

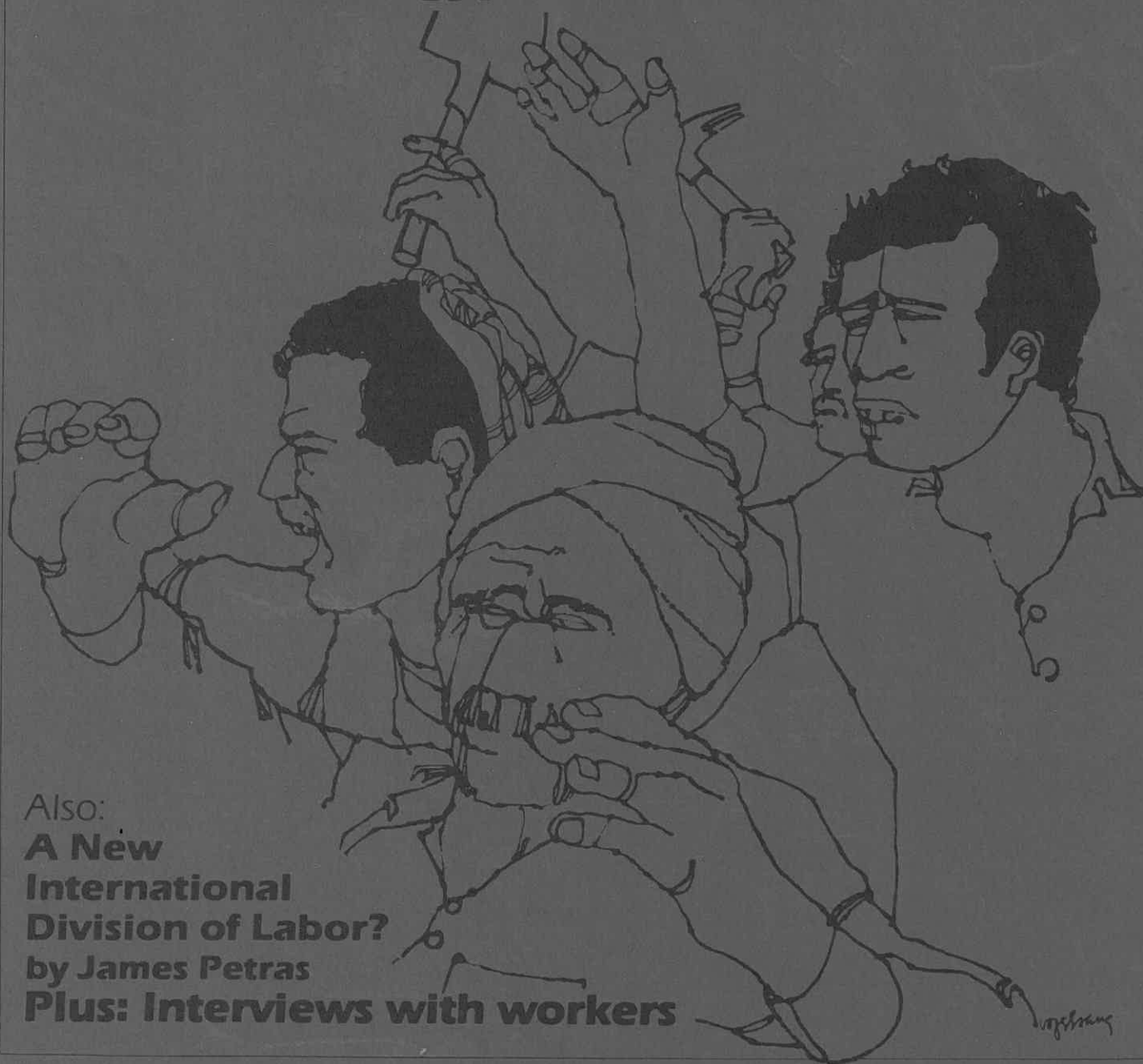
MERIP REPORTS

Middle East Research & Information Project

Origins of the Working Class in the Middle East

Algeria by Mahfoud Bennoune

Egypt by Joel Beinin



Also:
**A New
International
Division of Labor?**
by James Petras
Plus: Interviews with workers

No. 94/February 1981

\$2.00/85p



Credit: Revolution Afrique

North African workers in France.

Origins of the Algerian Proletariat

by Mahfoud Bennoune

In the first part of this essay, not included here, Bennoune notes that in precolonial Algeria's rural sector land was the basic factor of production, consisting of four predominant subsistence activities: agriculture, animal husbandry, fruit tree plantations and horticulture. Ecological conditions fostered a broad regional specialization of production. The precolonial rural population consisted of big landowners, peasant producers, and impoverished, landless cultivators. Both the economic structure and legal system regulating the property relations generated differential access to property before the French conquest.

All the urban classes—rulers, merchants, artisans—depended on the land for their food and primary raw materials. Diverse mercantile activities provided the material foundation of Algeria's precolonial urban centers, whose prosperity was maintained even with the shifting of trans-Saharan trade routes to the east up through the last decade of the 18th century. At that time European commercial aggressiveness resulted in complete Algerian loss of control of long-distance trade. The sharp decline of economic activity in the coastal cities had led to a drastic reduction of the urban population by 1830.

—Eds.

