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## Theoretical foundations: Settler colonialism and colonial urbanism

Not one in a hundred books of colonial history is scientifically honest [scientifiquement honnête].

– Charles-André Julien<sup>1</sup>

There is a historiographical debate over colonial Algeria which mirrors the personal and private one, a debate which revolves essentially around the nature and consequences of French colonialism in Algeria. The end of French rule and the beginning of Algerian independence are still so close, achieved in such a violent paroxysm of decolonization and national liberation, that the literature on Algeria suffers from the bane of so much contemporary history: too much personal polemic and not enough dispassionate analysis, too much in the way of historical myth and too little historical fact, too much reading the present into the past and too little consideration of the past on its own terms. Paradoxically, the fact that it has proven so damnably difficult to move beyond one-sided presentations testifies not only to the strong emotions aroused but also to the importance of the issues involved. All of which only serves to underscore the necessity for a history of colonial Algeria which transcends ideological *parti pris*.

### *Colonial Algeria*

As a first attempt to characterize the corpus of colonial Algerian historiography, consider the typology put forth by one scholar, who distinguishes four overlapping but discernible groups, each representing a more or less distinct interpretive approach.<sup>2</sup> First, there are the colonialist historians and colonial apologists, who were virtually the only writers on Algerian history until the 1930 centenary of French rule, and who dominated the field right up to the end of *Algérie française*. Known collectively as the “Ecole d’Alger” because centered at the University

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of Algiers, this group of French humanists, social scientists, and publicists included E. F. Gautier, George Marçais, Christian Courtois, Roger Le Tourneau, Stéphane Gsell, Claude Martin, Julien Franc, and Pierre Boyer, among others. Beginning in about 1930 a second group emerged consisting of Muslims who wrote Algerian history from a distinctly Islamic point of view: Moubarek al-Mili, Tewfik al-Madani, and Abd al-Rahman.<sup>3</sup> At around the same time a cluster of French scholars began to take issue with the dominant colonialist historiography. This group of liberal colonialists, humanist in outlook and sympathetic to Algerian nationalism, includes several of the most widely respected French authorities of colonial Algeria: Marcel Emerit, Charles-André Julien, and more recently, Charles-Robert Ageron and André Nouschi. Lastly, there emerged during and after the struggle for independence a number of nationalist Algerian and French Marxist writers who largely superseded the earlier Islamicists comprising Mostefa Lacheraf, Mohamed Cherif Sahli, Djilali Sari, Mahfoud Kaddache, and Yves Lacoste.<sup>4</sup>

To highlight clearly the differences between these four groups, let us examine the representative colonialist and anticolonialist viewpoints concerning the successive colonizers of Algeria from the Phoenicians to the French. First of all, colonialist historians stress that earlier conquerors of Algeria – the Phoenicians, Romans, Arabs, Turks – were exploitative, alien invaders who so disrupted Algerian society that by 1830, when the French came, no Algerian “nation” could be said to exist (if there ever had been one). The anticolonialists counter that Algeria was indeed a nation prior to the French invasion, a highly developed, populous country with a high literacy rate. Moreover, they claim that the Phoenicians and Arabs cannot be considered colonizers in the ordinary sense of the word because the ease with which they were incorporated into the indigenous Berber society attests to their common racial and cultural features. The same argument of racial and cultural similarity is applied to the Turks. Although exploitative, they at least shared the same Islamic faith as the Arabs and Berbers they ruled.<sup>5</sup>

In the case of French colonialism, the debate hinges on the causes of the Algerian war. This issue is important for two reasons. First, it led directly to the collapse of the French Fourth Republic as a result of a military-settler uprising and precipitated de Gaulle’s return to power. Second, the Algerian Revolution has been exported as a revolutionary model throughout the Third World. Colonialist historians view the steps leading up to the 1954 outbreak as a series of missed opportunities, of failures to offer meaningful reforms in time, particularly the refusal to accept the French-educated Muslim elite, the *évolués*, as French citizens without restrictions. Where Julien emphasizes the proposed Blum-

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Violette bill of 1936 as a key turning point, Ageron stresses the Jonart reforms of 1919.<sup>6</sup> But anticolonialists such as Lacheraf and Sahli reject in toto the argument that there was ever a genuine possibility of Algerian-French rapprochement, arguing instead that the Muslims would never have accepted assimilation with France, and that independence was inevitable in the long run.<sup>7</sup>

