

ON COLONIAL NOSTALGIA CASE STUDY: ALGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *The colonization of Algeria lasted for one hundred thirty-two years. The war that broke up on November 1, 1954, cost much blood, 1.5 million people killed. At this juncture, the colonized regarded Western colonialism, in general, French one, in particular as a system with undeniable damaging effects. In these recent years, however, there has been much talk in progress, both in the settler country and in the formerly colonized. This talk is about a presumed positive role. In other words, a new political discourse and a new literature aiming at justifying and sanctifying the role and the impact of colonialism is coming to the fore. The colonists, having never given up yearning for Paradise Lost, are seeing to rehabilitate what they consider a distorted image of colonialism. Their main argument is grounded in the fact that it had unquestionably been beneficial not only to them but also to the natives. In short, the argument lies in that the civilizing mission proved a success. Likewise, in Algeria, a population, mainly young, born after independence, and which can only guess the far reaching consequences of such a system, is led to think that its embrace would have enabled it not to miss the rendez-vous with modernity. To put it simply, the widespread idea among these youth lies in that having driven the colonists out of the country has affected the country in all domains. This article looks at this colonial nostalgia with Algeria as a case study. This has been done by examining the writings of pros and cons concerning this nostalgia.*

KEYWORDS: Algeria, Colonialism, Nostalgia

INTRODUCTION

“Every single empire in its official discourse has said that it is not like all the others, that its circumstances are special, that it has a mission to enlighten, civilize, bring order and democracy, and that it uses force only as a last resort. And, sadder still, there always is a chorus of willing intellectuals to say calming words about benign or altruistic empires, as if one shouldn't trust the evidence of one's eyes watching the destruction and the misery and death brought by the latest mission civilizatrice” Edward Said, *Orientalism*.

In 1830, France, angered by what she perceived as an impolite and irresponsible behavior towards her ambassador, made the decision to invade Algeria, where she remained until June 5, 1962. The war that broke on November 1, 1954, lasted for eight years and cost much blood, 1.5 million killed. For some time, after independence, the idea that colonialism was a harmful and damaging system stood too clear for dispute. Presently, however, Western colonialism, in general, and French one, in particular, is reassessed with the view to rehabilitate its image. In this light, the idea which is being spread and that seems to gain swift ground lies in that both colonists and Indigenous unquestionably did, to a given extent, benefit from it. To put it simply, the ongoing idea is about a role that was far from being negative

Well before the invasion and during the colonization of Algeria, the French authorities invited myriad writers, poets, anthropologists, and architects to get in touch with the would-be colony.

The assigned mission was to thoroughly study and report on the land and its inhabitants with peculiar emphasis on strengths and weaknesses. The overall picture that resulted from the reports was, broadly speaking, a land “awaiting an organizing genius who could make France reap the fruits of its unexploited and dormant resources” (Gastineau 11). As per the inhabitants, the picture showed a “strange, childish population having remained primitive as in the birth of races” (de Maupassant). Notwithstanding the presumed primitiveness, these authorities dismissed the idea that the natives would easily acquiesce to a foreign presence. The need for a pretext, and in the course of time, justification of the enterprise would embark on becoming a compelling need.

The pretext occurred further to what is commonly known as “the fly swatter affair.” Famine, a far reaching consequence of the isolation staged by the Coalition (Austria, Prussia, Russia, and England) against Napoleon Bonaparte plagued not only his army but also the French population. The alternative was to seek the help of the Dey of Algiers who, in turn, instructed two Algerian Jews, Jacob Bacri and Naphtali Busnach (Ben Moses), to be in charge of the delivery of wheat. It was no randomly choice.

Unlike many coreligionists, Bacri and Busnach belonged to Algeria’s privileged class. Busnach, for instance, became banker of the Dey, controller of the Algerian Treasury, and monopolist of the ongoing trade thanks to a firm he had set up, *Bacri & Busnach*. This status secured him a nickname, “the viceroy of Algiers”, but cost him his life. For the janissaries, if any person had to be accountable for the hunger they were suffering from, it was Busnach; they killed him.

The exports of wheat to France lasted for six years, 1792-1798. The debt, interest included, totaled 24 million French francs. Part of it was reimbursed to *Bacri-Busnach* and their heirs. The Dey, as creditor of the firm, neither received money nor was informed by Bacri-Busnach they obtained some payment. The nine successive Deys’ request for reimbursement remained a dead letter. Furthermore, France’s refusal to discharge and her attempt to fortify without any permission a commercial warehouse in La Calle (today El Kala, a small town near the Tunisian border), led Hussein III to summon on April 30, 1827, the French consul, Pierre Deval. After a stormy discussion, he hit the consul with his fly swatter.

