Research Journey

Marnia LAZREG

Marnia Lazreg died on January 13, 2024 as she was preparing an article on her research journey for this volume. This article was written by her son, Ramsi Woodcock. It is based on a short essay that Marnia published in Journal of World Philosophies (Lazreg, 2020). *The reader is encouraged to consult that text for a statement of Marnia's research journey in her own words.*

Marnia Lazreg was an Algerian historical sociologist who made fundamental contributions to a wide variety of fields, including international development, second wave feminism, torture, colonialism, Islam, and Foucault studies. Marnia was based in the United States and published in English during a half-century long academic career, but Algeria was a constant theme in her work, which is best described as anticolonial, antidogmatic, insistent that human experience is primary and universal, and deeply concerned with advancing both the independence of non-Western women and the independence of Algeria. Although Marnia placed great value on empirical inquiry, and many of her books are based on painstaking archival research and interviews, her work was also often intensely theoretical in character. This was because she understood that ideas are the foundation of power.

And it is with power and ideas that Marnia's research journey began at a young age.

Growing up in Mostaganem in the 1940^{s} and 1950^{s}, Marnia was one of a handful of Algerian girls to attend French schools. She would cross from what the French called the "native quarter" to the French quarter ever day, keenly aware that what the French taught her in school bore no relation to the colonial reality embodied in that walk. She was an Algerian; her mother tongue was Arabic; and she was attending school in Algeria. But her classmates were not Algerian; her teachers taught in French; and they taught only the history of France. In a 2020 essay on her intellectual journey, Marnia wrote:

For me, crossing over the arbitrary colonial divide in search of knowledge was compounded by the search for truth. To what extent did the colonial condition, especially during the war of decolonization (1954-62) in which I grew up, provide the test of the truthfulness of the knowledge I was acquiring by crossing the river? My colonial education was blind to my history, to the reality of war, and most of all to itself. It never questioned itself; it lived in the illusion of its absolute perfection, which it strenuously imparted to students, (Lazreg, 2020, p. 139).

The colonizer's knowledge did not just oppress through omission but also through commission. In philosophy class at her lycée at the height of Algerians' struggle to eject the French in the late 1950ˢ, Marnia was astonished to read Albert Camus declare in *The Rebel* (*L'homme révolté*) that revolution can only occur in the West (Lazreg, 2020, p. 139-140). From the start, Marnia resisted French intellectual domination. Unhappy with the way the French transliterated her Arabic name (مغنية) as Mughnia, she chose her own spelling: Marnia. Unhappy that the French did not teach her Arabic letters, she responded by studying English, which allowed her to pursue a PhD in Sociology at New York University after independence and thereby permanently to emancipate her intellectual career from French language and culture.

Pursuing her PhD in the late 1960ˢ and early 1970ˢ, while America was rocked by protests against segregation and the Vietnam War, Marnia came to appreciate "the universality not only of the struggle for freedom and dignity, but also of the suffering caused by power and domination when left unchecked" (Lazreg, 2020, p. 140). But she once again found that what her teachers taught failed to account for her own lived experience of powerlessness in colonial Algeria. Émile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons, and other pillars of the sociological canon had little to say about colonial domination, and those who did, like Max Weber, stressed the "uniqueness of the West" (Lazreg, 2020, p. 141). Marnia encountered the work of Frantz Fanon for the first time in New York, but while she found his descriptions of colonialism to be accurate, she felt that his work "was a confirmation of experience not its overcoming" (Lazreg, 2020, p. 141). Marnia wanted to overcome colonialism at the level of ideas. She read Marx, whose worked help her "situate colonial domination in a global economic as well as cultural framework" but found it to be at once "uplifting" and oddly disempowering: "If imperialism, of which I am an outcome, is analyzed by Marxists as a (necessary) stage of the development of capitalism, had I been doomed to be colonized?" she wondered (Lazreg, 2020, p. 141).

What was missing was a theory that could account for what Marnia had seen first-hand growing up: "the hegemonic character of knowledge production" as she put it the fact that domination starts with the mind (Lazreg, 2020, p. 141). She found it at last in the field of ethnomethodology, which showed that "the manner in which social scientists translate their observation of behavior actually changes the observation itself" (Lazreg, 2020, p. 141). The French saw Algerians as subjects; this colored the knowledge they produced about Algerians. More generally, the West saw the non-West as subjects; this colored the knowledge that the West produced about the non-West.

