Autogestion: Algeria's Socialist Experiment

James Becket

Autogestion or workers' self-management, is the keystone of Algeria's revolution and Algerians feel that it is their contribution to the underdeveloped world.

Autogestion is an instance of practice preceding theory. The theory that has emerged, stated in its most idealistic form, is that the workers democratically manage their own enterprise free from state interference. These economically autonomous units represent a decentralised system free from bureaucracy and authoritarianism.

The issue between centralisation and autonomy is, however, by no means settled in Algeria. Either system to work well needs trained personnel and, above all, needs time. However, with the pressure of a deteriorating economic situation, there is little patience.

An urban-based bureaucracy, a party striving to tighten its control and an army which believes the whole economy should be run on lines of military discipline, all act to suffocate the delicate life of democratic autogestion.

Perhaps if Algeria must pass through a period of rigorous party control and authoritarianism, she may approach autogestion again some time in the future, only it will be from the opposite direction.

PERHAPS the two most often used and most meaningless words in the tiers monde are "revolution" and "socialism". Though (their mere mention guarantees applause, turns aside any argument, and permits any act, these words are boundless concepts harbouring the most disparate realities. As they are used basically as moral concepts, rather than economic or political concepts, they do not submit readily to conventional analysis.

Algeria is a "revolutionary" country which has embarked on the path to "socialism". Though hardly anyone openly opposes it, and most take it for granted, no one quite knows what it means. President Ben Bella himself often includes everything his government does in the concept of "specific" Algerian socialism, even exchanging prisoners with Morocco and attending the Addis-Ababa conference. However, in the economic sphere a definite socialist pattern has emerged. This "opening to Socialism" has been based on the conventional process of nationalisation and an unconventional system of organization — autogestion or workers' self-management. Autogestion is the keystone of the "revolution" and Algerians feel that it is their contribution to the under-developed world.

'Socialist Option' Inevitable

Historically the FLN (Front of National Liberation) was formed to free the country from French rule. The FLN based itself on this one objective, and it gained the support of the vast majority of Moslem Algerians. The open discussion of what would happen after independence was taboo for fear not only that ideological debate would threaten the Front's unity, but that the adoption of an ideology would turn Algeria into a cold war battleground. Thus mention of the future in the documents of the war period was relatively vague, limiting itself to agrarian reform, a "national economy", and cultural vindication. The literature concentrated on the struggle at hand talking in the stirring yet general terms which move men in time of war, yet which do not satisfy in time of peace. "Socialism" was first mentioned in the Program of Tri poli adopted in June 1962 after the signing of the Accords of Evian. The Program, which is often contradictory and was purposely made imprecise so as to be flexible, stated that Algeria's development as a newly independent country, if it was to be "quick and harmonious", had to be "conceived in a socialist perspective." Agrarian reform was given top priority since 80 per cent of the population was rural, and this sector had borne the greatest burden of the liberation struggle. The Program was vague however in that it made reference to staple farms as well as co-operatives as well as division of land among the peasants.

Despite the fact that the Algerians had suffered no less under French Socialist governments and the fact that the Communist Parties of France and Algeria had not fully supported the armed struggle (believing that the proletarian revolution had to come first in France), Algeria's "socialist option" was both natural and inevitable. Those who were in a position of responsibility realized that French exploitation would continue unless the whole structure was changed. A capitalist system would simply perpetuate their dependence, and would not meet mounting pressures for social justice. There was a universally held belief that Russia and China were the outstanding examples of rapid development, and their economic systems should be the models for Algeria. The ruling class had been the French. When they departed there was no strong group or class, as, for example, there is in Latin America, which would block socialism. In the struggle for power men who would have followed a more moderate path backed down before the advance of Ben Bella rather than plunge the country into civil war. Having adopted the Marxian analysis, the party theoreticians are on the constant lookout for "bourgeois", yet this class hardly exists, though the war did produce a group of nouveaux riches. Though a socialism would have been the order of the day in any case, the events and conditions of the summer of 1962 forced into a rather special path.

