



L'Algérie et la France: deux siècles d'histoire croisée

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BOOK REVIEW

L'Algérie et la France: deux siècles d'histoire croisée, by Gilbert Meynier, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2017, 100 + 8 iconographic pp., €12 (softcover), ISBN 978-2-343-12558-9

Le désordre colonial: l'Algérie à l'épreuve de la colonisation de peuplement, by Hosni Kitouni, preface by William Gallois, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2018, 286 pp., €29.50 (softcover), ISBN 978-2-343-14859-5

The French colonial legacy in Algeria remains a contentious theme in France, one that quite often finds its way into the interstices of political debates. Since the end of the Algerian War in 1962, a central question has loomed over a significant segment of scholarship on this legacy: why did France lose Algeria? More recently, however, a growing number of works have begun focusing on the inverse question: why did France acquire Algeria as a colony? It seems that the receding immediacy of the need for interpretations of colonial disintegration has opened a wider historiographical vista before scholars, who are now increasingly interested in examining the longer history of French Algeria. The late Gilbert Meynier's *L'Algérie et la France: deux siècles d'histoire croisée* and Hosni Kitouni's *Le désordre colonial: l'Algérie à l'épreuve de la colonisation de peuplement* – published in L'Harmattan's La Bibliothèque de l'iReMMO and Histoire et Perspectives Méditerranéennes series, respectively – represent important recent contributions in this vein. Both authors study French Algeria over a longer period of time and seek to identify the generative forces that propelled the imperial entity into existence. Meynier and Kitouni generally converge in their view of imperialism as a tragic and ironic endeavour – one that led to indescribable human misery in the name of an elusive, utopic progress. But there are important divergences in their perspectives as well. Meynier's is a much shorter text that reads like a manifesto, and it focuses heavily on the twentieth century and both imperial seduction and violence, while Kitouni focuses on the nineteenth century and offers a fine-grained reconstruction of the multiple forms of violence exerted by the colonial state.

In the first part of his book, Meynier observes that French Algeria was a settlement colony, attributing the 1830 conquest to a nationalist revanchism that had been surging since the 1815 defeat at Waterloo. Meynier claims that the myth of French racial superiority also stemmed from the French nationalist imaginary, which included an 'anti-Southern racism' aimed at the *pièdes-noirs* – and to which the latter reacted by adopting a 'compensatory anti-Algerian racism' (15). The second part of the book describes the exploitive, discriminatory, and violent nature of the colonial system, stressing the French state's unwillingness to adequately address the Algerians' growing demands for political rights. Even by 1947, Meynier observes, the following political equation held sway: eight Algerians for one French citizen. According to Meynier, the French government did not

really attempt to stop the violence during the 1950s because of such deeply entrenched colonialist norms. In the third part, Meynier considers Algerian history from the perspective of *longue durée* and foregrounds Algeria's liminal position as a segmented society (especially when contrasted with Morocco) of the middle Maghreb, one deeply marked by an anti-statist reflex due to the multiple invasions and the successive impositions of state structures from the outside since the Roman period.

The fourth part of the book contains a dialectical analysis that highlights the interlacing of imperial violence with imperial seduction. To be sure, Meynier here repeats that the French conquest had an overwhelmingly negative impact on Algerian society, but he complicates this observation by listing, among others, the following fragments: Ferhat Abbas's French press conferences in Cairo, the participation of the Emir 'Abd al-Qādir's grandson, Khālid al-Hāshimī, in the French army during World War I, Ahmed Ben Bella's combat on the French side at Monte Cassino during World War II, and the centrality of the Parisian political milieu in the development of Algerian nationalism. In the conclusion, Meynier characterises Algeria as a country with a 'double identification' (57), which oscillates between the Islamic and Arab East and the French North. He ends the book by calling for a reconciliatory Franco-Algerian historiography that follows the Franco-German model of writing a common history without focusing on the selective celebration of imperialism or demanding repentance for colonial misdeeds.