It took time before this insight appeared in Marnia's work. Her first book, *The Emergence of Classes in Algeria: A Study of Colonialism and Socio-Political Change* (Lazreg, 1976b), which was based on her dissertation, was a critique of Algerian socialism's creation of a privileged technocratic elite after independence an elite that Marnia had observed firsthand while working for the Algerian national oil company, Sonatrach, immediately before moving to the United States (Lazreg, 1976a, p. 297). Marnia argued that Algerian socialism was paradoxically creating a class system in the wake of a colonial experience in which class distinctions had melted under the pressure of collective domination by the French. This was an attempt to "come to terms with the colonial legacy" but it did not reflect Marnia's insight regarding the nature of Western knowledge (Lazreg, 2020, p. 142). She later felt that in this work she had "hid[den] behind academic neutrality" (Lazreg, 2020, p. 142).

Marnia's insight into the nature of Western knowledge first made its way into her work in an article on the Berber question. In an article titled, *The Reproduction of Colonial Ideology: The Case of the Kabyle Berbers*, Marnia saw the Berber movement as having succumbed to the French intellectual domination that she had resisted throughout her own colonial education (Lazreg, 1983). She argued that, starting in the 19th century, French scholars had used false and selective historical narratives to construct a distinction between Arab and Berber identities with the aim of dividing and conquering Algerian society (Lazreg, 1983, p. 383-390). Algeria was now formally independent of France, but this intellectual legacy of colonialism lived on in some Algerian minds. (Apart from a book review, Marnia never published again on the subject (Lazreg, 2016). But she returned to the Berber question at the end of her life and was actively engaged in research in this area when she died.)

But it was not until Marnia encountered a movement that was itself in the midst of engaging with knowledge as domination that Marnia "discovered [her] voice", as she put it (Lazreg, 2020, p. 142). That movement was academic second-wave feminism, which Marnia encountered as a participant in two seminars that she attended in the mid-1980s, one at Harvard University's Bunting Institute and the other at the Pembroke Center at Brown University. Marnia wrote that "[t]he initial academic feminist critique of constituted knowledge in its search for a de-centered, liberatory knowledge resonated deeply with me" (Lazreg, 2020, p. 142). But Marnia soon discovered that even within this movement that seemed to grasp the relationship between knowledge and power, observers' preconceptions were coloring the portraits that they were drawing of the non-West. "I soon became disenchanted with academic feminism's ambition to define women such as myself, who hailed from the Middle East and North Africa, as "oppressed", passive bearers of religious categories, and in need of liberation", she wrote (Lazreg, 2020, p. 142).

Marnia's response initiated what became a lifelong engagement with the study of women. In what is perhaps her best-known scholarly article, *Feminism and Difference: The Perils of Writing as a Woman on Women in Algeria* (Lazreg, 1988), and in her second book, *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question* (Lazreg, 1994b, 2019), Marnia took Western feminists to task for reproducing, in their own views regarding non-Western women, the same savior narrative that Western men had long used to justify the colonization of non-Western peoples. *The Eloquence of Silence* exploded the myth of the passive Muslim woman by detailing the massive resistance offered by Algerian women to the multiple systems of domination trained against them, not least that of French colonialism. In preparing this now-classic work, Marnia made her first forays into the archives of the Algerian war for independence in both France and Algeria. Archival research into the war would become a mainstay of her research. Marnia went on to publish more on women than on any other single topic. Notable articles not otherwise discussed here include an additional critique of Western feminist attitudes toward non-Western women titled *Decolonizing Feminism* as well as articles on women in the Middle East and North Africa, global feminism, and feminist theory (Lazreg, 1990, 1994a, 2000, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2014).

The power of ideas to oppress was much on Marnia's mind as well during the decade of the Algerian Civil War, which started in 1992. In an article, *Islamism and the Recolonization of Algeria*, Marnia argued that the Islamist movement was attempting a "re-civilizing mission" that

targeted Algerians' cultural space in a way that was reminiscent of the "civilizing mission" undertaken by the French in Algeria in the 19th century, albeit with a different vision of what constituted civilization in mind (Lazreg, 1998, p. 44-45). In the 19th century, the French had sought to "reshape" Algerians' lives based on a view of French culture, society and politics as superior to those of Algeria (Lazreg, 1998, p. 44). Marnia argued that the Islamists were attempting something similar but now based not on French culture but instead on their interpretation of Islam an interpretation that differed from the traditional Algerian view of religion as "an essentially private matter that could not be legislated by any group or man" (Lazreg, 1998, p. 44). Marnia was also critical of government attempts to exert political control over religion in Algeria, which she considered to be a "colonial strat[egy]" in its own right (Lazreg, 1998, p. 45).