It is worthy to note that in an age of expansion, the fashion demanded for theorists who preached and legitimized colonization. Any writing that undertook to denounce it was regarded as history. To borrow from the French theorist Benjamin Constant, a fierce adversary of imperial expansion, in that age it appeared necessary that “Any authority that....wish[ed] to embark upon vast conquests [was] condemned to seek vain and scandalous lies” (Constant 33). To that intent, this authority relied on figures that enjoyed great fame like, to name a few, Alexis de Tocqueville, Victor Hugo, and Jules Ferry.

De Tocqueville who penned *Democracy in America* visited Algeria twice; in 1837 and 1841. After his first visit, he wrote that there actually existed good prospects of seeing the new colony consist of one all-embracing people after marriage between French and Arabs, and it goes without saying, one territory that would secure undisputable glory to France. To back, he wrote that “nothing in the known facts show[ed him] disparity between Arabs and us. On the contrary [he saw] them, in time of peace, intermingle, and as they know each other better, they come closer” (Tocqueville 13). As per the land, he pointed out that France “had to face but natural difficulties and the opposition of small barbaric tribes that inhabit it...” Consequently, she had to do her utmost to remain in Algeria. In case, she withdrew, she would lose, in addition to

resources, her glory. In short, he made it plain that “Anyone people that easily abandons what it has taken hold of and peaceably withdraws apparently enters the period of its decline (Tocqueville, Travail 4).

To avoid such a period, there was need for a binary, colonizer-colonized. One founder of post-colonialism, the Tunisia-born, Albert Memmi, in his *Portrait du colonisé, précédé du portrait du colonisateur* (1957) dealt with this binary. In the latter, Memmi explains that the colonizer as usurper, either extolled his merits and in so doing, suggested he deserved a reward: colonization, or showed the unworthiness of the “Other” who subsequently deserved to be colonized (Memmi 72-73). In the course of time, de Tocqueville undertook to show that the natives were unworthy of Algeria and called for a scorched-earth policy. To those who disagreed, he said:

I have often heard men whom I respect, but with whom I do not agree, find it wrong that we burn harvests, that we empty silos, and finally that we seize unarmed men, women, and children. These, in my view, are unfortunate necessities, but ones any people who want to wage war on the Arabs are obliged to submit to (Tocqueville, Travail 15).

Contrarily to de Tocqueville, the author of *Les Misérables*, Victor Hugo, chose another approach. “Civilization”, he contended, was more appropriate since colonization was a dirty job that “had to be done by others” notes Prof. Franck Laurent in *Victor Hugo face à la conquête de l'Algérie* (2001). On May 18, 1879, hosting a dinner celebrating the abolition of slavery, he invited one of his guests, Victor Schoelcher, to take the floor. Schoelcher told the audience that when Victor Hugo spoke, his voice rang throughout the world to “bring enlightenment to populations still living in infancy and to teach them [his] liberty and the horror of slavery” (Victor Hugo; Oeuvres 122).

For Victor Hugo, central to the meeting he was organizing stood the betterment of the human race, whose destiny was in the South. At this juncture, he felt that it was time the Old World changed into a New World. He grounded his stance in the dissimilarity between the two sides of the Mediterranean; they were utterly uneven. On one side, he stressed, lay civilization; on the other, barbarism. He rooted the latter in the existence of a big obstacle, Africa, “a bloc of sand and ashes, this lifeless and passive heap, which for six thousand years has hampered the universal march” (125). He also drew the attention of his audience to the fact that all of Asia and America had their history, even Australia; Africa had none. Lacking history and belonging to no one, he concluded that France had a legitimate right to seize it. The advantage was twofold: solve Europe’s problems, on the one hand, and help the Indigenous benefit from enlightenment, on the other hand.

This wild Africa has but two aspects: inhabited it is barbarism; uninhabited; it’s wilderness. Let’s hope the breath of the nineteenth century will be felt in those regions...The White has made of the Black a man; Europe will make of Africa a World. Go people, seize this land. Take it. Take from whom? From no one. Take it from God. God gave it to men; God offers Africa to Europe...At once, solve your social problems; change your proletarians into land owners; build roads; ports, cities, grow; colonize it (125).

But that was doing without an ever-growing hostility to the so-called civilizing mission. Victor Hugo, it is true, criticized his government of having failed in its civilizing mission and of not having been capable of doing the dirty job of colonization but held the Indigenous most accountable for the failure. And like de Tocqueville, he demanded for ruthlessness:

France, for instance, will hardly know how to colonize and will succeed with difficulty....Strange thing to say but true though. What France is short of in Algiers is a little bit of inhumanity. The Turks moved faster, more securely, and further; they knew how to behead. The first thing that strikes the savage is not sense but might. England has it; so does Russia; France does not have it (Victor Hugo; *En Voyage* 274).