The question of the potential for Algerian-French assimilation shades off into the related one of the French *oeuvre* in Algeria. French apologists and colonialist historians have been concerned primarily with French colonization rather than French colonialism, that is, with tracing the stages of French settlement, the creation of an infrastructure (roads, railroads, schools, ports, hospitals, sanitary facilities, public utilities, and the like), in short, with what the French so aptly term the *mise en valeur* of Algeria. The decades-long discussion over whether to colonize Algeria and how, the successes and failures in attracting migrants, the heroic aspects of the early colonizers in taming Algeria and the Algerians alike, the bloody campaigns waged by the French army against recalcitrant Muslim rebels – all these are characteristic colonialist themes. Inevitably the indigenous Arabs and Berbers are neglected, although ironically the sources for the history of the Algerians since 1830 consist primarily of materials collected, annotated, and translated into French by French linguists, ethnographers, archeologists, and sociologists.

The anticolonialists rebut this view, arguing that even if the French are primarily responsible for laying the groundwork for a modern society, a vastly disproportionate amount of the benefits accrued not to the Algerians but to the French. Even more important, these historians point out that the effects of the French presence on Algerian society and culture – the systematic neglect if not outright attack on the Islamic religion, the refusal to provide for Arabic education, the progressive impoverishment of the Algerian *fellah* (peasant), the expropriation and exploitation of the best arable land and forests, the destruction or cooptation of the indigenous elite – were nothing short of catastrophic. The Front de Libération Nationale (NLF) goes still further and charges that the French were guilty of depersonalization, deculturation, enforced resettlement, and in some cases even of genocide.<sup>8</sup>

Although more recent work mostly continues these themes and debates, there has been one significant historiographical development. In 1954, at the beginning of the end of *Algérie française*, Marcel Emerit could write that “The history of Algeria since 1830 has been based, almost exclusively, on French documents and studied from a European point of view [*dans un esprit d’Européen*].”<sup>9</sup> Today it could be said that the sources remain essentially the same, but the viewpoint is no longer primarily Eurocentric, that there is a greater sensitivity to the ideological

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biases and distortions inherent in the historical record. For parallel to the historical decolonization of the Third World has been a less sweeping decolonization of historiography about the Third World. One of the key developments here has been the rise of what can be termed the “colonial sociology of knowledge,” and within the field colonial Algeria has been the focus of a disproportionately large amount of work.<sup>10</sup>

The colonial sociology of knowledge can be defined as a hermeneutic approach to reading the vast corpus of European writings about Third World peoples, an interpretive exegesis of colonialist bias in the sources of our knowledge about the Third World. Central to this area of inquiry are Pierre Bourdieu’s conception of *champ scientifique/champ politique*, scientific field/political field, and Michel Foucault’s analogous notion of power/knowledge, as filtered down through Edward Said.<sup>11</sup> Summarily stated, the intention of the colonial sociology of knowledge is to demonstrate how the scholar who generates knowledge and the knowledge which results are inextricably connected, that since the knower is not objective, neither is his knowledge. A good example is the historical myth propounded by the French that the Berbers were more assimilable than the Arabs. Now, a Berber is not an Arab, but it is no coincidence that by overstating their differences intellectually French scholars contributed a rationale for French administrators to practice classic divide-and-rule politics, the better to colonize both Arab and Berber.<sup>12</sup> Although the colonial sociology of knowledge suggests a way through the historiographical underbrush, the actual path remains largely to be cleared.<sup>13</sup>

In all this historiographical discussion, one may ask where are the *pièdes noirs*, the European settlers of Algeria? After all, they were the ones primarily responsible for the physical development of Algeria, they were the ones with whom the Algerians came into daily contact rather than the French of the *métropole*, and it was they who in collusion with the French army toppled the Fourth Republic. Amazingly enough, however, they have elicited little historiographical controversy from either side of the ideological barricades. It is almost as if their presence in the Algerian tragedy was a fact too big to be seen; there from the beginning of *Algérie française*, they finished by being taken for granted.

Throughout the historiographical literature the struggle for hegemony in Algeria is depicted as a two-way battle waged between the French on one side and the Algerians on the other. The polemic conducted between Xavier Yacono, author of a highly considered regional study of Algerian colonization and a convinced supporter of French Algeria, and Charles-Robert Ageron on the occasion of the publication of the latter’s monumental *doctorat d’état* is indicative in this regard.<sup>14</sup> In his review of Ageron’s book, Yacono propounds two main theses. The first

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is that metropolitan French indifference and not simply *colon* (colonist) resistance accounts for how events turned out in Algeria. The second is that the *colons* did not form a unitary bloc, that the conflict was not simply between metropolitan French liberals and reactionary *pieds noirs*, but instead that there was a small but vociferous liberal minority among the settlers. Ageron counters that the notion that France was indifferent to the fate of colonial Algeria is simply not an “objective observation,” that it is nothing but the old settler complaint that France hindered Algerian industrialization and exploited its population, both European and Muslim, and second, that in the course of fifteen years spent studying the 1870 – 1919 period he has never encountered this liberal *pied noir* group.<sup>15</sup>