Algiers fell to French troops on July 5, 1830. A French traveler, Rozet, deplored the fact that in the suburbs of Algiers "all the houses that were not occupied by the officers were almost demolished; the doors and beams were taken to be used for fire."¹ By 1831, 30,000 inhabitants of Algiers had been either killed or exiled. Aristide Gilbert observed in the same year that "of a total of 5000 buildings; 3000 came under control of the state."² As a result of this systematic confiscation of urban property, "the owners, the majority of which were expropriated without any compensation, were reduced to begging."³ Those who were spared were eventually ruined by inflation, which was aggravated by the introduction of French currency: "We imported into Algeria a considerable volume of money. It soon chased away the local currency, which was declared not convertible."⁴ This harsh measure ushered in the process of proletarianization of the indigenous producers and traders. The increasing

inflow of European settlers further undermined local commerce. . . the removal of a large number of rich Moslems singularly diminished sales and profits; demolition for the purpose of straightening and widening the streets and the increase of rents, dealt a hard blow to the indigenous merchants.⁵

The worsening economic situation was described in 1846 by a military doctor in these terms:

Everything that one sees here upon arrival saddens the heart: an indigenous population reduced to the last degree of misery; an endless crowd of starving proletarians. . . the mauresque houses, so constructed as to be

From the outset, the military conquest of the Algerian cities was characterized by a degree of violence rare in the history of modern colonialism.

well ventilated with pure fresh air are disappearing every day. The fever of construction has gotten hold of the speculators.⁶

The socioeconomic consequence of military conquest was the rise of the Algerian proletariat. Many dispossessed and impoverished people had no other alternative but to hire out on a day-to-day basis. A large number became dockworkers in the port of Algiers, "whose lot does not appear to have been miserable before the occupation. . . many must have lost their resources as a result of the economic upheavals that followed the conquest of the city."⁷

After Algiers French colonization of the urban centers expanded to such other cities as Blida and Medea. When General Clauzel attempted to occupy the former, its inhabitants resisted. The general ordered his men to loot it and massacre its defenders. He noted that when he arrived he found the city "jammed with corpses, among which were those of the elderly, women, children, and Jews. All had been defenseless."⁸ In 1832 the Duc de Rovigo imposed a 200,000 piastre war tribute on Blida and Kolea. When the former refused to meet this demand, he let his soldiers loot it. When the troops arrived, they found the city deserted.

The next city to be conquered, Medea, the capital city of the province of Tittiri, was not only depopulated but eradicated. It was attacked and looted in 1830 and 1831 and finally occupied in 1836. General Ducrot, who participated in the earlier attack as a captain, wrote:

Medea was abandoned and the inhabitants have carried away everything. There must have been strong motives to force an entire population to emigrate in this fashion, because they are not nomads, but urbanites accustomed to leading a peaceful and easy life; people who abandoned their roofs, their paternal houses, left their property, their industry, in order to go wandering on the plains and maybe die of hunger.⁹

In 1841 Medea was found by Captain de Smidt in total ruin. He exclaimed:

. . . it is good thing that in France they don't know how this poor city has been treated; nothing remains of it but a mass of ruins, a quantity of debris. . . the houses have been demolished to use the wood for fire. The city was not badly built at all. A few traces of art and marble are still visible.¹⁰

In the eastern province the same pattern of conquest was followed. Bijaya, one of the most prestigious medieval Algerian cities, was conquered in 1833 after a fierce battle in which the invaders had to conquer it street by street in order to occupy the resultant ruins. "This war of the street was prolonged for three days and as usual it exalted the ferocity of the soldiers. The entire population either perished or was exiled forever."¹¹ In 1846, when Poujoulat visited Bijaya, he said that the city "numbered thousands of inhabitants before our occupation. I have found there only three Arab families, about one hundred European settlers, and a battalion in garrison."¹²

The inhabitants of Constantine, the ancient city of Cirta, decisively repulsed the invading French troops who tried to seize it in 1836. This first "expedition cost about one thousand men, that is, one-eighth of the troops engaged."¹³ However, in 1837 Constantine was attacked again, and at the cost of thousands of men and women who defended it

valiantly, it fell to the French. While besieged, a large number of the inhabitants were forced to flee over the gorges of the Rhummel, but many fell into the abyss and crashed to the bottom.

In placing myself on the edge of the terrifying ravines, I stared at the sloping peaks over which thousands of men and women, more confident in the abyss than in the mercy of the French victors, sought the escape. Their means of salvation were ropes attached to the upper walls of the rocks. When these ropes broke, human masses could be seen rolling down this immense wall of rock; it was a veritable cascade of corpses.¹⁴

By 1846 Constantine had lost ten thousands of its Algerian inhabitants; the survivors were completely impoverished. A French colonial official described their economic conditions in 1845 as follows:

Constantine is horrible to see; all buildings are falling to ruin, half of the houses that were there five years ago have been demolished. The indigenous population is in a terrifying state of misery and deprivation. . . by expelling the traders, by taking all sorts of violent measures, we have spread misery everywhere.¹⁵

The urban centers of the western province were colonized, pillaged, and depopulated in the same manner. In 1835 Mascara, the capital of Abdel-Kaker, was completely eradicated by French troops, who thus avenged the crushing defeat inflicted upon them in the battle of Macta. When the Duc d'Orleans entered the city, he exclaimed:

What I saw then was the most hideous spectacle I have ever witnessed. I would never have had an idea of a sacked city, where numerous inhabitants have been massacred. The street that leads to the square was full of all kinds of debris; wooden beams covered with flecks of blood were still burning; everything was in disorder; not a single object remained untouched; the houses were in flame and a thousand Jews threw themselves at our feet begging for mercy, all that was left of a population which until yesterday numbered ten thousand souls.¹⁶

In 1833 Tlemcen was occupied, its population forced into exile, and war tribute arbitrarily extracted by General Clauzel, who was impressed with the prosperity of the city. Those who could not pay in cash were forced to bring their wives' jewelry.¹⁷ The most typical and striking example, however, is that of Oran: as a result of French occupation, the population fell from ten thousand in 1830 to a mere one thousand in 1832.