Five years after the meeting, on July 28, 1885, a member of parliament, Jules Ferry, addressed the National Assembly. France, more than ever, in quest of new colonies had to fund her enterprise. It is no wonder then to see him tell the Low Chamber about the advantages of colonial expansion, which, he pointed out, was a system motivated by economic, political, and civilizing considerations. An access to new markets, presence, as more rival European were seeking the same, and the duty to civilize the barbarians, formed its core. Insofar as the civilizing mission is concerned, Ferry, a staunch believer in racial superiority, insisted on the importance of roles and duties of the civilized towards the uncivilized. He told the MPs: "Gentlemen, we must speak more loudly and more honestly! We must say openly that indeed the higher races have a right over the lower racesI repeat, that the superior races have a right because they have a duty. They have the duty to civilize the inferior races" (Ferry 1062-1065).

In passing, Ferry's speech underwent sharp criticism. Fiercely opposed to colonial expansion, appalled by a presumed existence of superior and inferior races and the need for a so-called civilizing mission, another MP, Georges Clemenceau, replied on July 30 saying in part:

That is in so many words, the thesis of Mr. Ferry, and we see the French government exercising its right on the inferior races by going to war against them and converting them by force to the benefits of civilization. Superior races! Inferior races! This is easily said. For my part, I singularly flap since I saw German scholars scientifically prove that France must be defeated in the French-Prussian War because the French are a race inferior to the German (Clemenceau 22).

The colonization of Algeria lasted for one hundred thirty-two years, 1830-1962. The day of independence, according to more or less reliable estimates, 800,000 Blackfeet, Jews included, and harkis (loyalists) were forced to leave. The choice was either "the suitcase or the coffin." The suitcase meant to leave Algeria with a few belongings; the latter to be shot dead and sent to France in a coffin.

Prior to their forced departure a military organization, the Secret Army Organization (OAS) was created with the aim to keep Algeria French. Its slogan was the OAS "hits whenever and wherever it wants." President Charles de Gaulle's will to withdraw was irreversible and all outlawed members of the OAS who did not succeed in escaping were put under house arrest.

But be they repatriated, individuals under house arrest, or harkis, their yearning for *Paradise Lost* and paradise left stands omnipresent. The determination of the former settlers to put to the fore and to stress their contribution to the building of Algeria; the determination of the harkis to put to the fore and to stress their contribution to defend French interests in Algeria, induced both to convince a number of MPs to act for their cause.

Their outcome crystallized in having the French Assembly implement a piece of legislation aiming at rehabilitating the role of colonization. Thus, a law about teaching the glory of colonialism was passed on February 23, 2005. Art IV, Paragraph 2, requested that high school teachers teach the “positive values” of colonialism to their pupils; it read:

The academic research programs give to the history of French presence overseas, and in North Africa, in particular, the place which it deserves.

School curricula recognize in particular the positive role of French presence overseas, notably in North Africa, and give to the history and to the sacrifices of the army stemming from these territories the eminent place to which they are entitled.

The cooperation allowing the getting in touch with available oral and written resources in France and abroad is encouraged.

French historians; more than one thousand signed a petition, criticized the government for its interference in teaching. The motto was: “Colonization, no to teaching an official history.” Pierre Vidal-Naquet, who spent most of his life denouncing colonialism and torture in Algeria, stressed that “It [was] not up to the state to say how history should be taught.” The French-Jew Vidal-Naquet was one of the signatories of the *The Manifesto of the 121*, [Le Manifeste des 121] also known as the *Declaration on the Right of Insubordination in the Algerian War* [Déclaration du droit à l’insubordination dans la guerre d’Algérie].

The Manifesto, the work of Dionys Mascolo, Maurice Blanchot, and Jean Schuster was published on September 6, 1960. It was an address to the French government and the French people, whose attention was drawn to the fact a real war was taking place; torture widespread, and those French who had given a helping hand commonly called “*The Suitcase Bearers*” deserved respect, not indictment. Regarding the harkis and the former members of the OAS, Article XIII stated:

Can ask for the profit of a fixed compensation the French people the date of the publication of the present law having been subjected, in direct relation with the events of Algeria during the period of October 31st , 1954 till July 3rd, 1962, to convictions or pardoned penalties, administrative measures of eviction, internment or house arrest....