What is striking about this exchange is the inability of either author to break out of the intellectual straitjacket which has so far constricted the debate over colonial Algeria. Yacono still mistakes isolated individuals for a cohesive, well-defined group,<sup>16</sup> while Ageron is still unable to see that for all the French efforts at Algerian reform the result was virtually nil, that “the history of Algeria cannot be written according to its laws: its history is the manner in which the French of Algeria have gotten around them.”<sup>17</sup> As a matter of fact, Ageron’s disclaimer that he minimized the role of the European settlers rings hollow.<sup>18</sup> Nowhere, for example, does he follow up his observation that French colonialism in Algeria constituted “a force of implantation rarely attained in other colonies.”<sup>19</sup> For throughout his massive study the settlers are treated as a *donnée*, a given. They are everywhere referred to, but nowhere actually scrutinized and fleshed out.<sup>20</sup> And this despite the fact that the *pieds noirs* briefly occupy center stage in Ageron’s saga during the key 1898 crisis, which is admittedly the climax of his entire study. In the last analysis, therefore, Ageron fails to accord the *pieds noirs* a position commensurate with the role they played in the Algerian drama.

Moreover, Algerian historians have evidenced even less interest in the settlers than French historians, for reasons which Jean-Claude Vatin explains.

Algeria is preoccupied more with denying its colonial history, in the same fashion that colonial history had denied it [Algeria] previously. [Thus,] it is not the action of the colonizer who has *determined* Algeria, it is [Algeria] which has *reconstituted* itself. . . . The history of the Algerian people, of the Algerian nation, owes nothing to anyone. In short, Algeria has become a *historical subject* by its own forces.

*Retour violent du bâton.* Previously the Arabs “obscured” Algeria in the eyes of the French. Now it is the French who, by their occupation, have obscured the true Algeria in the eyes of the Algerians.<sup>21</sup>

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And among the French colonizers, who played a more important role day in and day out than the *pieds noirs*?

Yet the fact that the settlers comprise a third significant force in addition to the metropolitan French and Muslim Algerians has been recognized throughout the history of colonial Algeria, although never systematically analyzed. No less a committed colonialist than Jules Ferry, for example, criticized “*l’état d’esprit of the colon vis-à-vis the vanquished people*: it is difficult to make the European *colon* understand that there exists other rights besides his in an Arab land,” and that “the indigenous people are not at his beck and call.” Ferry concluded that France should act as an arbiter in Algeria, in this land which was “necessarily given over to the conflict between two rival races,” and mediate between the European settlers on the one hand and the Algerians on the other.<sup>22</sup>

Astonishingly enough, however, Pierre Nora is the only historian to have written a study squarely focused on the *Français d’Algérie*.<sup>23</sup> Even his book, however, is not so much a work of history (it is not based on original research and is devoid of the usual scholarly apparatus) as a personal account written in a passionate, powerful style.<sup>24</sup> In Nora’s view there was never any real prospect of Algerian-French assimilation. Rather, he argues that in the very manner in which the settlers formed Algeria, they precluded any future evolution. “What they [the settlers] wanted in Algeria was Algeria; in the two forms they saw it: land and the Arab. By that, from the beginning and spontaneously, they installed themselves counter to any current of evolution, they blocked history.” Throughout their attitude was “take the land, take the people, contain history.” To the extent that this conflicted with official French policy in Algeria, “The French of Algeria have fought on two fronts: Algeria and the métropole.” Not simply the impact of a modern industrial civilization on a traditional peasant society, “the fundamental fact of the history of Algeria for 130 years [has been] the systematic if not premeditated desire of the conquering minority to not treat the traditional civilization of Algeria as a civilization, and yet for all that of taking advantage of its presence.”<sup>25</sup>

Nora pushes his critical analysis of the *pieds noirs* so far that he has been accused of engaging in polemics and lacking any human sympathy for the lot of the settlers.<sup>26</sup> But one thing which he fails to do is to treat them as one of three protagonists in a context of settler colonialism.