Marnia had noted the way the "civilizing mission" in the Algerian Civil War led to horrific torture and that this was an echo of the use of torture by the French during the Algerian war for independence (Lazreg, 1998, p. 44). A few years later, she saw another "civilizing mission" lead to torture, in the form of America's "war on terror" in response to 9/11. "The colonial logic was at work again", she later wrote, both in the conventional Western form in which Marnia had first encountered it growing up and now also combined with the "civilizing mission" of the American feminists that Marnia had challenge in her scholarship (Lazreg, 2020, p. 142). The American armies invading Iraq and Afghanistan claimed to be liberating Muslim women at the same time that they carried out the "sexual torture of Muslim men" (Lazreg, 2020, p. 142). American war planners even screened the movie *The Battle of Algiers* to teach urban guerrilla warfare to American troops (Lazreg, 2010, p. 4).

Marnia's response was her next book, *Torture and the Twilight of Empire* (Lazreg, 2008), which she wrote "to demonstrate the continuity in methods used by France in its colonial imperial war to keep Algerians subjugated and the United States' neo-colonial, pre-emptive wars in the Middle East" (Lazreg, 2020, p. 142). Based on archival research into the use of torture by the French in Algeria, as well as into the intellectual justifications for the practice developed by French military theorists, the book remains the leading historical account of the use of torture by the French in Algeria. Unique among studies of torture, the book treats the practice as the necessary consequence of colonial ideology rather than merely as an impulse, an excess, or a counter-insurgency strategy. Marnia was here again applying the insight from ethnomethodology that had

inspired her in graduate school: that the mind of the observer colors the observation and the resulting action.

Marnia's study of torture also helped her to understand that the colonial idea had not only been *taught* to Algerians but *carved* into their bodies and, through the attendant psychological trauma, into their minds as well. This insight helped her to render precise her views regarding the limitations of Fanon's work. In her article, *Battling for the New Man: Fanon and French Counter-Revolutionaries*, Marnia observed that both the French generals pursuing genocide in Algeria and the great anticolonial thinker had used the same phrase to describe what they wanted to create: a "new man" (Lazreg, 2007, p. 13-14). For the French generals, this new man would be a pacified colonial subject (Lazreg, 2007, p. 16-17). First, the French would torture him in order to create a blank slate, then they would scratch a picture of obedience onto that slate (Lazreg, 2007, p. 17). For Fanon, the new man would liberate himself on both a political and psychological level. He would "free himself of Europe, while freeing Europe of its anti-humanistic self" (Lazreg, 2007 : 19). Marnia suggested, however, that Fanon did not approach the problem of the liberation of the mind of the colonized person with the same programmatic intensity with which the French had approached the shackling of that mind. "[J]udging by the description he gave of the French military techniques of brainwashing, [Fanon did not] seriously gauge the long term effects of brainwashing," she wrote (Lazreg, 2007, p. 21). Nevertheless, Marnia thought that Fanon had been on the right track in treating the problem of decolonization of the mind as having *medical* as well as intellectual sources (Lazreg, 2007, p. 22).

Marnia then turned her attention back to women, but unlike her earlier interventions, she entered into conversation directly with Muslim women instead of addressing herself to Western feminists in order to defend Muslim women. In *Questioning the Veil: Open Letters to Muslim Women*, an erudite and deeply personal work structured as a series of open letters from one Muslim woman to another, Marnia took up the matter of the global resurgence in the popularity of the veil (Lazreg, 2009a). Marnia had rejected the veil as a child growing up in a family of veiled women, and in the book she rejected the four contemporary grounds for veiling -modesty, sexual harassment, cultural identity, and piety-often put forth in defense of the reveiling trend. Here we see how Marnia's intense belief in the importance of personal independence- including for women -gave her anticolonialism complexity and nuance. While Marnia understood the impulse to display a non-Western cultural identity through the veil, she

argued that there are better ways for Muslim women to express their identity than to wear a piece of cloth that links that identity to their biology (Lazreg, 2009a, p. 61-62).