Initiative from Workers

The summer of 1962 was highly chaotic. The war had caused great damage, villages had been destroyed, herds decimated, forest burned. Over two million Algerians were leaving the "regroupment centres" and half a million more were returning from outside the country. The French exodus which had begun earlier from the less secure interior swelled to such proportions that within a few months only 100,000 of the original million remained. The property they abandoned was called the biens vacants. This withdrawal, probably unique in its scale, meant that the vast majority of those who had run the economy were gone. Colonialism meant not only that 85 percent of the Moslems were illiterate, but that
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technical cadres simply did not exist. As a colony, Algeria's development had been agricultural, divided into a modern, highly profitable, French sector and a traditional sector of Moslem fellahs subsisting on the poorer lands. Nearly one million hectares of land, mostly cereal growing, had been abandoned.

The pressure of the landless, among them the homeless and uprooted, acted to fill the vacuum by occupying this vacant land. In some cases occupied land was seized, especially from members of the OAS. On these vacant farms the majority of hired managers had departed, there were no cash reserves, and most of the machinery would not operate. There was, however, at this time a great spirit of brotherhood, having fought together they would join together to work the newly-freed land. It is difficult to trace exactly what happened as experience varied greatly from place to place. The harvest was successfully brought in. Some organized themselves by means of committees. The initiative came from the workers themselves, not from above.

In the urban areas, apartments, shops, factories, villas were abandoned. In Algiers this urban vacuum was tilled and the slum problem solved when the vacant apartments were broken into and occupied. The legal situation was highly confused as there had been many "panic sales" to Algerians.

**Legalisation of Autogestion**

In October Ben Bella made the first of a series of moves designed to gain some control over events and protect the biens vacants. His reactions were more political than economic as on the one hand he had the restrictions of the Evian Accords and on the other he had the workers taking over the abandoned land and factories. Decrees were issued to keep vacant farms and factories running. "Operation Plow" was successfully carried out. The great potential of autogestion was dawning on many, and it gained momentum throughout the country. All this culminated in the Decrees of March, where the Government recognizing the seizures of land as a fait accompli, institutionalised autogestion. At this same time the largest French estates were nationalised adding 800,000 more hectares to the socialist sector. The next October during the political crisis of the Kabylie and Morocco the remaining land in French hands was expropriated. In a period of a year the country shifted its productive modern sector from a system of colonial production based on private property to socialist production based on workers' management. This sector now contains 2.7 million hectares of the most productive land, by far the largest amount in the world under autogestion.

**Practice before Theory**

The March Decrees defined a bien vacant: in effect nationalized them: set out the organization and function of the self-managed units; and treated the question of the division of the units revenue. The permanent workers of a factory or farm are organized into a General Assembly of Workers who elect Workers' Council who in turn elect a Management Committee which elects a President. The interests of the state are represented by a Director, in theory technically trained, who manages the accounting and paper work. The final decree established that a measure of the profits had to go to an amortization fund, a social fund, an unemployment fund, and a National Investment Fund, but the decrees did not say how the shares would be determined.

Here was a case of practice preceding theory. The theory that has emerged stated in its most idealistic form is that the workers democratically manage their own enterprise free from State interference. These economically autonomous units represent a decentralised system free from bureaucracy and authoritarianism. In no sense are the workers salaried, but rather they share the fruits of their own labour. This pure position would hold that the workers have absolute control over the firm's profits. Ben Bella in December 1962 even said that the State would have nothing to say about "even one centime" of the firm's earnings. The idea is to build socialism from the grass roots up, to give the responsibility to the men who work in the fields and work in the factories. Socialism was not to be imposed from above but by a bureaucratic state apparatus.

Algeria was fortunate that she did not have the restrictions of an official dogma. Her whole development has been characterized by improvisation and pragmatism. In a sense autogestion was dictated by necessity, the trained people to take over simply did not exist. For the plowing to get done, for the factories to continue production, this was the best, if not the only, way. The theoreticians hold that autogestion avoids the failings of economic liberalism and of centralized state control.

