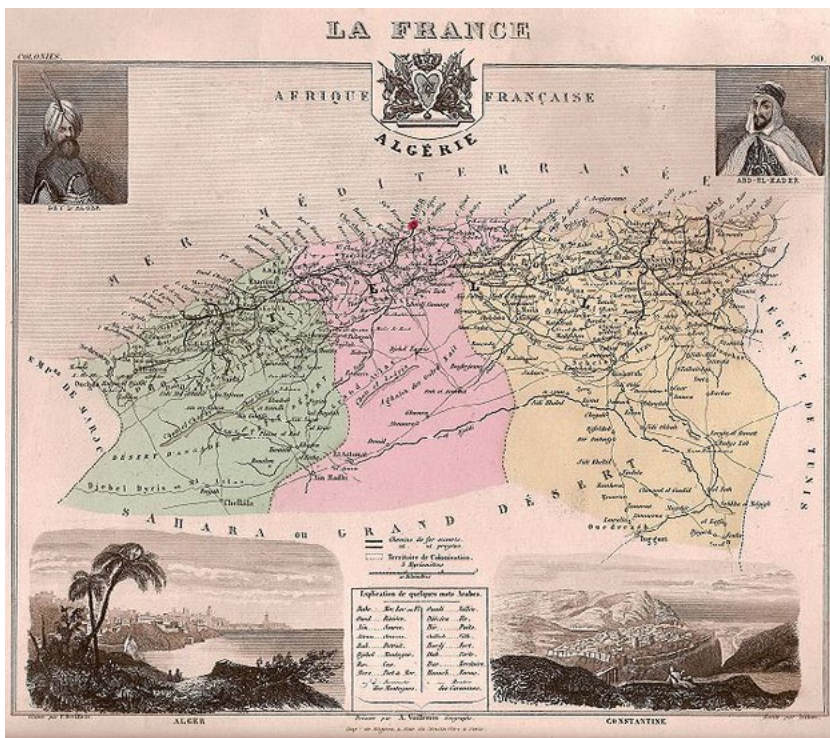


Experiencing Colonialism 1870–1900



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Core Questions

- What was the experience of the colonial conquest like from the perspective of the colonized?
- How did colonized people resist and survive the violence of settler rule across generations?

3 Quotes

Quote 1: “As the European population grows, the *indigène* becomes weaker, retreating before the celestial rays of the civilizing star of which every civilized man is a direct emanation. He retreats . . . blinded but not entranced [by us], no matter what we do. And like a sleeper inconvenienced by the light of a candle, he seeks the shadows where he can be at peace.” – Theodore Blancard, *Questions Algériennes* (Paris: Challamel, 1888), 9.

Quote 2: “On that fateful day, I realized that I was no longer a true Muslim, and that I would still never truly have a French spirit. Oh my poor soul, what have you become? Who will return my Arab soul to me?” – Charles Geniaux, “Mazouna,” *Revue des deux mondes: recueil de la politique, de l’administration et des mœurs* (November 1921): 450.

Quote 3: “Try as they might to chew us up, they will never be able to swallow us down.” – Anonymous, “Legend of the 101 Gatherings (*mia diouan ou diouan*),” transcribed into French by Joseph Desparmet in *L’oeuvre de la France jugée par les indigènes (extrait du Bulletin de la Société de géographie d’Alger et de l’Afrique du Nord)* (F. Montégut et A. Deguili, 1910), 186.

Quote Reflection Questions:

- What is one phrase or quote that stands out to you as surprising, confusing, or interesting?
- What do you think is the meaning or significance of the quote?
- Based on these quotes, what is something you think, feel, notice, or wonder? What do you predict you will learn about in the reading?

Key Terms:

Paul Bourde

Warnier law of 1873

The Indigénat

Kabyle

The Mufti of Ain Beida

Third Republic

Malek Bennabi

Introduction



French journalist and colonial administrator, Paul Bourde.

Traveling through Algeria for the first time in 1880, a young journalist named Paul Bourde found himself entranced. He was en route from Bône to Constantine, traveling as part of an investigatory caravan of Parisian politicians, when he sighted a magnificent farm in the valley below, which beckoned “like an oasis of civilization in the midst of uncultivated wilderness.” As they approached the French settler’s estate, his traveling companions let out a unanimous “cry of admiration to see such a superb habitation, half hidden behind the opulent vegetation of eucalyptus, orange and banana trees.”

“Come! Look!” Bourde wrote in his travelogue, published in Paris shortly after his journey. “Observe this farm next to the miserable camps of the Beni Salah . . . compare this prosperity with that misery, and then tell me to whom the country ought to belong.”