The analysts saw in this an article a gesture aiming at rehabilitating the OAS former members and the harkis (loyalists) although they had been the ones, against de Gaulle’s decision, to try to stop independence and thereby attempt to save “their French Algeria.” In fact, the colonists never accepted independence since they always saw Algeria but as an extension of France and have never given up calling it a French department (un département français). Gaulle’s decision to accept to enter into negotiations with the National Liberation Front (FLN) led a number of generals to stage a coup, the Generals’ putsch (Le Putsch des Généraux) that ultimately led to their indictment. Those who escaped, like Raoul Salan, founded the OAS.

The Algerian authorities perceived this piece of legislation as a deliberate move aiming at minimizing the role and the impact of colonization. Displacement of populations, land dispossession, torture, and 1.5 million killed during the war seemed to have been deliberately overshadowed. Algeria's president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, on a visit to Constantine (western Algeria), seized the opportunity to restate the facts; he declared: "colonization undertook genocide of our identity; our history; our language, and our traditions" (Sabri).

The controversial article was short-lived. Given the unprecedented discontent it bred, President Jacques Chirac resolved that it was time "to find the way back to harmony; the nation must gather round its History" (Le Figaro 14). And the way to harmony had not to pass through an amendment but rather through an outright repeal. Some hailed his decision; "the right decision in front of the re-opening of wounds within the French society." Others, like the leader of the *Movement for France*, Philippe de Villiers, viewed it as "a shame for all the repatriated and the harkis who see their honor thrown overboard for the second time" for this "retreat is but one of a long series of disavowals; we celebrate Trafalgar rather than Austerlitz; we prefer the FLN to the French army" (Le Figaro 14). sadder still, there always is a chorus of willing intellectuals to say calming words about benign or altruistic empires,

Nostalgia for *Paradise Lost* is in no manner a one-way approach for "sadder still, there always is a chorus of willing intellectuals to say calming words about benign or altruistic empires." The French intellectual, Jean-Paul Sartre, stood against the idea that there existed good colonists and bad ones and warned

Against what might be called 'neo-colonialist mystification.' Neo-colonialists think that there are some good colonists and some very wicked ones.... it is not true that there are some good colonists and others who are wicked. There are colonists and that is it. When we have understood that, we will understand why the Algerians are right to attack.... (Sartre, Situations 125).

Other intellectuals demand for a reassessment of colonialism as it will serve as a stepping stone to a better future. Bruce Gilley, in *The Case for Colonialism*, condones this system and even suggests reclaiming it.

The three first is to replicate as far as possible the colonial governance; the second s to recolonise some areas. Western countries should be encouraged to hold power in specific governance areas (public finances, say, or criminal justice) in order to jump-start enduring reforms in weak states. Rather than speak in euphemisms about 'shared sovereignty' or 'neo-trusteeship', such actions should be called 'colonialism' because it would embrace rather than evade the historical record. Thirdly, in some instances it may be possible to build new Western colonies from scratch (Gilley 1).

He is not the only one. Colonial nostalgia, which is moving along amnesia, induced an MP for South Derbyshire to "Empire Goes for Gold" and is reflective of such a yearning. All that remained for her to do was to add "Well done Team GB & all our Commonwealth friends, now

for the Trade Agreements....” (Wheeler 1) Some time earlier, French Interior Minister Claude Guéant’s “not all civilizations are of equal value” reminded of the duty to civilize the uncivilized.

Colonial nostalgia is in no manner a proper to former colonists and. It seems to be felt also across the Mediterranean and has come to be expressed in the very Algerian literature. The French-Algerian author, Boualem Sansal; in 1999 he was awarded the *Prix du Premier Roman* (début novel) for his book *Le serment des barbares* (the Oath of Barbarians), explained that France played an important role in that “she built Algeria, which presently carries France XIX century values. As to Algiers, it is a squatted city (Sansal 325). Far from criticizing the colonists, he lamented their departure. His opinion was that the Blackfeet, unlike Algeria’s natives, held this land dear to their hearts; he wrote: “It seems to me that forty years is an honest span of time to accept the idea that these damned colonists loved this land more than us who are its children (Sansal 375). Interviewed by the French daily, *Le Figaro*, if he felt nostalgic of French presence, he replied that he did as did eighty per cent of the Algerian population. He stressed, however, that this in no manner meant that he felt nostalgic of colonization. His feeling was that Algeria, despite undisputable inequalities, was, unlike today, a beautiful, well-administered country. Even more, this majority has even come to regret the departure of the Blackfeet for had they remained, we would have avoided this tragedy (Le Figaro 14).

In sum, having done their duty, having held dear this land, and having built it, is exclusive of any guilt. The true significance of colonialism is put to oblivion. In the case of Algeria, for the seventy-five percent of the population that compose it, is under twenty-five, born after independence, colonialism is an undeniable reality but confined to an imaginary; they did not watch “the destruction and the misery and death brought by the latest mission civilisatrice.”

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