

1789 in 1954: Human Rights and the Algerian Revolution

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The paper:

This paper considers the use of the language of human rights by the Algerian resistance during the Algerian Revolution, focusing in particular on the writings of the president of the Algerian provisional government, Ferhat Abbas. It brings forward a version of human rights politics and a set of claims on the inheritances of 1789 that, by combining ideas of human rights with those of postcolonial sovereignty, made manifest the inconsistency between human rights and colonial rule. Through Abbas's account of the paternalism of imperial promises and the challenges of postcolonial re-foundings, the paper argues that, in using the language of human rights, Abbas and his allies not only contested the content of the term, but the concept's historicity, and, with it, the historical narrative of which they were part.

This paper is a draft chapter from my book manuscript, tentatively titled *The Promise of Human Rights and the Politics of Hypocrisy*. It will be chapter four, one of a pair of chapters on the use of the language of human rights and claims on the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (as well as, to a lesser extent, the US Declaration of Independence and the UDHR) in the context of debates about decolonization in Algeria. The previous chapter addresses accusations of rights abuses levelled against France in the course of the war, and the French government's response, to show the use of a narrative of what I describe as "imperial promises" by the French government to justify its use of colonial violence. The pair on France and Algeria is followed by a pair of chapters on the United States, the first of which traces the remaking of an American promise after World War II through a consideration of Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma*, and the latter of which, in parallel to Chapter 4, traces the use of the language of human rights and claims on the American Declaration, again in connection to anticolonial internationalism, in the work of Malcolm X.