Despite his open admiration for the settler colonial project in Algeria, Bourde’s travelogue also expressed frustration with the attitude of many European settlers he encountered.



European settlers in the town of Prévost-Paradol (today Mechera Sfa), Algeria, at the beginning of the 20th century

“If it can be truthfully said that we have good hearts, it must also be said that we have bad attitudes,” he wryly commented. “We like to show off our superiority, to play the master. This psyche pushes the settlers to constantly remind the *indigène* that he has been vanquished and, to be honest, it seems

to me that we are truly disagreeable in our triumph.”

Bourde was shocked to discover that daily violence toward the Algerian population seemed to be ingrained in the behavior of European children and so frequent as to not warrant any particular attention from passersby. While waiting at the train station in Bône, he recounted, he had felt deeply ashamed as he watched a European child of 13 mercilessly beat and kick an old Arab man with a white beard (*à barbe blanche*) in the midst of an indifferent public: “the wrinkly elder struggled to escape the youngster’s hailstorm of blows, and no one stepped in to stop him; this humiliated me.”

Let's pause here to reflect: A teenager beat an old man in broad daylight on a public train platform, and no one stepped in to stop it:

- How do you think the old man felt during this experience?
- Why was the boy allowed to do that?
- Do you think you would have stepped in to stop it? Why or why not?

Jot down a few thoughts in your notes.

Later in his travels, Bourde encountered another episode of violence. He recalled that on the road leading to the market in the mountainous town of Fort National, his party had walked past a small Kabyle child, a toddler of perhaps three or four years old, seated quietly upon a mule:

“The beast was not tied up, but stood perfectly still with all the resignation of its species . . . the child, bundled in his burnous⁵, stared at us with an oddly solemn look.”

Suddenly, a member of Bourde's entourage, a European settler living in the region, impulsively decided to strike the mule with his cane so hard that it bled and burst into a gallop as the frightened child screamed out for his father. Bourde confessed that he was shocked and embarrassed as he watched the child's father bolt frantically after his son, then return to “gaze at us with eyes full of hatred, murmuring imprecations that we could not understand.” Wouldn't it have been more in line with the goals of the French civilizing mission, Bourde reflected, “to have caressed the little boy rather than to have whipped the beast?”

Neither Bourde nor any other political theorist at the time asked Algerians themselves what they thought. Although their voices were rarely heard and even more rarely recorded, careful study of colonial records reveals that between 1870 and 1900, Algerians of all different regions and social classes reacted, responded, and resisted in a variety of ways to life under settler colonial rule.



Algerians in a street in Sidi Oka, Algeria, ca. 1899

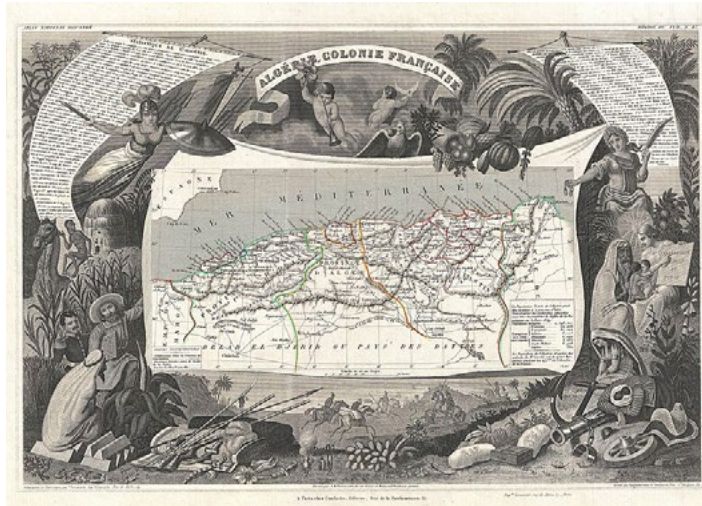
This reading explores the perspectives and experiences of Algerians whose names are unknown, people like the frightened child, the angry father, the helpless elder, people whose stories have been recorded only in snippets through the lens of French observers.

As you read, consider the following questions. We will return to them at the end of the lesson.

- For the people being colonized, what was the experience of colonialism like?
- Why is it important to pay attention to their experiences?
- How can we find their stories?

A New Era

We cannot understand the experiences of Algerians under colonial rule without knowing about the consolidation of civilian power in the colony. As we learned last class, French officers believed that bringing settlers to Algeria would help end the war and make the colony permanent. In 1841 the French government offered 12 hectares of arable land to migrants. As a result, the European population in Algeria rose exponentially: soaring from 37,000 individuals on 20,000 acres in 1841 to almost 300,000 people occupying 750,000 acres by 1872.



