of history, it was perhaps inevitable that

more nuanced pictures of the precolonial past would emerge, as it was that the use of the explanation of the devastation imposed by colonialism to explain all the problems of the formerly colonised countries would recede. Increasingly, the reclamation of their own history by the formerly colonised has entailed the calling into question of the very model that posits the watershed of colonisation and colonialism and its aftermath as the defining moment from which all else follows, as by Aijaz Ahmad here:

In periodising our history in the triadic terms of precolonial, colonial and postcolonial, the conceptual apparatus of 'postcolonial criticism' privileges as primary the role of colonialism as the principle of structuration in that history, so that all that came before colonialism becomes its own prehistory and whatever comes after can only be lived as infinite aftermath. That may well be how it appears to those who look at that history from the outside – to those in other words, who look at the former colonies in Asia and Africa from inside the advanced capitalist countries – but not to those who live inside that history. (Ahmad 1996: 280–81)

This criticism relates equally to 'postcolonial' theory as to versions of colonial history and nationalist-inspired anticolonial reworkings of that history. It will become even more relevant in the process of current trends towards 'normalisation' (see Chapters 7 and 11).

Reclaiming Culture

The notion of reclamation has also figured importantly in the domain of culture. Potentially, this covers a very wide range of issues, fields and relations, though some critics have adopted a fairly restrictive definition of culture. Edward Said, for instance, differentiated culture from other types of practices, such as those connected to economic, social or political activity. For him, it was mainly associated with those forms of communication and creativity, designed to provide aesthetic pleasure. He also attributed an inherent value to culture, defined as the best or most noble elements of any particular society:

As I use the word, 'culture' means two things in particular. First of all it means all those practices, like the arts of description, communication and representation, that have relative autonomy from the economic, social and political realms and that often exist in aesthetic forms, one of whose principal aims is pleasure ... Second, and almost imperceptibly, culture is a concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each society's reservoir of the best that has been known and thought, as Matthew Arnold put it in the 1860's. (Said 1993: xii–xiii)

A broader definition of culture sees it as the medium through which the individual relates, passively or actively, to his/her personal situation or social reality. In this

definition, culture is implicated in all spheres of human activity. It is constituted by practices, representations, myths, beliefs that fashion and frame the substance of our experience, whether or not they are conscious or unconscious, acknowledged or challenged. These individual elements generally constitute systems providing the connectivity between the different elements of experience and activity.

The scope of 'culture' can therefore extend into all spheres of life. It impinges on the assumptions, beliefs, values and practices operating in the economic, political, religious, judicial, artistic and intellectual domains, as well as in the customs and habits of social living and daily life, affecting cooking and food, dressing, shopping, leisure, family life and so on.

This does not mean, however, that culture has to be considered as a single monolithic system. First, since the elements that constitute it are constantly evolving and new elements are continually emerging, the stability of a cultural system is never permanent, but only relative. Thus, if sets of beliefs, values and practices can be grouped into more or less well-defined and relatively autonomous cultural systems, which can be represented as different, discrete cultures, these systems remain temporary configurations, fluid and dynamic in nature, in which the key mobilising element is human activity. Moreover, the boundaries between these different cultures are not impermeable. Interactions and interconnections between different cultural systems are commonplace, on both the synchronic and the diachronic levels. The specific, localised forms of the historical cultural heritage, constituted by the practices of previous generations, are prime candidates for this interactivity in terms of the new meanings with which they are invested, the new links that are drawn and the distance that is mapped from their assumptions.

One of the hotly debated topics of the national liberation era was the question of a national culture and its role in the nationalist project. Fanon was particularly concerned by this question, to which a whole chapter, 'On National Culture', is devoted in *Les Damnés de la terre* (Fanon (1961)/1987). While it was recognised that cultural struggles were an essential part of the nationalist struggle, there were two key issues. First, cultural struggles on their own were not sufficient. Sooner or later, the colonised intellectual or artist has to realise that 'one does not prove one's nationhood on the basis of culture but by demonstrating it in the struggle waged by the people against the occupation forces' (Fanon (1961)/1987: 163). The second issue concerned the content of this national culture. How was it to be defined? How was the right balance to be achieved between focusing on a new national culture, based on the values of modernity and progress, and looking towards a better future, on the one hand, and reclaiming a lost or threatened historical culture and tradition, suppressed by colonialism? Both projects had their own mobilising appeal and often coexisted in an uneasy tension in the cultural policies of the nationalist parties and post-independence states, where a factor of unity was provided by the fact that, in both cases, the national culture was defined primarily in opposition to that imposed by the former colonial power. The notion of a national culture, whatever its content, also tended to assume the form of a single homogeneous entity, which was used as the vehicle for the imposition of uniformity. This was particularly the case in Algeria,

where, ironically, the dominant model was to a large extent a mirror image of the dominant conception of French national identity, along with its intolerance of difference, which had been dominant in France at least since the Third Republic.