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*White men who live beside, but not among, a colored proletariat will insist that they cannot afford to deal in ethics that do not relate to that predicament. That they choose to stay in it is beside the point. They resent the social*



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*analyses that issue from a commentator's armchair, because they see in them only a menace to their own security, to preserve which is, and must always be, their first duty.* – A. P. Thornton<sup>27</sup>

That the presence of a sizeable settler population is an important factor in determining the nature and impact of colonialism in a given colonial situation has long been recognized. Likewise, the phrase “settler colonialism” turns up time and again in scholarly discourse as well as the mass media.<sup>28</sup> It is surprising, therefore, that no one to date has shown exactly how settlers are significant, or established satisfactorily settler colonialism as an important and legitimate subtype of imperialism and colonialism. On the one hand, the most common distinction made between imperialism and colonialism – terms too often used interchangeably in intellectual discourse – is that colonialism entails the presence of settlers while imperialism does not.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, the few studies that discuss settler colonialism as a separate category simply do not advance the discussion very far.<sup>30</sup> In short, settlers and settler colonialism are topics which everyone mentions but which no one pursues.

It is not in explicit discussions of settler colonialism that insights into this historical phenomenon are to be gained so much as in the literature pertaining to the plural society, internal colonialism, and to a lesser extent, the colonial situation.<sup>31</sup> A plural society is defined here as “one made up of a set of socially segregated subgroups sharing only the narrowest and most provisional of cultural consensuses.”<sup>32</sup> And the single best example of a plural society, the one in which its characteristics stand out in the boldest possible relief, is colonial society in general and a settler colony in particular. That this is so follows naturally from the way in which the concept was developed. J. S. Furnivall first used the term to describe the colonial societies of South and Southeast Asia, especially Burma and Indonesia, which he observed firsthand during the interwar period. For Furnivall a plural society was one in which a European colonizing minority lived alongside an indigenous colonized majority with, in addition, intervening ethnic or racial groups which provided labor that the Europeans and natives either would or could not perform themselves.<sup>33</sup>

A corollary of the plural society idea is the notion that in such societies there exists a dual economy consisting of a “bazaar economy . . . in which the total flow of commerce is fragmented into a very great number of unrelated person-to-person transactions” and a “firm-centered economy . . . where trade and industry occur through a set of impersonally defined social institutions which organize a variety of specialized occupations with respect to some particular product or distributive end.”<sup>34</sup>

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The plural society concept was later picked up by M. G. Smith who applied it to the primarily postcolonial and mixed European, African, creole, and East Indian Caribbean society which he studied as an anthropologist in the British West Indies.<sup>35</sup> More recently, the concept has been extended to societies elsewhere, especially to Africa, by Smith and Leo Kuper among others.<sup>36</sup> Yet at the same time that the plural society idea has been applied more widely, its theoretical content has been watered down. Thus it has been argued that other societies and not simply colonial societies are plural in nature, that there is not always a foreign minority dominating an indigenous majority, and that a plural society engenders consensus rather than conflict between its members.<sup>37</sup> However these issues are resolved, the narrow definition of a plural society has the advantage, for my purposes, of providing a model of multiethnic and multiracial colonial societies relevant especially to settler colonies.

Internal colonialism is a second concept which bears certain family resemblances to settler colonialism. It differs from other varieties of colonialism insofar as the “colonizers” occupy the same territory as the “colonized.” But whereas settler colonialism applies to an actual colonial situation, internal colonialism is used figuratively to describe situations with certain colonial features. In fact, the characteristics of an internal colony sound very similar to those of a plural society: economic and social dualism, plus what one writer calls a “cultural division of labor” in which “objective cultural distinctions are superimposed upon class lines.”<sup>38</sup> The concept of internal colonialism was used first by Lenin and then Gramsci, but it has been elaborated more fully by writers on Latin America to account for relations between Indians and *ladinos*. It has been extended more recently to the relationship of ethnic, cultural, national, or racial groups within societies such as blacks in the United States and South Africa, and the Irish in Great Britain. At the same time, it has been criticized on the same grounds as the plural society, namely, that it emphasizes race and ethnicity over socioeconomic class.<sup>39</sup> However, the main drawback of internal colonialism for my purposes here is that it does not fit the case of colonial Algeria: although the European settlers occupied the same territory as the Algerians, Algeria was not an internal colony run by the *pieds noirs*, but a French colony ruled ultimately by France despite substantial local control by the settlers. Moreover, internal colonialism represents a diluted version of the plural society notion – colonial analogies without colonial actualities.