Map of the French Algerian colony, 1852

Although many settlers saw themselves as pioneers seeking to bring democracy and freedom to Algeria, the plan to build communities of small farms owned by individual families largely failed. Instead, large capital-rich agricultural corporations like the Algerian Society were able to monopolize land ownership and form a powerful political lobby. These corporations used their power to coerce the Algerian populations to laboring on the land they had previously resided on for minimal compensation.



A crowded train station in Algeria

In 1870–1871 the civilian government in Algeria gained full control over colonial policy. The context for this is complex, but the “tldr” version is this: France lost a war to Germany, leading to yet another revolutionary transition and the establishment of a democratic political system in France called the “Third Republic.” The leaders of the Third Republic were closely allied with the settlers in Algeria, and as a result, they gave the settler lobby significant power.

This marks a major turning point because, after 50 years of domination, the army quickly lost influence. Within 30 years, most political, economic, and social power fell into the hands of a narrow cohort of the wealthiest settlers (called “*les grand colons*” in French).



Vice-Admiral de Gueydon, 1886

Once in power, they did several things that had major impacts on Algerians:

First, they took all the land they could. In his first official speech, the new Governor General Vice-Admiral de Gueydon promised to take back lands that he believed had been “too liberally given” to Algerian farmers by the old government. Over the next decade, this is exactly what occurred.

In 1870 a new decree stated that communally-owned tribal lands would be divided into individual plots and then sold. Algerian property owners were forbidden from opposing the sale of these plots.

Next, the new administration passed a law to take properties traditionally protected from private sale by Islamic laws: mosques, large farmlands, and religious schools.

And finally, the Warnier law of 1873 imposed French property laws on Algerians, obliging them to have their land surveyed and divided up, often at their own expense. In many cases, entire communities were expropriated by default.

As a result, the amount of settler-controlled land grew rapidly to over 2,000,000 acres, comprising not only plains and forests but also over 378,000,000 (yes, that’s right) new acres of rich farmland in the *mitidja* region. Meanwhile, the percentage of land to be reserved for Algerian villages dropped from 19% to 12%. Put simply, rural Algerians lost their farmland and became impoverished.



A French settler farm upon settlement

The Indigénat

In 1873 the local government took a second major step in consolidating power by creating a discriminatory law code, based on religious difference, that applied only to Algerian Muslims. This code was known as the *Indigénat*, and it permitted colonial administrators to accuse, judge, and incarcerate colonial subjects for crimes not normally punishable under French law, such as:



Algerian subjects threshing wheat

- Failing to be respectful to a colonial administrator
- Leaving the village without a permit
- Refusing to pay taxes
- Refusing to act as a guide or informant
- Gathering in a group to celebrate a religious holiday

Pause and predict: How do you think people reacted to these new laws? How would you react? Why? Jot down your thoughts in your notes!

Power and Abuse

The *Indigénat* policy led to constant abuses of power and small humiliations and daily violence, which fostered deep mistrust and resentment between many Europeans and Algerians.

One newspaper reported a settler’s eyewitness account of one such abuse in the 1880s:

“I remember an adolescent who came to our offices one day . . . [he was] mutilated, the fingers of his hands torn off, because the field manager had chosen to punish his indigenous workers by hanging them by their fingers, in the sun, with no water, for as long as he liked.”



Algerians outside of the Sikh Abderrhaman mosque in Algiers, 1899

On another occasion, recounted by the same witness, a four-year-old boy was accused of theft, then beaten and tortured by European farmers before being found with a chain wrapped around his neck and body. The boy’s father was also beaten when he protested, and both were later found guilty and punished again by the local courts.

It got so bad that even some settlers were shocked and began to file complaints about the excessive punishments being doled out to Algerians. In 1882 a group of settlers and Algerians worked together to write a petition complaining about the “barbaric actions” occurring in their home region of Oran. One concerned settler reported seeing Algerians being “kicked, punched, beaten with clubs, arrested and incarcerated without trial, fined at every moment and without just cause.” In the region of Constantine, a scandal erupted when five Algerian men were evidently “suspended by their arms from the highest branches of an oak tree” for over four hours in an attempt to coerce a confession.

In fact, between 1880 and 1897, the French government in Paris investigated 75 colonial administrators for criminal activity, 112 for destruction of Algerians’ property, and 154 for electoral fraud. Over 50% of Algerians during this period experienced having an administrator suspended or removed for abuse of power.