Of course, this supposed homogeneity did not exist in fact, either in France or in Algeria. As elsewhere, there was no single, unidimensional culture, just as there are no unidimensional individuals in the real world. Whether the ideology was used with a view to uniting the nation or to defining the Other (often part and parcel of the same process), there was a simplifying tendency at work, in which the real differences between individuals were steamrollered out of the fixed, stereotypical, collective categories, or the multiple facets of each individual's own self-identity were reduced into a single, pure essence.

In the face of the inadequacy of these notions of cultural identity, a number of alternative models have emerged, premised on a multiplicity of different cultures or cultural strands coexisting within a society or an individual, implying diverse identities. Some have described this more complex view of identity in terms of a palimpsest, where the different elements are superimposed one upon another, or where, as Kateb Yacine describes it in *Nedjma*, the palimpsest absorbs the earlier signs and meanings, 'comme un palimpseste boit les signes anciens' (Kateb Yacine (1956)/1981: 70). The palimpsest is a metaphor that has often been used to describe Assia Djebar's work, this time in its work of uncovering and rewriting the different layers of accretion, as Debra Kelly has pointed out (Majumdar 2002: 82). It is also a paradigm drawn upon by Salman Rushdie, most notably in his novel, *The Moor's Last Sigh*.

Here, Rushdie has one of his characters, Flora Zogoiby, drawing up physical and notional demarcation lines to mark out the boundaries of racial and religious communities, in a simplistic fencing in of the essential collective identity she shares as a member of Cochin's Jewish community (Rushdie 1995: 70–73). This identity is firmly fixed in the notion of a shared past, a collective historical memory. As such, it is challenged by her son Abraham, whose eyes are focused on the future, on the possibility of seizing his own potentialities and actualising them in a process of self-creation. At the same time, the collective essence is itself subject to change, through reinterpretations of the past and reconfigurations of the collective memory. What is more, the particular collective identity in question here is just one of a mosaic of diverse identities that formed the basis of the pluralistic vision of modern India, now under increasing threat from communalist, fundamentalist essentialisms.

The notion of the palimpsest, or the overpainting of one identity, replacing it with another, only to uncover the original at some point, may be applied equally to the reality of the individual, as well as to the reality of the city of Bombay or the national reality of India.

The city itself, perhaps the whole country, was a palimpsest, Under World beneath Over World, black market beneath white; when the whole of life was like this, when an invisible reality moved phantomwise beneath a visible fiction, subverting all its meanings, how then could Abraham's career have

been any different? How could any of us have escaped that deadly layering? How, trapped as we were in the hundred per cent fakery of the real in the fancy-dress, weeping-Arab kitsch of the superficial, could we have penetrated to the full, sensual truth of the lost mother below? How could we have lived authentic lives? How could we have failed to be grotesque? (Rushdie 1995: 184–85)

This is a picture of reality with different levels, some visible, some invisible or hidden. In fact, what is being proposed gets away from binary oppositions altogether, including those of fact and fiction, appearance and essence, the individual and the collective. This is not the notion of a hybridised identity as a combination of several elements; the pluralism here lies as much in the diversity of layers, spaces and relations as in the processes themselves. What we have in Rushdie is a many-layered notion of identity, in which individual selfhood is inherited through the genes and/or manufactured either in a single or a multifaceted version by the individual her/himself or those who manipulate him/her. In addition, the individual's identity may be tacked on to some collective identity/identities, although it may override them. Thus, we have a vision of the world and the self which is full of different spaces, different layers, some open to others, some secret, some more real than others.