The closest French analogue to the plural society and internal colonialism concepts is the much less well-developed notion of the colonial situation. Georges Balandier is chiefly responsible for articulating this approach, by which he means to stress simply the primacy of the colonial



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context itself in shaping and determining a given colonial experience.<sup>40</sup> Thus he diverts attention away from the colonizing country and towards the colony itself, and in particular to the relations between the various social groups in the colony. Given the bias in colonial historiography towards the *métropole* rather than the colonies and towards colonial politics and doctrines rather than colonial practice, this represents a noteworthy advance.<sup>41</sup> Otherwise, however, the analysis of the colonial situation corresponds almost exactly to that of the plural society narrowly defined.<sup>42</sup> For my purposes, moreover, the disadvantage of the colonial situation, at least in Balandier's formulation, is that he fails to distinguish settler colonial situations from others.<sup>43</sup> Yet clearly the colonial situation per se is even more important in settler colonies than in others. In any case, it is worth noting that no one has studied colonial Algeria from the standpoint of the plural society, internal colonialism, or the colonial situation.<sup>44</sup>

Now in my view settler colonialism shares certain features with the concepts of the plural society narrowly defined and the colonial situation, but it differs from them both in arguing that settler colonialism is a discrete form of colonialism legitimate in its own right. For what distinguishes it so clearly from other varieties of colonialism is that whereas in the majority of colonial situations there are two primary groups involved – temporary migrants from the colonizing country (colonial administrators, military personnel, merchants and traders, missionaries) and the indigenous people – in settler colonies the settlers constitute a third group. It is not simply the existence of settlers which makes a difference, but rather the implications and consequences which result from their presence that is significant.<sup>45</sup> Obviously, the chief characteristic distinguishing settlers from other temporary migrants is rooted in the life choice they have made to live in the colony. Admittedly, there is a fuzzy, borderline area here consisting of “crossovers”: those agents of colonialism who come temporarily and decide to stay permanently, on the one hand, and those settlers who decide not to stay and leave rapidly, on the other. Yet this flux – one could almost say that it is inherent in the colonial situation – should not obscure for us the fundamental life choice which sets off settlers from others and from which so many other characteristic attitudes and attributes stem. For example, from the settlers' perspective we can see why land and access to it is even more important in settler colonies than in others, and also why it is so often remarked that colonial officials are paternalistic when it is a case of protecting “their” natives from rapacious, land-hungry settlers.<sup>46</sup>

One implication of this view of settler colonialism is that the formation of settler society – its emergence, growth, and coming to group consciousness – can be charted in the same way as that of any other social

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group. Whether we single out settler subgroups such as tea planters in Sri Lanka, rubber planters in Malaysia or Indonesia, tobacco growers in Zambia, cattle farmers in Kenya, wine growers in Algeria, or settler societies in their entirety, the particular determinants of life and work which make these individuals members of historically definite groups also implies that we can elucidate the core ideas, the underlying *mentalité*, around which they cohere and organize their existence.<sup>47</sup> A corollary is that to fully understand the settlers in their historical context, they need to be considered in relation to the other two main groups with which they come into contact in the colonial situation.<sup>48</sup>

It follows from the very manner in which a settler society is formed that stratification is based more on race and ethnicity than on socioeconomic class.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, the maximum points of friction occur where ethnic and racial divisions are exacerbated by socioeconomic ones; in other words, for those at the top of indigenous society and at the bottom of settler society, or in sociological terms, for high-achieving non-Europeans and low-achieving Europeans. It is not surprising, therefore, that in the case of colonial Algeria it was the French-educated Algerian elite, the *évolués*, and the European “poor white trash,” the *petits blancs*, who experienced the greatest status anxiety. To be sure, within the various ethnic and racial groupings a class-based hierarchy forms. But Marxists generally err in attributing the fact workers fail to perceive that common economic bonds transcend ethnic and racial divisions to false consciousness on the part of the working classes.<sup>50</sup>

In terms of historical development, I would argue that a settler colony passes through a series of discrete stages. During the period of colonization conflicts emerge between the settlers and the colonial administration chiefly over native policy, but these are generally papered over. Invariably the settlers want more land, sooner, and on better terms than the administration is willing to grant them. Likewise, those segments of the colonial administration which intervene between the settlers and indigenous population often acquire a paternalistic attitude vis-à-vis “their” natives. When it comes to the crunch, however, the colonial officials and administrators side with the settlers. In the case of colonial Algeria, for example, Nora notes the apparent paradox whereby “the *métropole* always disapproves of the *Français d’Algérie* and always defends them. Whatever they do, they are ours. . . .”<sup>51</sup> This is not a contradiction, I would contend, but rather inherent in the settler colonial situation. Later, however, during the period of decolonization when colonialism has bred a native nationalist reaction, the indigenous people emerge as a third force capable of driving a wedge between the settlers and the colonial power. It is precisely this three-sided conflict, therefore, which explains why decolonization is so much more violent in settler