The subsequent increase in the Algerian urban population was due to the migration of the rural population to the cities, rather than to natural population growth. Indeed, according to a study made by J. Boudin in 1853, the vital statistics for Algerian urban inhabitants were: in 1850, 1128 births and 4192 deaths and in 1851, 2439 births and 5738 deaths.¹⁸ These figures give us some indication of the rate of depopulation of the cities as a direct result of colonization by "pacification." According to official records, between 1866 and 1872 the country lost 646,159 people.¹⁹

Penetration Into The Rural Communities

French colonization of Algeria developed in four successive stages. The first, between 1830 and 1839, was marked by

the occupation of the urban centers and their immediate hinterlands. The second took place between 1840 and 1847, when the colonial army managed to extend its conquest to the fertile agricultural plains of the Tell, or northern Algeria. This period was characterized by the seventeen-year war in which the partisans of al-Amir Abdelkader opposed the French. The third and fourth stages were from 1848 to 1872 and from 1873 to 1954. All the energies of the colonial power were devoted to the "subjugation" of the mountainous sedentary communities in the Tell and to the southern oasis-sedentary communities and pastoral nomads of the Sahara. The rural masses fought the encroachment of the colonial army until 1884, but the core of Algerian rural resistance to colonialism was smashed in 1871.

Confronted with stiff peasant resistance, the French army adopted from the outset a "scorched-earth strategy" in order to subjugate the peasantry and expropriate its land. Many accounts of the application of this strategy have been related by French officers. They speak for themselves: "More than fifty-five villages built of stone and roofed with tiles were destroyed. Our soldiers made very considerable pickings there." Marshall Bugeaud added, in another passage, "I began to chop down the fine orchards and to set fire to the magnificent villages under the enemy's eyes." General Saint Arnaud described, in 1846, similar colonial practices:

I left in my wake a vast conflagration. All the villages, some two hundred in number, were burnt down, all the gardens destroyed, all the olive trees cut down. In a paragraph of a letter you asked me what happens to the Algerian women we capture; some we keep as hostages and the rest are auctioned to the troops like animals. . . In the operations we have carried out during the last four months I have witnessed scenes that would melt the

hardest heart if one had time to let them! I witnessed it all with a frightening indifference. Kill all men above the age of fifteen. Take all women and children and put them on a ship for the Marquesas Islands or some other destination. . . The country of Beni Menseur is superb. . . we have burnt everything, destroyed everything there. Oh war! How many women and children who took refuge in the snow in the Atlas are found dead there from cold and misery!

Colonel Montaignac wrote:

Women and children, snared in thick bushes that they were obliged to cross, surrendered to us. We kill, we slaughter, the screaming or the terror-stricken, the dying, blend with the noise of the beasts which roar, groan from all sides: it is hell, where instead of fire that roasts us, snow floods us.²⁰

These war crimes were not committed because the (abstract and selective) ethical standards of the nineteenth-century French had degenerated; they were motivated by the firm conviction that by colonizing Algeria, the French capitalists would realize a considerable accumulation of capital.

Little does it matter that France in its political conduct goes beyond the limits of common morality at times. The essential thing is that it established a lasting colony and that as a consequence it will bring European civilization to these barbaric countries. When a project which is to the advantage of all humanity is to be carried out, the shortest path is the best. Now, it is certain that the shortest path is terror; without violating the laws of morality, or international jurisprudence, we can fight our African enemies with power and fire joined by famine, internal division, war between Arabs and Kabyles, between the tribes of the Tell and those of the Sahara, by brandy, corruption, and disorganization. That is the easiest thing in the world to do.²¹



Harvesting under the watchful eye of the colon.

In fact, this is exactly what the French troops did, with the full support of their government. In 1841, Tocqueville observed with sarcasm that he had to report from Africa "the afflicting notion that at this moment we are making the war in a manner more barbaric than the Arabs themselves."²² Charles Julien tried to use Marshall Bugeaud as a scapegoat by attributing to him the responsibility for the devastation of the Algerian peasant communities. During this period "when he was unable to vanquish the Algerians militarily, Bugeaud wanted to compel them to submit themselves by destruction and famine."²³ Actually, he went beyond mere "destruction" and "famine" to the point of committing a collective genocide with the full support of his government.

In fact, in 1845 Colonel Pelissier burned a thousand people in the grottos of Dahra. Sergeant Moret, who executed the colonel's order, wrote: "The soldiers who set the faggots on fire hurried in rage to carry the wood," and said that he himself, "furious like the others, gave a hand to the execution of the work. . . The next day. . . one thousand heaped up corpses were found."²⁴ When the news of this event reached Paris, only the Prince of Moskowa dared to denounce it as "a murder consummated with premeditation against a defenseless enemy."²⁵ Governor General Bugeaud replied that he would take the entire responsibility for this deed because he had "prescribed the use of and resort to such action in the last extremity."

This was neither the first nor the last occurrence of this kind. The previous year General Cavaignac had proceeded in the same manner among the Sbeah. These military acts were neither isolated nor accidental; they reflect the continuation of French colonial policy by other means, judged at the time more opportune than any other course of action.

In order to expropriate 364,341 hectares of land from the rural cultivators,²⁶ the French government, between 1830 and 1851, had to sacrifice to French capitalism tens of thousands of soldiers who were themselves victims of the colonial onslaught. The extent of the casualties indicates the organized yet flexible resistance put up by the peasantry. The consolidation and use of their segmentary system, in the face of the colonial onslaught, is a chapter of military history that remains to be written from the perspective of the unlettered, designated victims.

The colonial agents and their surveyors "armed with extraordinary powers,"²⁷ followed in the tracks of the colonial army. Using innumerable arbitrary measures — sequestration, confiscation, expropriation, cantonment, and the application of various property bills devised to establish "incommutable individual property" (thus transforming the soil into a commodity)—an increasing number of hectares were accumulated for the purposes of colonization. The ceaseless transfer of land from the "indigenous" peasantry to the settlers was disguised under juridical trappings. The subsequent distribution of booty among the *colons* was as in Table I.²⁸ By 1954, these 3,028,000 expropriated hectares consisted of 2,828,000 hectares of plowland and 210,000 hectares of forest, all owned privately by the French *colons*. The colonial state still possessed 7,200,000 hectares, including forest, unproductive land, and pastureland.