Other views of identity see it in more synchronic terms, where the elements making up a complex reality form part of an interconnecting fabric of interwoven strands and processes. Amitav Ghosh, like Glissant, though to less negative effect (see Chapter 7), has made particular use of the concept of weaving to articulate the global reality of human existence in its dimensions of both time (history) and space (the diaspora) in his novel *The Circle of Reason*, where he uses fictions based on the travels and migrations of different peoples across India, Africa, the Middle East and Europe to bring out the interweaving of different threads of human existence and history across continents. Far from an abstract, even threadbare universalism, this textured fabric is more like Césaire's vision of the richness of all the particulars.

What could it be but weaving? Man at the loom is the finest example of Mechanical man; a creature who makes his own world as no other can, with his mind. The machine is man's curse and his salvation, and no machine has created man as much as the loom. It has created not separate worlds but one, for it has never permitted the division of the world. The loom recognizes no continents and no countries. It has tied the world together with its own bloody ironies from the beginning of human time.

It has never permitted the division of reason.

Human beings have woven and traded in cloth from the time they built their first houses and cities. Indian cloth was found in the graves of the Pharaohs. Indian soil is strewn with cloth from China. The whole of the ancient world hummed with the cloth trade. The Silk Route from China, running through central Asia and Persia to the ports of the Mediterranean and from there to the markets of Africa and Europe, bound continents

together for more centuries than we can count. It spawned empires and epics, cities and romances. Ibn Battuta and Marco Polo were just journeymen following paths that had been made safe and tame over centuries by unknown, unsung traders, armed with nothing more than bundles of cloth. It was the hunger for Indian chintzes and calicos, brocades and muslins that led to the foundation of the first European settlements in India. All through these centuries cloth, in its richness and variety, bound the Mediterranean to Asia, India to Africa, the Arab world to Europe, in equal, bountiful trade. (Ghosh 1986: 55–56)

This is not just fictional fancy; it is closely related to the history of cotton and other textiles and their effect on the course of human history and the spread of global capitalism. Moreover, Ghosh gives the precolonial world its full due, breaking with the view that the modern history of the colonised countries began with imperialism and colonisation.⁵

Thus, where differences exist, they may well be in conflict, reflecting irreconcilable, antagonistic cleavages such as class divisions, or they may be non-oppositional, simply coexisting without interacting much at all. Any notion of a credible national culture is thus dependent on a concrete analysis of the elements and processes that actually make up that culture and the relations between them. In Algeria, problems inevitably arose when there was no recognition that differences existed, even if they were put aside to achieve a national unity or alliance, however temporary. The problem of a national culture in Algeria was, in fact, a reflection of the problematic nature of the national movement, which proclaimed itself a ‘Front’ but not in the usual sense of an alliance of heterogeneous constituents to achieve a common goal, but rather as a single homogeneous union (Harbi 1980).

Samir Amin attributes the very notion of a distinct and invariable culture to the mode of thinking characteristic of Eurocentrism, according to which there is only one ‘Western’ model for the rest of the world to follow. This does not necessarily imply a belief in the universal validity of this culture. On the contrary, Eurocentrism presupposes the existence of discrete, fixed cultures that mould the histories of different peoples, although it also proposes that these peoples should imitate the Western model. According to Amin, this is a phoney universalism:

Eurocentrism is a culturalist phenomenon in the sense that it assumes the existence of irreducibly distinct cultural invariants that shape the historical paths of different peoples. Eurocentrism is therefore anti-universalist, since it is not interested in seeking possible general laws of human evolution. But it does present itself as universalist, for it claims that imitation of the Western model by all peoples is the only solution to the challenges of our time. (Amin 1989: vii)

It is not a simple particularism, a particular ethnocentrism, like that of any other people; the key to its specificity lies in its pretensions to universalism and its capacity

to impose itself on other peoples. The corollary of this position would be that non-Western peoples are forever doomed to engage in mimicry, with the supine imitation of an alien, but dominant, cultural model the only alternative to the furtherance of an inevitable conflict of cultures, as set out in publications such as Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* (Huntington 1996).

In recent years, the idea of such a clash of cultures (or indeed religions) has become more commonly used as a factor of explanation of conflict in the world, taking over from explanations founded in economic and political processes, deriving directly, or indirectly, from the class struggle, as seen by the international proletariat, or in terms of the Cold War clash of two socio-economic and political systems. The appeal in the West of this notion of clash of cultures as an explanation of the tensions and conflict existing in the modern world, may owe something to the need to construct a clearly defined Other to replace the bogeyman of the former Soviet Union. It can, however, be subject to criticism on a number of levels.

