

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

7 May 1993
Cairo, Egypt

Peter B. Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755
USA

Dear Peter,

Things in Algeria are seldom what they seem. Those who perceive themselves as modernists have a funny way of sounding old-fashioned, and the traditionalists are starting to look like flower children of a new 1960s. Terms like liberal and conservative are beginning to lose their meaning and take on a disturbingly hollow tone. Welcome to planet Algiers.

What do I call a modernist who resists change and is struggling to protect the status quo? What do I call a traditionalist who would lay his life on the line for change and an untried alternative solution to the problems of his country?

Even the terms that would describe the situation in general seem misplaced and empty. How can this be a civil war when everyone I talk to is against both sides? Hardly anyone supports the principle of violence in the name of Islam, but neither do they support the forces that be. It seems that Algerians are caught in a battle between extremists, neither of whom represent the average citizen. It doesn't sound like civil war to me.

Because the terminology and assumptions used in describing this struggle are so often skewed, I find myself comparing what I see around me to more familiar movements and trends in an attempt to put things in context.

One parallel that keeps coming to mind in my conversation with Algerians is one I would have least expected. From the inside, this feels strangely like a kind of Muslim 60s

Katherine Roth is a Fellow of the Institute studying tradition and modernity in the Arab world.

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

KLR-2

movement. Although this may seem bizarre from the Western perspective, it doesn't seem all that far-fetched from the eye of the storm. After all, what's significant about the Islamist movement is not political, but social. Hanging out with the traditionalists who would "take the country back to the Middle Ages", what is striking is the sense of brotherhood and sisterhood and togetherness and communal utopia. There are Islamic herbal remedies and health food stores.

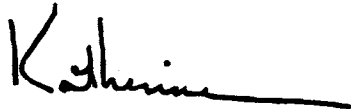
Ethnic is it. It is hip to be Islamist. It is a moralistic dream world in the face of a rigid power structure which nobody, including the "moderns", agrees with. Back to the Garden of Eden. The people unite. It is a spontaneous and natural uprising taking place everywhere in the Arab world at once (as it did in the West in the 1960s). As in the 60s, the movement's real strength started out socially and then filtered into politics. While idealism among Islamists is certainly great, the fact that the social side of this movement has mobilized the masses and has given hope and voice to the unemployed and alienated must certainly be positive.

Of course there are differences, but this is the Arab Muslim variation on the theme and cannot be expected to mimic the Western version. The religious discourse and preferences in dress here do not come from exotic Asian cultures, as they did in the U.S, but from closer home. And one must remember that the governments involved here are hardly in the position of strength and stability in which the American government found itself during our own social upheaval. So it is not surprising that the ramifications of such a trend here are so much greater than those seen in the West during periods of social reform and rethinking.

I'm only beginning to put the pieces together, but so far this seems like one of the more probable models to draw from in coming to an understanding of the struggle. As unlikely as it may sound from the outside, this parallel feels accurate from the interior. It's something about the mass involvement and stirring idealism of the time, the fact that the politics seem somehow secondary, more a symptom than a cause.

But this, of course, planet Algiers. Things are seldom what they seem and I fully expect my impressions to give way to new images and to transform themselves again and yet again before this journey is over.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Katharine", with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Received in Hanover, May 7, 1993.