TABLE I
Distribution of Booty among *Colons*

Dates	Number of hectares under the control of the settlers
1830 to 1850	115,000
1851 to 1870	765,000
1871 to 1880	1,245,000
1881 to 1890	1,635,000
1891 to 1900	1,912,000
1901 to 1920	2,581,000
1921 to 1940	3,445,000
1941 to 1954	3,028,000

TABLE II
The Size of Landholdings as an indicator of Social Differentiation in Rural Algeria

Size of estate in hectares	Algerians		French	
	Number of landowners	Area in hectares	Number of landowners	Area in hectares
Less than 10	391,000	1,850,000	8000	40,000
10 to 50	118,000	3,013,000	7000	209,000
50 to 100	17,400	1,226,400	4000	306,000
100 to 500	5,000	1,108,000	5000	1,202,000
More than 500	600	414,700	900	963,000
Total	532,000	7,612,100	24,900	2,720,000

Source: Robert Arao, *et. al.*, *Les Origines de la guerre d'Algerie* (Paris: Fayard, 1962), p. 224.

The Algerian Tell consisted of only about 20 million hectares. The 24,000 settlers privately owned 3,028,000, or 23 percent. The state owned 7,200,000 and the "natives", numbering over 7 million, remained in control of 7,133,000.²⁹ But two-thirds of the land assigned to the peasants was minimal pasture and unproductive plots. The average returns were as follows: one hectare of land in the colonized areas yielded 9.74 quintals, while in the "native" sector one hectare yielded between 2 and 4.65 quintals.³⁰ Each settler owned an average of 109 hectares, while each Algerian owned only about 14 hectares. Seventy-three percent of Algerian peasant households owned less than ten hectares; the threshold of malnutrition was estimated at twelve hectares by Governor Chataigneau in 1946:

A *fellah* cannot live a life of a peasant deriving all his income from the land unless he possess at least 25 hectares of arable land. The minimal familial unit of cultivation would need to comprise 20 hectares of ploughland and 5 hectares of pasture. In the peasant state, the *fellahs* are not true peasants but half proletarians.³¹

The 550,000 Algerian landowners situated in the marginal semiarid zones, characterized by denuded slopes and the total absence of irrigation or mechanized means of cultivation, formed atomized agricultural microfundia. The average size of their plots was estimated at about four hectares per family. Their techniques of cultivation remained rudimentary. According to the 1950-1951 agricultural census, 543,310 peasant cultivators were using only 283,256 *jabda*, wooden ploughs harnessed to two oxen, two mules, or one mule and one ox.³²

The *fellah* is the Moslem proprietor of the so-called traditional sector, where the relations of production inherited from feudal Algeria, before the copnquest, are essentially

maintained; the underlying cause is the maintenance of anachronistic means of production after more than a century of colonization. Pushed back from the more fertile regions to the insufficient and infertile land, compressed on small plots whose subsequent partition between the generations was frequently parcelled to the extreme, the Algerian peasants could not have perfected their instrument of production.³³

The Demographic Component of Colonization

The outright seizure of buildings and businesses along with land expropriation in the countryside undermined the foundation of the Algerian precolonial mode of production. The economic life of numerous petty commodity producers — peasants, craftsmen, and artisans — who, with the exception of the *khammas*, controlled their own means of production, was shattered. Only the urban specialists emerged as generalized commodity producers while production for use remained prevalent in the countryside. These rural small producers were also involved to a limited degree in commodity exchange because in order to survive they had to transform a certain amount of what was produced for use into commodities for exchange to be sold in the local market. This mode of production was torn asunder by the forcible superimposition of a elaborate social system based on large-scale commodity production. The primary resources — land, livestock, crops, timber — were confiscated from the “native” producers and reallocated to the accelerating number of European immigrants.

The colonial enterprise itself has a demographic trajectory. While France was resolving its demographic pressures by diverting its surplus population and “troublesome” working class elements to Algeria, the dispossessed Algerian masses were “fated” to shoulder the socio-economic consequences of this policy. For instance, after the revolution of 1848 the French Government decided to rid Paris of 20,500 workers who had dared to erect barricades. It requested the national assembly to vote 55 million francs for their transport to and installation in Algeria. From the end of 1848 to 1850 these 20,500 proletarians were forcibly transformed into “reluctant pioneers.” Upon their arrival in Algeria they were assigned to fifty-six *centres de colonisation* that had been established to receive them. The colonial army provided them with houses, arable land, instruments of cultivation, livestock, food, and pocket money.³⁴ On June 21, 1871, the French Government granted 100,000 hectares of land in Algeria to 8,000 refugees of the Franco-Prussian war from Alsace-Lorraine. They were installed in eighty *centres de colonisation*.³⁵ The economic resources at the disposal of the Algerian producers were gradually drained by the magnitude of the immigration.

Up to 1906 the annual inflow of settlers far exceeded the natural growth of the European population in Algeria. A comparison between the Algerian and European populations will illustrate this point. Although the exact population of Algeria before 1830 is still controversial, a large number of scholars tend to agree with the general census completed by the French army’s intelligence service under the supervision of the *Bureaux Arabes*, which in 1845 advanced a figure of three million inhabitants.³⁶ However,

in terms of the number of inhabitants in the unoccupied territories, the figures are necessarily approximate and could be greater than indicated. Nevertheless, in 1856, when the first extensive census was taken by the colonial authorities, the population was registered as only 2,487,373, including settlers. Henceforth, regular censuses were taken.

Between 1830 and 1876, then, the Algerian population declined, but after 1881 it began to grow again. The publication of this latter census shook some in colonial circles in Algeria. It surprised the racial supremacists, who asserted that “history is here to prove that the inferior races have always been either absorbed or destroyed by the superior races.”³⁷ And two professors at the University of Algiers School of Medicine, Battandier and Trabut, affirmed that the native’s “traditional laziness will condemn him sooner or later to disappear before the more active races.”³⁸ When reality turned out to be different, and when subsequent censuses indicated a steady population increase,

the colonial press was often astonished by this growth in the number of Moslem Algerians, seeking to explain it by the improvement in census procedures. This is due to the old prejudice which was still alive that assumed the slow extinction of the native by the sole fact of his contact with “civilization.”³⁹



Destruction of the village of Tizi-Ouzou, May 1871.