**Conflict with Centralisation**

Planning, though not yet in operation due to lack of statistical information and trained people, has always been considered one of the basic principles of Algerian socialism. Though planning and autogestion are not necessarily contradictory there is now an open conflict between those who favour the essentially autonomous and decentralized policy of autogestion, and those who favour direct state control and centralized planning. Agriculture is still the key to the economy; the modern socialised sector, as the country's largest source of foreign exchange, must provide the savings for investment in industry. Those who favour central planning argue that for the operation of these firms to be efficient for maximum production and profits, there must be coordinated planning and a centralization of scarce technical and administrative resources. It is too much to expect autogestion to produce sufficient surplus. Those in the sector of autogestion have been called a "privileged class". Relative to the others this is true. In agriculture for every person employed in the socialist sector, there are seven in the traditional sector who are estimated to work no more than 60 days a year. The friction is not, however, between these two groups but rather between those in the modern sector who are "permanent" workers who fully participate in the benefits of autogestion, and those of about equal number who are "seasonal" workers hired occasionally when extra labour is needed. Unemployment is the number one social problem, it is estimated that over two-thirds of the active population is unemployed or severely underemployed. The problem is how to get the maximum surplus out of these socialist units. In general it is those directly concerned with the economy, such as the Minister of Agriculture, who favour the centralised policy, and it is the political theoreticians of the Party who favour decentralization.

The question that must be asked and which many workers are asking is, is this really self-management? Is this in practice the land to those who work it, and the factories to those that work in them? One must distinguish between external and internal abuses of this ideal. The workers...
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themselves when elected President or Committeemen have been guilty of abuses ranging from outright misappropriation of funds to insufficient consultation of the workers. Many thought they were now the ‘patron’, and should live and spend like one. However, this is a minimal threat to autogestion, especially compared to the external threat.

In examining the external pressures to appropriate the management function, it first must be acknowledged that these units need outside help. Autogestion has been instituted in areas where some technical knowhow is required; in agriculture such commodities as wine, citrus, and tobacco need special attention and knowledge. These units need credit, they need technical assistance, and they need help in marketing their products. The Government has inherited or created a number of organisations charged with giving this assistance. This has meant that with organisations that handle credit, handle marketing, handle all cash, determine inputs such as seed and fertilizer, there is little left for the President and his Committee. In fact many feel that they are nothing more than supervisors of the day to day work. These organisations are so snarled in red tape, that frustrations mount and the belief that autogestion is being “sabotaged” increases.

Growing State Control

The spheres of power of the state-appointed man, the Director, and the elected man, the President, are not always clear in practice. If the director is a strong personality he will run things, especially as many Presidents are not accustomed to speaking out. The director is a “young upstart with no practical experience” while the President is “old, ignorant, and conservative”.

What has perhaps been more serious than the intervention in the management process has been the intervention in the democratic process. The Army, the Bureau Politique, the labour union (UGTA), and the prefects have all interfered in elections. They also have exerted pressure to have “thier” men made permanent members of a firm. The criteria of a man’s standing in Algeria is his participation in the war. This has meant that these “militants” have been given jobs where the criterion should have been technical skill. It also means that farms now have double the amount of labour than they did under the French. These pressures have created friction between the old soldiers and the experienced agricultural workers. The organisations which have interfered are hardly democratic themselves, and are accustomed to achieving what they think is just by other means.

Disposition of Profits

Last fall there was a Congress of the Agricultural Sector of Autogestion and at the end of March there was one for the industrial sector. These were carried out in a very free atmosphere. The delegates spared no one in making a wide range of criticisms and proposals. Despite the fact that discussion was completely free, the effect was one of group therapy since the complaints had difficulty making their way into the final declarations. The Congresses served more as an occasion for the Bureau Politique to put forth what they feel is best for the country and have it approved "unanimously". The hottest issue and the one over which the Bureau Politique encountered the most resistance was the division of the profits. In the industrial sector the declaration was vague but promised to the point where it permitted a bonus to the members "not to exceed one month’s pay." This left the majority dissatisfied. At the end of last year the regime had to face the question of profits since the Decrees of March had not made their disposition clear. The 7 New Francs ($1.40) that the workers had been receiving as a daily wage was described, consistent with the autogestion philosophy, as an "advanace" on the firm’s earnings. The reason was asserted in that there were so few accountants to keep accurate books, it was impossible to know after amortisation and other complicated adjustments how much a firm had made. The government resolved the difficulty by simply handing out 230 NF to those members of firms that seemed to show a profit and 130 N F to those in firms showing a loss.