First, the conception of culture which it implies is that of a system, with a definite, fixed essence, closed to the influence of other cultures, as well as to the possibility of dynamic development as a result of internal processes. The reference back to origins or tradition takes pride of place in such a perspective, as a way of grounding this culture. This can be taken to the extreme position whereby the culture is considered to be organically linked to the nation. It becomes identified as part of its 'nature'. Cultural identity becomes a straitjacket and cultures assume the status of entities to be defended, rather than shared (Garapon 1997).

Secondly, it shares with other political positions that also highlight the role of culture, such as the call for the defence of cultural diversity so important in the discourse of *Francophonie*,⁶ an undue prioritisation of culture or religion as the main issue in the world today and the most important arena of conflict and struggle. In such world views, whether sincerely or cynically held, explanations based on primary economic, social and political factors are displaced to the realm of the cultural or religious.

Thirdly, whether as the defence of the need for cultural diversity, in which different cultures are seen to complement and harmonise with each other, or in the form of the notion of a clash of civilisations, where cultures are presented as not merely different but in opposition to each other, culturalist analyses or proposals sidestep the issues raised by the globalisation of international capitalism and, in particular, the question of universalism.

Amin has categorised three distinct attitudes in respect of universalism, in terms of analysis and model solutions (Amin 1989: xi). In the first category, there are those who see no need for universalism but claim instead the 'right to be different' in what he describes as 'culturalist praise of provincialisms'. This implies a fundamental shift away from universal mobilising calls relating to the political rights of all humanity or the liberation of the universal working class through the world revolution to demands for the right to cultural difference. It is an approach that is in line with many contemporary forms of nationalism, regionalism, religious communalism, multiculturalist ideology and the *Francophone* discourse. The second category comprises those who believe that universalism already exists; it was discovered by

Europe and then adopted by the ‘West’ in general. It calls for all to ‘imitate the West’ as the ‘best of all possible worlds’. This is a West that is summed up in the phrase ‘marketplace plus democracy’. The last category consists of those who do not accept that this type of utopian universalism actually contributes to an understanding of the real nature of the global economy and political systems. In this last category of Amin’s, we could include those who see the need to develop a better analysis of current global realities and problems, which could have a truly universal dimension and validity, along with appropriate global solutions, as well as those who reject outright the possibility of universal knowledge, given the existence of irreconcilable cultural differences, along with attempts to find global solutions through cooperation.

There are elements of all three approaches to be found in the political discourse of the dominant powers in the contemporary world, as in the discourse of those who would challenge this hegemony.

Notes

1. At a conference held at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, on 24 July 1999.
2. This was at a conference on Francophone literature and Otherness, held on 11 and 12 March 1999 at the Waterford Institute of Technology (O’Dowd-Smyth 2001).
3. Vikram Chandra, for instance, in his monumental novel tracing the fortunes of Europeans and Indians alike through the various stages of the imperial past, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, also harks back to the time of Ashoka and a (literally) golden age of trade. ‘Then there was a time of riches. A king named Ashoka did that rarest of things – he gave up aggressive conquest and ruled for the good of all creatures. Traders went to the empires of the West, taking goods and bringing back gold’ (Chandra 1995: 254).
4. See also his sections on the developed Arab-Islamic version of medieval metaphysics and the peripheral Western version (Amin 1989: 40–59). ‘European feudalism, the peripheral form of the tributary mode, gave rise to a peripheral version of tributary ideology; Islamic metaphysics, heir to Hellenism and Eastern Christianity, constituted the fully developed expression of the ideology’ (Amin 1989: 58).
5. He continues with his metaphor of weaving, as the essential activity in human history:

Who knows what new horrors lie in store? It is a gory history in parts; a story of greed and destruction. Every scrap of cloth is stained by a bloody past. But it is the only history we have and history is hope as well as despair. And so weaving, too, is hope; a living belief that having once made the world one and blessed it with its diversity, it must do so again.

Weaving is hope because it has no country, no continent.

Weaving is Reason, which makes the world go mad and makes it human. (Ghosh 1986: 57–58)
6. This is dealt with in Chapter 7.