Credit: Julien, *Histoire de l'Algerie Contemporaine*

Indeed, the French theorists who predicted the doom of the native “race” had based their assumptions on the actual decline of the Algerian population between 1830 and 1881.⁴⁰ However, by 1903 the native birth rate had overtaken that of the European population, 32.1 percent against 30.9 percent. This fact alarmed some settlers. In 1889 one of their representatives declared before a parliamentary inquiry commission that the “natives have almost quadrupled since 1866. If they continue, in ten years they will reach ten million, and in thirty, sixteen.”

Demand for Labor and Colonization in Algeria

From the outset the *colons* and their public officials realized the potential advantage of the surplus labor of the

pauperized population. As early as March 5, 1849, the Higher Council of the French government in Algeria, in order to induce the impoverished peasants to till the farms of the settlers either as sharecroppers or agricultural laborers, decreed that "all natives are subject to special taxes (*impôts Arabes*), except those employed as sharecroppers on the European estates, inhabiting a house, and working under the supervision of a European landowner or his manager."⁴¹ In another official report sent to the Ministry of War in Paris, it was emphatically stated that the "advantages that colonization could extract from the Arab workers had already been appreciated by the European landowners, who, without any exception, are already employing sharecroppers on their holdings."⁴²

In urging the colonial authorities in Algeria to facilitate the utilization of "indigenous manpower" on the newly established agricultural plantations and industrial enterprises, the Minister of War wrote on October 15, 1851:

To attract the Arab laborer to work for the French owners. . . is the best and most proper thing to do so that the French domination will be asserted definitively. . . We find in the Arab worker several essential qualities. He is sober and does not have too many needs; no matter how hard the tasks he is given to perform, he is less discontented than the European worker. He is robust and acclimatized and this permits us to count on him for all seasons. He is intelligent and docile.⁴³

It must be noted that throughout the early period of colonization the Algerian population was forced to provide labor for the construction of roads, the building of *centres de colonisation*, and to perform various other services without any compensation. From 1830 to 1871, forced labor was a standard phenomenon in Algeria; the "requisition of native manpower for public utility work" was used by army officers in their attempt to oppose the introduction of the Arab workers into the centers of colonization, since they feared they would lose their free laborers to the *colons* who offered some sort of wages. But on October 15, 1851, the Minister of War, who was in charge of Algeria, rejected the objection of the army in the following terms:

The introduction, on a large scale, of the Arab or Kabyle manpower into agricultural work is a goal toward which the administration has to concentrate all its efforts and has to pursue by all means in its power. It is obvious, in effect, that without this powerful auxiliary, cultivation would be for a long time shackled by the high wages and scarcity of European workers.⁴⁴

The Algerians not only worked for the settlers as sharecroppers, but as wage laborers on a daily or monthly basis. In 1851 they were paid between two and two and one half francs a day. Those who worked on a monthly basis were offered between twenty and thirty francs per month. After studying the differences in wages between Arab and French laborers, a colonial official reported that:

I have indicated what is more important and it is easy to judge the enormous difference in the sum to be paid for the employment of an Arab laborer in contradistinction to that offered to a French laborer. . . . It is sufficient to ensure that the price paid to the indigenous worker will not ordinarily exceed the fourth of that which we are obliged to give to the European worker.⁴⁵

It was officially recognized in 1851 that "for a long time

almost all the big concessionaries of land. . . in the civil territory have been using indigenous laborers for cultivation of their estates. They recruited them from everywhere."⁴⁶

The gradual widening of the perimeter of colonization, compared by Bugeaud to a "spot of oil," resulted in the dispossession of the peasants and in the increasing demand for native manpower, which played a determining role in the development of the colony. The introduction of vineyards in the 1860s accelerated the process of proletarianization for a large number of peasants who were concentrated in rural slums during the *cantonment*. For these destitute masses the only salvation from famine, epidemics, and collective despair lay in wage labor in the colonial sector. The acceptance of work, either as sharecroppers or wage laborers on the confiscated plots of land and newly consolidated fields of the *colons*, was the only course under the circumstances. It was a matter of survival. As noted above, both the settlers and their high officials were in full agreement about the vital importance of restricting the role of the native people to that of subservient colonized manpower, to be used under careful surveillance, not to sap but to contribute to the development of colonization. As General Bedeau stated:

Colonization with its requirements will be the touchstone of real submission; it will place at last in their true respective positions the conquering people and the conquered. . . . Only by its mass can the colony reduce them to the point where agitation is impossible. . . . There must be no empty space between us and the Arab population which, under careful surveillance, should supply the tribute of its labor and resources to the colony surrounding it in its growth, like the hedge around a cleared field, which is built up with the thorns that have been pulled out of it.⁴⁷

In the long run, the exorbitant requirements of colonization multiplied the ranks of the Algerian proletariat. In fact, after the defeat of the peasant rebellion of 1871, which was triggered by a series of confiscatory measures directed against the peasantry during the 1860s, the core of rural society was literally smashed and the peasants ruined. The failure of this insurrection inaugurated a new period in the history of colonialism in Algeria. After the rebellion 665,591 hectares were "sequestered," that is, grabbed from the defeated peasantry and redistributed to the settlers. A levy of 68 million gold francs was imposed on the peasants and paid to the colonial government.⁴⁸ Thenceforth the peasants resigned themselves to various piecemeal adjustments to the triumphant colonial presence.

Apart from the outright seizure of their land, the introduction and spread of the capitalist market thrust the peasant household into a vicious circle. The international "invisible hand" generated a

cycle which starts when the peasant is forced to sell his produce immediately after the harvest in order to pay off his debts — to sell, that is to say, at the bottom price. It continues when five or six months later he is compelled to buy the same produce back at the top price, which means at least double the figure he was given for it. It is easy to see that at this rate the unhappy man sets deeper and deeper into hopeless difficulties.⁴⁹

It should be added that in a desperate effort to break this cycle the peasants typically borrowed money, thus entangling themselves further in the web of colonial obligations.