Algerian Reactions

Algerians reacted to the violence of settler colonialism in a variety of ways. In doing so, they transformed a period of profound cultural crisis into one of continual resistance and renewal, often under the very noses of those for whom they worked. We already learned that they continued fighting until armed resistance was physically impossible. But Algerians employed a variety of more subtle resistance tactics too.

For the wealthy and well connected, one option was *hijra*—a self-imposed exile to protect one’s life and faith in the spirit of Muhammed’s original flight from Mecca to Medina in 622 BCE. In 1854, 1860, 1870, 1875, 1888, and 1892, groups of Algerian colonial subjects undertook *hijra* in protest to French colonial policies.

The Mufti of Ain Beida, a respected leader from Constantine, wrote a detailed and candid letter explaining that people in his community were leaving the country to protest their bad treatment by the European population:



Portrait of a “Kabyle woman” sometimes used to depict Lalla Fatma N’Soumer, who led resistance against the French from 1849 until her capture in 1857



An Algerian and European man speak in front of a Kabyle home, 1889 Hippolyte Bancard, Arabe parlant à un Européen devant une maison Kabyle, 1889,

“We are in their eyes nothing but suspicious beings, vile and low,” he wrote. “We are humiliated and [suffer from a] complete lack of consideration . . . They place us on a level with donkeys. They only speak to us . . . in foul language.” Although there existed many good settlers, he noted, those who acted kindly toward colonial subjects risked being shunned by their communities, making any rapprochement impossible.

For peasants and farmers, another form of resistance was social banditry: in essence, they became Robin Hoods. The villagers in the mountains would hide them and help them.

He Who Laughs Last . . .

Another form of resistance, which was hidden but palpable, was mockery. Careful examination of primary sources reveals that making fun of French cultural customs was a strategy employed by many Algerians.



Algerians gather outside the gates of Constantine, Algeria, ca. 1899

European observers were aware of this but could rarely prove it. For example, in 1910, a colonial ethnographer named Joseph Desparmet published a translation of a story that had been narrated to him by “two peasants—a cheikh and a sturdy mountain fellow.” Known as *miat diouan ou diouan* (*The 101 Gatherings*, in imitation of the classic Arabian tales *The 1,001 Nights*), the legend told of a mystical

reunion of saintly figures, which had supposedly occurred in the Great Algiers Mosque on the very eve of the French conquest. Transported magically from all corners of the land, clad in rich robes and sometimes in exotic non-human forms, saints representing all the tribes of “Al-djai’r” gathered to debate whether the French occupation was a force of good or evil and whether or not it was destined to be permanent.

In each episode of the legend, two orators would employ satire and mockery to voice criticisms of French rule and make claims for the moral supremacy of North African Muslim culture and society. “I cannot agree with you about this artificial people,” begins the orator in one story:

“Always a hypocritical smile on his lip [the French] will lure us with the promise of respecting [our religion]. But in reality he will slowly destroy our cultural personality. At his school we will learn to eat at high tables, drink from glass cups . . . they will also have us drink wine morning and evening, adopt their vain hairstyles. Muslim women will . . . paint their faces, bat their eyes and show their teeth like female wild donkeys. They will speak their language, read their books, sing their songs, dance their dances, adopt their agitated lifestyle . . . My God! . . . protect our children, watch over the generation which will come after us!”

Despite the interventions of the patron saint of Marseille, hailing from across the sea to defend the cause of France, the Algerian saints in each episode succeed in comically lambasting the culture of European settlers and tourists:

“What charm can you possibly see . . . in these people with their faces hidden under their hats, behind their automobile goggles, their little lady’s veils, who can’t take two steps without turning round and round with their pants rolled up and skirts raised, stopping all the time to chatter at the top of their voices?”

In his study, Desparmet describes having a vague but unshakeable feeling that “the natives which wander in our crowds are wearing a mask, which they remove as soon as they pass across their doorsteps.” He warns his readers that this “sullen refusal of the natives to all things French” was extremely dangerous and must be crushed through the inevitable evisceration of Algerians’ cultural identity.



French people at a shipyard, Algiers, ca. 1899

The persistent fear that native Algerians hated French culture fed settlers’ paranoia and became a constant source of anxiety for colonial educational officials. But how true was it?

Pause here to reflect: What do these stories tell us about how local Algerian communities and individuals felt about the imposition of a cultural hierarchy that privileged European over Islamic civilization?



Men in a coffee house Algiers, Algeria, ca. 1899

New Battlefield: Colonial Education

Prior to the French invasion, Algeria had been a sophisticated and prosperous province and ally of the Ottoman Empire. The cities had a functional and well-financed Islamic school system, where students learned Arabic and Koranic recitation before going to college to learn law, theology, history, astronomy, arithmetic, and algebra. In rural areas, students might attend classes at an informal Koranic primary school and from there move on to pursue religious studies in a *zaouia*, a Sufi center of learning.