Kitouni's *Le désordre colonial* broadly overlaps with the first two parts of *L'Algérie et la France* chronologically and thematically, as well as in terms of the overarching argument. In the introduction, Kitouni explains that his 'book is a history of the programmed failure of settlement colonisation, which everywhere produced chaos' (19). In the first part, he claims that the French were the first proponents of settlement colonialism in the Mediterranean, and he lists some of the well-known arguments used by those who embraced this vision: a Malthusian concern for the management of France's demography; the rumoured fertility of the Algerian soil, a view supported by Algeria's history as Rome's granary; as well as the need to address France's 'social question' (31). Kitouni then argues that the view of colonial settlements-*qua*-panacea dominated within the upper echelons of the French army, and he claims that the existing historiography has failed to adequately acknowledge the presence of this ideological commitment to settlements during the early colonial period. In his view, the planned settlements amounted to 'fantasies in the guise of a colonial programme' (55) and he describes one of the chief proponents of this programme, Bertrand Clauzel, as the 'illusionist-in-chief' (37). The second part of *Le désordre colonial* describes colonial warfare as a tool of settlement colonialism. According to Kitouni, French generals aimed not only to defeat their local enemies, but also to render impossible indigenous community-building. This destructive vision, Kitouni claims, underpinned the cruelty of colonial wars and led French officers to justify their reliance on 'unbridled violence, devoid of all affect' (81), including massacres, punishing razzias, and the infamous *enfumades*, which Kitouni considers 'localized exterminations' (110).

In the third part, Kitouni addresses sequester and dispossession as additional tools of settlement colonialism. He notes that French officers generally sought to take lands and properties away from the indigenous population and then grant them to European settlers. Kitouni points out that between 1841 and 1851, the colonial authorities created forty-two centres of colonisation and granted 101,675 hectares of concessions to the settlers. The fourth part of *L'Algérie et la France* details the ethnic logic that underpinned colonial taxation. Dispossession of their land and properties, the indigenous population faced a 'predatory tax system' (226) that imposed great burdens on them and granted them few benefits, while the European population enjoyed the inverse: lower taxes and greater benefits. For example, after 1870, an average family earning 240 francs annually had to pay 193.70 francs in various taxes and was left with 28.30 francs for the year. Moreover, Kitouni cites an 1891 study which shows that municipal spending amounted to 7.84 francs per inhabitant for Europeans and 0.16 francs for the indigenous population. In the conclusion, Kitouni stresses that settlement colonialism resulted in the creation of an overprotected, favoured European minority and an overexploited, oppressed indigenous majority. He ends the book with Frantz Fanon's estimation that colonial violence would generate anti-colonial violence, as well as a quote from an indigenous notable's prediction that the French would be forced out of Algeria just like the Turks, even if they remained in the colony as long as the latter.

Although *L'Algérie et la France* and *Le désordre colonial* in many ways echo each other in describing the imperial order in Algeria as an oppressive system that engendered the seeds of its own destruction, the two narratives serve slightly different purposes. Kitouni's poignant, fine-grained study focuses mainly on the period between 1830 and 1900, and his main aim consists of painstakingly reconstructing the ways in which various forms of colonial violence led to the establishment of a settlement colony and the concurrent and inevitable emergence of an anti-imperial movement. Meynier's narrative includes this perspective as well, but he complements it by pointing out that French imperialism was both a destructive and seductive force, and that historical tragedy does not preclude the possibility – even if only a remote possibility – of historiographical catharsis. In other words, where Kitouni sees stark contrasts, Meynier often detects at least some ambivalence. For Kitouni, for instance, indigenous notables who worked for the French administration did so due to the threat of violence, but for Meynier, they at times fought on the French side simply because of a desire to do so. Yet despite these divergent views, Kitouni and Meynier generally describe the long arc of French imperial history in Algeria as tragic. And although it is at times difficult to reconcile their views on those who joined the French camp after 1830, there is much original work that could emerge from an emphasis on the tension between Kitouni's stress on stark contrasts and Meynier's focus on the fluidity of colonial loyalties. In fact, a wider set of studies on this tension could help us reassess the history of colonial and post-colonial Algeria more broadly.

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