Colonization, then, involved the expropriation, in one form or another, of the basic factor of production, land, from the indigenous peasantry and its redistribution to the settlers. The transfer of land was followed by the rapid development of the colonial sector and by an increase in the native Algerian population precisely because of the subsequent deterioration of the peasant subsistence economy. These interrelated phenomena generated a tremendous demand for labor by the peasant households and by the colonial sector. Indeed, the removal of land and labor, coupled with the extraction of taxes in cash from the traditional sector, made it imperative for the peasants to increase their labor input. This in turn led to an intensive expansion of agriculture, involving the clearing of wooded areas. The intensification of gardening and arboricultural activities on the remaining plots also required labor-intensive techniques. Finally, as the economic development of the colonial sector proceeded, it attracted an increasing number of paupers as wage laborers. In fact, it was the native labor force that constructed the communication networks, dug trenches, extracted minerals from the ground, dried up swamps, cleared fields, and planted and harvested crops for the settlers, and that performed countless other tasks required for the development of the modern economic sector.

To paraphrase Benjamin White, the modern colonial system tended to substitute native labor for settlers' capital. Such intensive colonization, without modernization of the means of production, injected labor into a colonial economy controlled to a large extent by metropolitan entrepreneurs. Under such colonial conditions

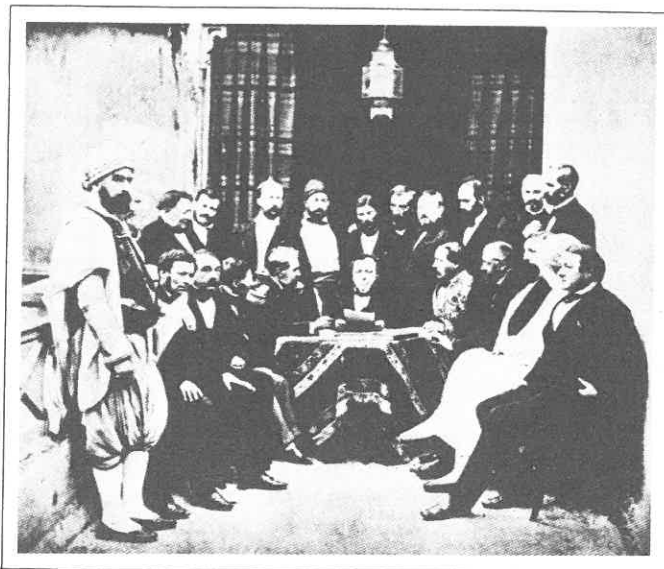
the easiest way for the people to maintain their standards of living and leisure while meeting the levy of the colonial government was to have more children, to occupy more land, and to devote a larger proportion of the land to . . . agriculture.⁵⁰

Thus the pauperization of the majority of Algerians was caused by two interconnected factors, one extrinsic, the other intrinsic. The extrinsic factor was the French colonial policy of implanting its surplus population in Algeria, confiscating property from the indigenous population and distributing it to the immigrants. The intrinsic factor was the natural process of demographic growth within a hard-pressed population, which further accelerated the deterioration of its social conditions. Once the existing property relations were forcibly dissolved and restructured in favor of the settlers, the dispossessed Algerian producers had no other feasible economic alternative but to enter into the newly superimposed capitalist relations; that is, to sell their labor power to the *colons* in order to eke out their livelihood. The proletarianization process through which the artisans and peasants were forced to march was the only practical adjustment to the colonial situation. It is pertinent that the colonial authorities had severely hampered the urban artisanal "corporations" by restrictive administrative measures, specifically those of 1838 and 1851, and in 1868 abolished them altogether.⁵¹ The Algerian handicraft industries gradually and for all practical purposes disappeared.⁵² "The number of Algerian artisans declined from one hundred thousand in the mid-nineteenth century to 3500 in 1951."⁵³ The opening of the Algerian

market to French speculators and the thrusting of the entire economy, without any tariff protection, first into the "metropolitan" and then into the international market, had by 1920 undermined the market for local handicrafts:

All the utensils for domestic use that were manufactured by the potters, tinkers, smelters, coppersmiths, and tinsmiths had been replaced by European hardware. Only a few indigenous carpenters are still found, hidden in the old quarters, manufacturing painted chests and etageres; . . . some turners, some ironmongers assembling and decorating fancy beds.⁵⁴

In this manner all indigenous precolonial artisanal manufacturers were outcompeted by French industrial products, and the integration of the Algerian economy into the French capitalist market led to the disintegration of the precolonial urban culture. With the collapse of urban social and economic structures, the traditional centers of education, the *zaoqiyas*, *madrassas*, and the *kuttabs* attached to the latter, which were subsidized by revenues derived from the religious prebends, the *habus*, disappeared.⁵⁵ Moreover, the price of consumer goods rose by about 300 percent between 1830 and 1870.



The Consul-General of Algiers in 1860.
Credit: Julien, *Historie de l'Algerie Contemporaine*

From Producer to Proletariat

The genesis of the Algerian working class occurred in the devastated urban centers during the first period of conquest. The French colonization of Algeria had aimed, from beginning to end, at continually constricting the economic base of the native population. By expropriating the indigenous producers, they were transformed into a modern colonized proletariat. This fact further substantiates the conclusion that the "expropriation of the mass of the people from the soil forms the basis of the capitalist mode of production."⁵⁶ Indeed, shortly after the introduction of the French capitalist system, with its characteristic colonial forms, into Algeria, the native socioeconomic formation based on small commodity production was intentionally dismantled and restructured in line with superimposed

capitalist production relations. For the bulk of the dispossessed masses there was no alternative but to resign themselves to the hiring out of their labor power.