Unfortunately there has been a marked decrease in enthusiasm especially in the agricultural sector. The majority have grown apathetic, while only a few have maintained a selfless spirit of dedication. The average size of the farms are over 1,100 hectares which has proved too large for the workers to identify with and see their particular contribution affect profits. Widespread petty thievery and lack of initiative have increased alarmingly. The frustrations of so much bureaucracy and interference have disillusioned many who tried to assume responsibility. It is hard for a worker to see the difference between his status and that of a salaried employee. As a result of this a serious problem has developed whereby men will “only work a set number of hours” and no more. It is impossible to get people to work Sundays. As the hours demanded by the nature of agriculture are so varied, this attitude can be disastrous. The government has refused to pay overtime for fear the workers will slow up to create overtime work. At the Agricultural Congress the workers understood that they were promised a family allowance, insurance, and a raise, but these have not been forthcoming. Last month delegates to the Industrial Congress eloquently argued that division of the profits was a “necessary stimulant”. Many Presidents related how they had in good faith promised this at the beginning of the year, the workers had relied on it, and now they had to go back and tell them that this would not be the case.

A Fact and Dilemma

In reality there has been little genuine autogestion. But without credit, with markets disrupted, with no experience in management, with pressure groups uncontrolled in an unstructural social and political system, it was not possible. Someone has wisely said about autogestion that “it is a perfect system, the only difficulty is that it needs perfect people.” It has been quite extraordinary how well the “self-managed” sector in both agriculture and industry has done. But this fact does not decide the debate between those who want more government control and those who want more autonomy, for each will attribute the limited success to the measure in which their view has been followed. The policy-makers are caught in a fact and a dilemma. The fact is that Algeria does not and will not in the foreseeable future product enough to give everyone a satisfactory share. The dilemma (particular acute in the crucial agricultural sector) is that the more a man feels he has a fixed salary regardless, the less he will produce, and the less for society as a whole; the more he feels his effort affects his return, the more he will produce, but he will expect to consume more, and thus society will not recede the same portion of this increased production. The partisans of genuine autogestion argue that the
socialist sector should be favoured precisely because it is the socialist sector and the basis of future development. Those favouring centralization always dwell on the "community" interest, and say in effect that patriotism should be sufficient incentive.

In agriculture, this year will be crucial. The modern sector will be on its own. Last year many of those expropriated were allowed to remain to reap their last harvest. Last year in wine production the output of the socialist sector declined 50 per cent, and the output in the private sector declined 15 percent. Citrus production also has declined, but more important there has been a serious decline in quality. A majority of the French experts under the cooperation programme are reportedly leaving. Many are predicting a catastrophe for this year. Cereal production, mostly in the traditional sector, depends on the rainfall, which for the third straight year has been extraordinarily favourable. It is said the revolution has been saved by the rain.

The Prospect

Algeria plans to eventually nationalise everything that is in private or foreign hands. This includes 85 percent of industry, the banks, foreign trade, and the important oil and gas of the Sahara. As now envisaged, autogestion will be the system of organisation throughout the whole economy. The overcrowded traditional sector of agriculture, where the phrase "agrarian reform" has relevance, will first pass through a stage of "cooperatives", and then evolve into autogestion.

At the recent party congress, the debate erupted again. The momentum now seems to be on the side of those urging centralization. In a sense historical experience is on their side. Autogestion is by no means new, historical precedent ranges from the Paris Commune to the Hungarian Revolution of 56 and it is reminiscent of the "committees" of the period of the Russian Revolution. Autogestion seems more a feature of the chaotic and anarchical period after a revolution when power has not yet been consolidated. The most successful example of institutionalised autogestion, and the inspiration for Algeria, is Yugoslavia. However, its greatest success is in industry while only a small part of her agriculture is under autogestion. There autogestion came after Experience with centralised plan-

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