

The empty niche

by Ernest Gellner

WE drove to Tunis from Morocco, across all Algeria: an unusual experience in September '55. Indeed, we saw virtually nothing on the open roads in Eastern Algeria besides trucks in convoy and army transports.

Entering Tunisia was like entering light from darkness. In Morocco, tension and suspense: in Algeria, fighting. At one point along the road in Algeria, we heard the muffled noise of a distant heavy machine-gun. It sounded like an unattended telephone in a distant room: the Frenchwoman and Algerian truckdriver who were with us paid hardly more attention to it than if it were. The woman, who was attending to a level crossing, drily commented that it had been going on for days. Later we read in the papers the *bilan* of that particular engagement.

We had stopped in the town of Constantine, the centre of the region where the rebels operate. It is a town magnificently situated on two cliffs with a chasm in between. In the deep gap there is a criss-crossing of bridges like a giant cat's cradle. On the higher of the two cliffs there is a war monument, with four niches: Foch, Clemenceau, Joffre. The fourth niche is empty. One wonders just when the bust of Petain was removed. The empty niche seems to symbolise the crisis of France. Over a decade ago Frenchmen had to choose: today's crisis concerning North Africa goes no less deep.

The tragedy of France may be here that the French are neither good liberals nor fascists. They do not, like South Africans, frankly educate the subject race for servitude. On the contrary, *Egalité* remains on public buildings and in school curricula,

But *Présence Française* is opposed to *Conscience Française*. Of course, the men of the *Présence* maintain that their position is compatible with, indeed entailed by, conscience: whilst the men of the *Conscience* believe that they are doing what is best for the maintenance of the presence of France. . . . Policy is a mixture of the two.

In Morocco, this paradox is complicated and accentuated by the fact that the secular French Republic has underwritten, guaranteed a theocratic absolutism (happily tempered by impotence), whose Sultan and embodiment then allied himself with the Nationalists. . . . The paradoxes struck me most clearly when I watched festivities on July 14th in Rabat: the fall of the Bastille was being celebrated by a *defile* of the Sultan's black guards, a *corps of slaves*. (They may no longer be such, in law or fact: but such still remains the tradition of that Household Cavalry. . . .) No one seemed to think it funny. Perhaps one could revive the Swiss Guards at Versailles to take part in July 14th as well. . . .?

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WHAT accentuates the sense of coming from darkness into light at the Algerian-Tunisian border is that in the two western territories, curfews are imposed – which enable one to have the curious experience of witnessing closing time in a French bistro. In Tunisia, all is alight, and seems euphoric.

The crucial question – perhaps, by way of precedent, for all North Africa – is how well-founded this Tunisian euphoria is. In dealing with Tunisian officials one can feel one is dealing with men who have no European masters. They are courteous and

and, and seem to wish to impress one – and themselves – with how courteously and efficiently they can run their own country. They have just received their internal autonomy. How far is all this a case of being on one's best behaviour just after the wedding, so to speak? Will underlying stresses come out when the rosy glow has faded?

On the other hand, even if the compromise works in Tunisia, it does not follow that it must necessarily work in Morocco. Impressionistically Morocco seems a tragic country and reminds one of Spain; Tunisia seems a light-hearted one and reminds one of Italy. Morocco always was deeply xenophobic: foreigners, Europeans, if admitted always had to form ghettos. Even the settlers of today there live in ghettos – albeit those of a dominant minority. This is due as much to rejection by Moroccans as to Lyautey's policy of aesthetic segregation or to the racial arrogance of Europeans. Tunis, on the other hand, is cosmopolitan, eclectic, commercial; xenophobia as a consideration gives way to trade. Tunis is open to the Mediterranean: Morocco was prised open by force.

We visited the Government offices in Tunis. They had the air of a flat into which a new and eager couple are just moving in – down to the fact that much of the furniture does not seem to have arrived yet. The present Government is only a caretaker one, but nevertheless there is immense eagerness and hectic activity. Everyone is rushing from committee to committee and there is goodwill and enthusiasm everywhere. A sceptic might say: how like a man after a New Year's resolution, still believing that a new leaf has been turned and that henceforth he will be ever efficient and cheerful. But maybe he *will* keep it up; only the future can tell.

We were told that Tunisia is to be seen as three strips. The Northern is substantially in order, the Southern too poor for anything but sheep: it is the central part that is the crux. Land reform: not break-up of the big estates (later perhaps: at present the big landowners are in the Government), not the adaptation of fragmented holdings to modern methods, but the obviation of *habus*. This is an institution which – as a matter of piety, of preventing the dissipation of property by heirs, of disinheriting women – freezes ownership of land. *Habus* and tribal ownership reduce the value of land and stand in the way of agrarian development. Here, Islam seems the obstacle; compromises are being tried.

A further problem of the central part of Tunisia: the need to convert cultivators from cereals, unsuited to conditions, to arboriculture, especially olives. The peasants resist from conservatism, distrust and – it was suggested – atavism: being descendants of nomads who had wrested these fields, they cling to what they had gained

in the face of economic reason. Finally: foreign investments, and orderly international marketing of olive oil are required.

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THE question is -- will more be demanded? Will the direction be 'Islamic' or 'Kemalist? Will there be a turning towards Cairo? An intelligent Frenchman who had spent his life involved in North African affairs commented: 'We must hope that Bourguiba will bring off a "Kemal" -- that is, have enough prestige to go against Islamic obscurantism and pan-Islamism -- though this will necessitate that he is rude about us (the French) in public at least. It may also require that he has some money to fight for influence within the Neo-Destour.'

Colonial revolutions, like European nineteenth century ones, have two stages, the nice and the nasty: the first when all oppo-

sition is yet united in its rejection of the status quo, the second when its divisions and problems appear in the hour of victory. The Nationalists in Morocco owe their moral victory to the passion of Casablanca proletarians and the tribesmen around Oued Zem and Khenifra. That passion and violence may have found its symbol, its point of crystallisation in Sidi Mohamed ben Yussef; it cannot have its real spring there, however much that may seem so to those possessed by it. The moral victory of the Nationalists will be followed by some power and responsibility; and then they will have to deal with whatever the true source of that passion is. The French faced their greatest trials when they got rid of Ben Yussef; the Nationalists may face *theirs* now they have him back. Unless of course, the French oblige by providing another symbol.