The birth of the Algerian working class was determined by colonial expropriation, but pauperization through taxation was a related process. From 1830 to 1919 the Algerians were forced to pay exorbitant special taxes called *impôts Arabes*. By 1882 some "enlightened" colonial newspapers started warning French officials that "if the natives continue to crawl in ignorance, to pay ruinous taxes from which they receive no benefit, if they are obliged to abandon their lands, a pauperism similar to that which is afflicting Ireland will necessarily result."⁵⁷ In 1900 a number of colonial administrators realized that many formerly well-off Arab families were joining the ranks of the proletariat.⁵⁸ In 1903 a colonial administrator was alarmed by the fact that "this fall of native people into the proletariat constitutes a grave danger for the future. It will remove our most powerful means of action over the vanquished race, the fear of sequestration."⁵⁹

The rapid development of colonization pulled a large number of pauperized people from the steppes and from the sedentary northern mountain communities onto the European colonial plantations as wage laborers. The causes of this internal migratory movement were multiple: soil depletion from the overuse of land and demographic pressure magnified by restrictive measures that denied the peasants' grazing rights in the forest meadows and pasturelands of the steppes. In fact, during the 1860s the rights of usage enjoyed traditionally by the rural communities over the forests were abolished. Thenceforth, if the peasants' livestock were found grazing there, the owners would be fined exorbitant (to them) sums of money. In addition, whenever fires broke out in the forests, the nearby communities were routinely accused of starting them. They were also fined collectively, and occasionally, when they could not pay, had their holdings sequestered. Another hardly known factor that played a decisive role in the continuous deterioration of the economic conditions of rural communities was the rechanneling of streams, springs, and water holes to the centers of colonization. As a consequence, the semiarid zones where the *fellahs* were contained underwent a further process of dessication and de-vegetation.

The *centres de colonisation* at Oran attracted a large number of impoverished pastoralists and peasants from Ain-Temouchent and Tlencen. The *colons* of the Mitidja, Chelif plains, Annaba, and Skikda sought and received large contingents of permanent and seasonal workers from Kabylia, Djidjelli, El Milia, Guelma, Dahra, and Ouarsenis.⁶⁰ Besides this, there was periodic emigration that led thousands of pauperized pastoralists from Djalfa, Boussada, and Laghouat, located in the steppes, to the Tellian centers of colonization where they worked on the colonial estates both temporarily and permanently. By 1930 the number of agricultural workers reached 462,467 and that of sharecroppers reached 713,387,⁶¹ while 1.5 million peasants were considered completely indigent.⁶²

Despite the fact that most official statistics on the rural population have not been adequately established or interpreted with accuracy, the available figures are telling. By the 1950s rural Algerian society was about 12 percent

pastoralist, while permanent agricultural laborers represented 22 percent of the total population. About one million were unemployed and only 19.5 percent of the peasants remained landowners, but their holdings were very fragmented.

The colonized regions of the world have uniformly experienced urbanization without genuine industrialization, and French colonialism has been no exception. By 1901, only 11,887 industrial workshops were counted in Algeria, employing 51,502 workers. The number of Algerian industrial proletarians increased from 20,535 in 1902 to 33,009 in 1903;⁶³ it fell to 29,984 in 1904, but went up to 33,556 in 1905. More than half were unskilled. However, the census of 1911 indicated a rapid growth of the Algerian industrial proletariat, 58,543 male workers and 21,397 female workers, totalling 79,940.

In 1900 the first important strikes in the history of the modern Algerian proletariat were organized in the port of Algiers by 1600 dockworkers. These thirteen strikes led to the arrest of twenty-eight strikers, eight of whom were sentenced to from eight days to one month imprisonment. Again in 1907, one thousand unionized dockers struck in order to defend their rights. These strikes provoked panic among the colonial population of Algiers. The city council, which represented the settlers only, denounced the strike and brought to the attention of the French government "the dangers that are presented by the public demonstrations of the natives,"⁶⁴ and thus justified the prohibition of strikes by noncitizens.⁶⁵

Moreover, due to the stagnation of industrial development in the colony, an increasing number of impoverished people were driven by hunger and want across the Mediterranean and into Europe. The emigration of Algerian workers into Western Europe, in small and isolated groups, first appears in the historical records of France and Belgium after 1871.⁶⁶ In 1906 several thousand laborers were reported in the coal mines, and in 1911 the French authorities revealed that 3,000 North Africans were working in France. The next year an official inquiry showed the existence of 5,000 migrant workers, among them 1,500 miners.⁶⁷ The reason for the slow development of this early migration was the administrative restrictions imposed. At the express demand of the *colons*, a decree was promulgated in 1876 by the Governor General in Algeria requiring a special travel permit for Algerians going to France. When this decree was abolished in 1913 the movement of Algerian workers to France increased rapidly. On the eve of World War I, 30,000 North Africans were working in the metropole.⁶⁸

World War I aggravated France's need for manpower. Mobilization, which particularly affected the active working population, led to a drastic decline in French productive capacity and a solution had to be found to keep the war industries running. Hence the "colonial reserve army" of pauperized masses was deployed and the forced recruitment of Algerians was transformed into a "veritable mobilization, a civil requisition that was made possible by the sovereignty of France over the territory of the colony."⁶⁹ Once in France, these colonial workers came under the direct jurisdiction of the *Conseil de Guerre* which was empowered to try them before military tribunals if they refused to work. They were housed in special compounds

where they were obliged to take their meals. This collective recruitment resulted in the introduction into France of 120,000 Algerians, 35,000 Moroccans, and 18,000 Tunisians.⁷⁰ Algeria also provided 173,000 men for the armed services. In fact, according to Ageron, between 1914 and April 1, 1917, a total of 168,678 men were either drafted or enlisted and sent to France. By April 1917, 2.7 percent of the Algerian population had been in the French army in France.⁷¹