Beginning in 1831 the French conquest of Algiers destroyed this system. In 1830 the Algerian city of Constantine had 86 schools, but by 1845 only 30 schools were left and enrollment had plummeted from 600 to 60. Similarly, the city of Algiers had at least 80 Koranic schools with 1,200 students in 1830, but by 1837 there were fewer than 25 primary schools, providing instruction for only 375 students. By 1850 this number had dropped even lower to a mere 15. Muslim universities were virtually extinguished, with advanced classes only being given at the tightly controlled Great Mosque in Algiers. As a result, illiteracy rates skyrocketed to almost 93% by the end of the century. Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in 1847 that “we have abandoned the schools, dispersed the seminaries . . . that is to say we have rendered Muslim society much more ignorant and much more barbaric than it was before knowing us.”



Great Mosque in Algiers, Algeria, 1899

After the start of the Third Republic, a surge of enthusiasm for a return to the “original” mission of “civilizing” Algerians took hold among French politicians and intellectuals. People like Bourde thought that the violence and lack of education in Algeria made the French Empire look bad and argued that the empire should “uplift” colonial subjects by teaching them how to “become French.” As a result, they pushed to increase and expand French primary schooling.

However, the settler political lobby strongly opposed these plans, arguing that Algerian people were not “ready” for modernity. Colonialist scholar Edmond Doutte argued in his 1901 study on colonial education: “For our subjects, it is better to sit for a while in the half-light of Muslim science than to be suddenly blinded by the bright light of European science and by the overwhelming vision of our industrial civilization.” This recommendation was echoed in the colonial schools’ new teaching materials, which cut history, civics, literature, and Arabic, while limiting the curriculum to vocational content after 1913.

If you were an Algerian child who went to a “French-Arab” school during this period, you may have been assigned Jules Renard’s *A History of Algeria, as Recounted to Small Children* (*Histoire de l’Algérie racontée aux petits enfants*), published in Algiers in 1881. Sitting on the banks of a one-room schoolhouse, you would listen as a French teacher or, more likely, an Algerian teaching assistant explained that prior to the invasion of the French, Ottoman-era Algeria had been a profoundly corrupt and despotic state, whose Muslim populations lived in anarchy and constant fear:

“So you see, my children, that under the Ottomans Algeria was nothing more than a nest of pirates, a gaggle of men without scruples, a hideout of evil-doers. It was to be the role of France, our beloved country, to put an end to a state of things that revolted the conscience of Europe and continues to baffle the historical record.”

Pause: Based on what you know about Ottoman Algeria and the invasion, how accurate is this? If you were an Algerian child, how might you feel reading this?



Girls in an Arab school of embroidery, Algiers, ca. 1899

Conclusion: Stuck Between Two Worlds



Group of Algerian colonial subjects, Algiers, ca. 1899

The late 19th century was a period of crisis for Algerian society. Dire poverty led to revolts in 1897, 1881, and 1901. As traditional social structures fractured, so did the established Islamic traditions. The Muslim clergy were held under French control and surveillance. After 1901, imams were required to change the

wording of the Friday opening prayers to praise the benevolence of France. The mockery of stories like *The 101 Gatherings* expressed a deep fear that North African traditions would be wiped out under French rule.

In his memoirs, an Algerian Islamic scholar named Malek Bennabi recalled his grandparents complaining bitterly about the “decline of civilization” in Algeria since the arrival of the French: the loss of charitable traditions, the decline of artisanal crafts, and the rise of theft, alcoholism, and mistrust among neighbors. He reflected on how the changes wrought by colonialism had left deep sadness in the older generations of Algerians: “All of these transformations . . . had a depressing psychological effect on . . . my grandfather . . . [it was a] tragic period . . . the land was no longer the master of its own existence.”

Algerians during this period experienced colonialism in almost every facet of their lives: Their homes, work, education, communities, religion, and income were all tightly regulated by a powerful colonial government. They survived, adapted, and responded using a variety of practices of cultural resistance: petitions, satire, social banditry, *hijra*, or refusal to learn French. These diverse actions and traditions, only fragments of which have come down to us in the written historical record, nonetheless offer important insights into how Algerians themselves understood, interpreted, and discussed French colonial society and their place in it.



Sheikh Mokrani, leader of the Mokrani Revolt of 1871

Reflect in your notes: Why is it important to listen to the voices of colonized people? How can their voices help us understand the history of colonialism? What do you think is the connection between the past experience of colonialism and current issues in the world today?

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