Marnia had so far addressed the problem of colonial knowledge largely through applications: the colonial gaze of Western feminists, French torturers, and American prosecutors of the "war on terror." But she had not yet sought it out in the abstractions of Western philosophy itself. This she undertook to do in her magnum opus, *Foucault's Orient: The Conundrum of Cultural Difference* (Lazreg, 2017). No social theorist has exerted more influence over contemporary Western thought than Michel Foucault. His work is critical of Western humanism and of the totalizing intellectual project that was Western rationalism. And it self-consciously provides a theory of knowledge and of power. Surely, Foucault, of all Western thinkers, should have succeeded at avoiding the othering of the non-West that Marnia had encountered in other corners of Western intellectual endeavor. Marnia discovered that he had not.

Drawing on Foucault's published work, material in the Foucault archives, and interviews with those who knew Foucault during his trips to non-Western countries, Marnia showed that Foucault defined "the 'Orient' as a limit experience of western Reason" (Lazreg, 2020, p. 143). Her starting point was the contrast that Foucault drew between what he took to be the disorder of an ancient Chinese encyclopedia and the scientific orderliness of Western culture. "This was a deliberate choice [Foucault] made to analyze the specificity-qua-universality of the western ratio as uniquely equipped to capture an order in the world," Marnia later wrote (Lazreg, 2020, p. 143). The book "enabled me to identify the limitations of Foucault's anti-humanist posture which critiques the failures of humanism, but falls back on its presuppositions when needed" (Lazreg, 2020, p.143).

Marnia had shown that Foucault did not see his critique of reason as having implications for non-Western thought because, in Foucault's view, reason was itself a uniquely Western project (Lazreg, 2021, p. 144). Foucault's rejection of this "specificity-qua-universality of the western ratio", as Marnia put it, had brought the concept of culture to the fore (Lazreg, 2020, p. 143). If Western thought could not pretend to universality, then Western thought was a habit of mind it was culture. Marnia had once criticized Western feminists for wanting to save non-Western women. She noticed that now Foucault's turn to culture had caused both Western feminists and Muslim feminists to "flaunt cultural difference" (Lazreg, 2020, p. 143). This was reflected in the celebration, by both Western and Islamic feminists, of the reveiling trend about which

Marnia had written in *Questioning the Veil*. But it was also part of a broader effort to hitch the empowerment of Muslim women to Quranic text a trend that Marnia called "Quranic attributor contextualism" (Lazreg, 2021, p. 2). In her next book, *Islamic Feminism and the Discourse of Post-Liberation*, Marnia argued that Quranic attributor contextualism disempowers women by predicating their social position on religious text (Lazreg, 2021, p. 114-115). She argued that caution was particularly warranted because the approach has been promoted by Western countries as part of a "cultural strategy of the "war on terror" of promoting a deradicalized, 'moderate' Islam" (Lazreg, 2020, p. 143). The civilizing mission of the West was trying to coopt the re-civilizing mission of the Islamists. Women's agency would be the victim.

Over the course of her career, Marnia showed how the colonial mindset colored Western perspectives in disparate fields from feminism to philosophy. Throughout her career, Marnia was also interested in how the colonial mindset colored Western and, in particular, French perspectives on colonialism itself. Indeed, in Marnia's view, French historians were incapable of evaluating French colonialism other than through a colonialist lens, because colonialism was part of the French sense of self. In an article, *Mirror, Mirror, Tell Me Who I Am: Colonial Empire and French Identity*, Marnia argued that acknowledging "the centrality of racism in the colonial and neocolonial politics of the French state" would, for French historians, be "tantamount to a denial of the self, a sapping of identity from within" (Lazreg, 2011, p. 186). She thought that "[m]ilitary officers who served in the colonies tend[ed] to be more candid on this score" (Lazreg, 2011, p. 186). One had said: "to lose an empire is to lose oneself" (Lazreg, 201, p. 186).

Shortly before her death, Marnia picked up the thread of this argument and delved into recent French historiography of France's colonial past. In a book manuscript that she titled *French Revisionism and the Erasure of the Algerian Revolution*, Marnia investigated attempts by a new generation of French historians, writing from both the political right and the political left, to legitimize France's colonial past, sometimes by treating French colonists as revolutionaries and at other times by suggesting that Algeria's post-liberation experience has been a failure (Lazreg, 2022a). (Marnia published a summary of this work online under the same title (Lazreg, 2022b).) In most of her prior work, Marnia had encountered Western ideas that were implicitly colonial in character. In the French historians of Algeria that Marnia was now studying, the colonialism was very nearly explicit. It had been more than 60 years since the French had left Algerian land, but they still sought to colonize the

idea of Algeria. Just as she had done as an Algerian girl in French schools, Marnia continued to resist because she understood that it is from the domination of ideas that all other forms of domination originate.

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