After the armistice a large number of the mobilized men were sent back home, but many remained as laborers to rebuild the war-torn areas. Since France found itself depopulated and economically paralyzed, the French government again resorted to North African colonial manpower to reconstruct its economy. Between 1920 and 1924, 120,000 North African workers were called to France: in 1924 alone, 71,028 Algerian and 10,000 Moroccan migrant workers were imported. This massive out-migration from the Maghreb frightened the colonial entrepreneurs, who up to then had been able to pay starvation wages to workers by maintaining a vast reserve army of lumpen-proletarianized peasants. Their pressure, as always, elicited a positive response from the colonial authorities. Thenceforth a work permit was required before emigrating. But although this brought a decrease in emigration, 71,000 Algerian workers arrived in France in 1929 alone.⁷²

Conclusion

As early as 1833 the Commission d'Afrique suggested to the French government that "to bring these people under the subjection of our social order, to force them to labor the soil, to make of them industrial machines, and at last taxable, would be a very fine result."⁷³ In fact, in retrospect the French state had succeeded not only in tying a large number of agricultural workers to the plantations of the settlers (600,000 seasonal and permanent workers in the 1950s), but also in attracting many migrant workers to metropolitan France itself, where they were transformed into "industrial machines" (over 800,000 Algerians were in France in 1974; all of them migrated in search of employment). One conclusion is inescapable: capitalism, in the colonized world as in its country of birth, has resulted in the brutal expropriation of the means of production of the petty commodity producers and peasants. As Maurice Dobb observed:

The process which created both capital and labor as joint products, the so-called "primitive accumulation," appeared from one aspect as the concentration of property through the instrument of economic pressure and monopolistic usury or actual expropriation, and from the other aspect as the consequential dispossession of previous owners. One kind of property was born from the ashes of an older kind of property; large property grew to adult stature by digesting the small; and a capitalist class arose as the creation, not of thrift and abstinence as economists have traditionally depicted it, but of the dispossession of others by dint of economic or political advantage.⁷⁴

In fact, the colonization of Algeria brought about the division of the society into two antagonistic classes: a colonial bourgeoisie monopolizing the means of production, and a resourceless, disinherited proletariat, more than that, a large lumpen proletariat, which served the function

of a colonial "reserve army," was catapulted into existence. This feature, contrary to Fanon's thesis, appears to hamper the development of class consciousness and put a brake on the militancy of the comparatively small and rising working class. Such social conditions are conducive to the emergence of nationalist and populist, rather than revolutionary, working-class parties, because the working class is reduced to a daily struggle for bare subsistence.

Footnotes

- 1 Rozet, *Voyage dans le Régence d'Alger* (Paris: Arthur Bertrand, 1833), vol. 1, pp. 223-224.
- 2 Mostefa Lacheraf, *L'Algérie: Nation et Société* (Paris: Maspero, 1965), p. 57.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 Augustin Berque, "La bourgeoisie Algérienne," *Hisperis*, vol. XXXV (1948), p. 14.
- 5 Quoted in Lacheraf, *L'Algérie*, p. 158.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 159.
- 7 Charles A Julien, *Histoire de l'Algérie contemporaine* (Paris: P.U.F., 1964), pp. 72-73.
- 8 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 67.
- 9 Général Ducrot, *La Vie militaire du Général Ducrot, d'après sa correspondance, 1839-1871* (Paris: Plan, 1895), vol. 1, p. 93.
- 10 Quoted in Lacheraf, *L'Algérie*, p. 166.
- 11 Général Daumas et Fabar, *La Grande Kabylie, Etudes historiques* (Paris: Hachette, 1847), p. 115.
- 12 M. Pouhoulat, *Etudes Africaines* (Paris: Hivert, 1847), pp. 219-20.
- 13 Maurice Wahl, *L'Algérie* (Paris: Alcan, 1903), p. 135.
- 14 Pouhoulat, *Etudes*, p. 43.
- 15 Quoted in Lacheraf, *L'Algérie*, pp. 170-71.
- 16 Duc d'Orleans, *Récits de Campagne* (Paris: Calmann Levy, 1892), pp. 139-40.
- 17 Camille Rousset, *L'Algérie de 1830 à 1840* (Paris: Plon, 1900), vol. 2, pp. 53-54.
- 18 J.Ch.M. Boudin, *Histoire statistique de la colonisation en Algérie* (Paris: Bailliers, 1853), p. 53.
- 19 *Resultats statistiques du denombrement de la population* (Alger, 1954), p. xix.
- 20 All quotes cited in Mahfoud Bennoune, "Socio-Economic Changes in Rural Algeria: 1830-1954," *Peasant Studies Newsletter* (April 1973), pp. 14-15.
- 21 Quoted by Charles H. Favord, *Le FLN et l'Algérie* (Paris: Plon, 1962), p. 31.
- 22 Quoted in Julien, *L'Histoire*, p. 316.
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 320.
- 25 *Ibid.*
- 26 John Ruedy, *Land Policy in Colonial Algeria* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 101.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- 28 Rene Gallissot, *L'Economie d'Afrique du Nord* (Paris: P.U.F., 1964), p. 40.
- 29 Tami Tidafi, *L'Agriculture algérienne et ses perspectives de développement* (Paris: Maspero, 1969), p. 26.
- 30 *Annuaire Statistique de l'Algérie* (Alger, 1955), p. 43.
- 31 "A Report Established by the Authorities of the Commune of Teniet El Had," quoted in Robert Aron, et. al., *Les Origines de la guerre d'Algérie* (Paris: Fayard, 1962), p. 225.
- 32 *Les Recensement agricole 1950-51 de l'Algérie*, p. 46.
- 33 Robert Barbe, "Les Classes Sociales en Algérie," *Economic Politique* (September 1959), pp. 14-15.
- 34 Louis Vignon, *La France dans l'Algérie* (Paris: Hachette, 1887), pp. 98-99.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 106.
- 36 C. Yacono in J. Amrouche, ed., *Terre et Hommes d'Algérie*. (Alger, September 1959), pp. 2-7.

See Footnotes, page 32