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I

The French Colonial Myth of a
Pan-Mediterranean Civilization

PHILIP DINE

Officially France's colonial history came to an end with the accession to independence of Algeria, the country's most cherished and most fiercely defended overseas territory, on 5 July 1962, some 132 years after French forces first landed on the beach at Sidi Ferruch near Algiers. For while France would maintain its hold on isolated imperial outposts that often predated Algeria such as Guadeloupe and Martinique in the Caribbean, which became full "overseas departments" of the Republic, Algeria was undoubtedly the jewel in the French imperial crown, and its loss marked the end of empire in its entirety. Yet nearly half a century after that traumatic withdrawal, the historiography of France's imperial adventures—and, crucially, misadventures—remains a deeply divisive and regularly contested issue. The polemic prompted in 2005 by the conservative government's legislation to make obligatory the teaching in French schools of the positive contribution made by the country's "presence overseas"¹ is merely the most recent manifestation of an ongoing debate surrounding the French colonial experience. Within this hotly contested field, the most strongly competing readings of the nation's

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colonial past invariably concern Algeria and particularly the war of national liberation that brought to an end the most sustained and most developed colonial settlement to be found anywhere in the French empire.

This chapter focuses attention on both the complex reality and the multiple representations of that most ambitious of French colonial constructions: *Algérie française* or French Algeria. Central to the discussion is a particularly powerful and durable fiction that the literary critic Jean Déjeux was among the first to identify as the French colonial myth of a pan-Mediterranean civilization.² More particularly this essay argues that the creation, consolidation, and continued existence of *Algérie française* was at least as much the product of mindsets or *mentalités* as it was of material realities (to the extent that these formal categories may in fact be legitimately separated for the purpose of historical analysis).³ Indeed, following Tony Smith, the present discussion contends that, at least as far as the French colonial presence in Algeria was concerned, history was primarily understandable not in terms of rational economic or strategic interests, nor yet as a result of the shortcomings of a political system, but rather as a function of ideology.⁴ Central to the French colonial project in Algeria were of course the million or so settlers of various European origins who made their homes in the territory. Their continued and apparently immutable, economic, political, and cultural ascendancy in the territory after the Second World War—in spite of the decolonizing “Winds of Change” then sweeping through many other parts of the European colonial empires—led directly to the Algerian war. For the *pièds-noirs* (literally “black feet” as the settlers were known) were both the most visible and the most essential component of French Algeria, and their determination to resist at all costs the increasingly urgent calls for radical social and political change first provoked and then prolonged the Algerian

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nationalists' armed struggle for the territory's independence.

From an ideological point of view, the settler community's subsequent entrenchment reflected a continuation of established systems of interpretation rather than any serious questioning of the communal world-view that had rendered inevitable the 1954–62 conflict. On the contrary there was if anything a hardening of the most fundamental beliefs of the *pieds-noirs* as expressed by the colony's political representatives as well as by its many and various literary defenders, whether in Algeria or in "metropolitan" France. Central to the articulation of these beliefs was a network of overlapping myths of origin, place, identity, and mastery.⁵ The settler community developed, and its metropolitan defenders repeated, this myth system in a continued but inherently vain attempt to legitimize European minority control of the increasingly disputed territory. The challenge of the ultimately triumphant Algerian uprising was thus integrated into a much older interpretative grid. This explanatory system had begun to emerge in response to the large-scale European immigration that followed the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 and by the turn of the century enabled the nascent settler community to respond ever more confidently to the most basic questions posed by its presence in a manifestly foreign land. As Jean Déjeux memorably puts it: "Who are we? How can we prove that this land belongs to us and that we are at home here?"⁶

A number of key ideological themes provided reassuring answers to these profoundly troubling questions but none more so than the myth of the eternal Mediterranean. Indeed such is its attraction that it continues to be evoked by the exiled European settler population of Algeria to this day. Perhaps the most obvious marker of its durability is the number of *cercles algérianistes*, or pied-noir cultural groups, currently active in France. In addition to the Cercle Algérianiste National, which is based in Narbonne and publishes

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the periodical *L'Algérieniste*—“Revue d’expression de la culture des Français d’Afrique du Nord” (a journal presenting the culture of the [now exiled] French population of North Africa)—there are currently over thirty *cercles* active across France. They are mainly but not exclusively located in southern France and the Paris region, thus reflecting the patterns of settlement that followed the *piets-noirs*’ “repatriation” in 1962–63.⁷ There is also a Chair of Algerianist Studies at the Centre Universitaire Méditerranéen in Nice. Operating under the joint auspices of the University of Nice and the celebrated Collège de France, this institution was from its foundation in 1933 until 1965 a prestigious intellectual and cultural center under its eminent administrator Paul Valéry. It was then incorporated into the local university before being reestablished in recent years as a research institute organizing conferences and public lectures on what might conveniently be summarized as *piet-noir* culture.⁸

The specific contribution made by various theories of Mediterraneanism to this shared symbolic store—*piet-noir* culture—emerges from one of the many press investigations of the settler diaspora included in the historiographical *ouverture* prompted by the thirtieth anniversary of the Evian peace agreement in 1962. In an article revealingly entitled “Pour que nos enfants cessent d’avoir honte de nous” (In order that our children will no longer be ashamed of us), Philippe Eliakim, a reporter for the popular news magazine *L’Événement du Jeudi*, interviewed the organizers of several *cercles algérienistes* and received the following response from one of the group:

“After all,” he asks, “why does no one ever talk about ‘Algerianist’ [i.e. settler] culture?” Proudly, the organizers work their way through the list of their famous writers, Emmanuel Roblès, Louis Bertrand, Jean Pommier, not forgetting Albert Camus, of course;

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they mention the composer Camille Saint-Saëns, together with the painters of the “Algiers School,” who were based for half a century at the Villa Abd el-Tif, and whose paintings shine with a unique light. All children of French Algeria. “Algerianism is not a pseudo-equivalent of your metropolitan civilization,” insists Alain Martin, one of the organizers of the circles, “but rather a culture in its own right: a mixture of Arab, Berber, Maltese, Sicilian, Spanish, and French influences.”⁹

This impassioned representation of the cultural autonomy of Algérie française requires some critical unpacking, both chronological and thematic, if we are to situate it convincingly against the historical backdrop of colonial Algeria. However, the particular contribution made here by the Mediterraneanist vision of the territory as a culturally inclusive *creuset* or melting pot should be immediately apparent.

Before moving on to consider the components of the Mediterraneanist myth system(s) in more detail, we ought to note that in the wave of commemorations that accompanied the thirtieth anniversary of the ending of the Franco-Algerian conflict, the exiled settlers and their descendants who looked to the Mediterranean as a means of linking the hitherto conflictual relations of France and Algeria to a brighter future of mutual cooperation were hardly alone. Thus, for instance, in an important series of articles published in *Le Monde* entitled “L’Algérie de la deuxième mémoire” (approximately, “Remembering Algeria”), French readers were encouraged by a variety of commentators to “Retrouver la Méditerranée” (Relocate the Mediterranean). To take only one example, Thierry Mandon, the then socialist deputy for the Essonne *département* in the Île-de-France (the densely populated central region that includes greater Paris), contrasted the artificial community generated by the post-

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war project of Europeanization with a deeper, more organic, and characteristically southern variety of kinship:

The Twelve [then existing European Union member states] do possess a certain cultural unity. . . . However, we have at least as much in common with the Mediterranean peoples: it's a question of a different rhythm of existence; of a form of rural life that is tending to disappear, in France at least, while we still have real need of it; and of strong spiritual values, which are not only to do with religion. We need a concerted policy for the south of Europe. This is something that is not currently taken seriously.¹⁰

In a rather different register but covering very similar ideological ground, a contributor to a 1992 volume entitled *La Méditerranée réinventée: Réalités et espoirs de la coopération* (Reinventing the Mediterranean: the reality of and prospects for cooperation) drew attention to the positive contribution that sporting relations could make to Franco-Algerian understanding:

Thanks to Olympia, the Mediterranean became the cradle of Olympic sport, both ancient and modern. Renewed, rethought, readapted, readjusted, and newly conceived according to the norms of twentieth-century society, by that strange little French nobleman, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the "Games" were born again, in 1896, in their homeland, Greece, where the very first Olympiad had taken place in 776 BC. . . .

Thus, since the days of the classical games, several countries share and claim as their own the same heroes and the same sporting idols, who are seen as Mediterranean cousins even if they are not brothers in the same nation. . . . Soccer, because it has conquered the most popular social strata, is the most dependable catalyst of mutual appreciation. . . . It may thus bring together in a shared passion the most diverse constituencies, establishing

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emotionally charged sporting links between North Africans and Latin peoples.¹¹

The concrete achievements of the Mediterranean Games, launched in Alexandria, Egypt, in 1955 and held in Algiers in 1975 and in the French Languedoc-Roussillon region in 1993 bear out this perceived sporting linkage as does the very visible contribution made by soccer in the writings of Albert Camus and others to the Mediterraneanist conception of colonial Algeria.¹² The December 1995 edition of *L'Algérieniste*, which contains a detailed and celebratory account of colonial Algeria's classical sporting "heritage" in an article entitled "Les jeux et les spectacles de l'Afrique romaine" (The games and spectacles of Roman Africa), highlights the abiding appeal of this sports-inflected variation on the theme of the eternal Mediterranean.¹³

Let us return now to this mythical schema's properly literary origins, for the main conceptual and thematic strands from which the politically charged myth of a pan-Mediterranean civilization was woven were produced initially by the literary ideologues of colonial Algeria. To this end I shall draw particularly on the critical insights of Peter Dunwoodie, Azzedine Haddour, Lucienne Martini, and David Schalk, as well as on what is arguably the single most significant pied-noir literary text to have emerged since 1962, Albert Camus's posthumously published *Le Premier Homme* (The first man). Peter Dunwoodie's *Writing French Algeria* (1998) is a reliable guide to both of the principal varieties of Mediterranean myth proposed by the literary spokesmen of French Algeria; that is to say, the Latin myth of Louis Bertrand and the Algerianists on the one hand and the Hellenist myth of Albert Camus and the Ecole d'Alger (School of Algiers) on the other. While Camus himself needs little introduction, the Algiers-based group of liberal humanist intellectuals that he represented to French and international audiences alike may be

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less familiar to a modern reader and consequently merits discussion below. Also worthy of note is their literary ancestor and ideological rival, Louis Bertrand (1866–1941). Born in the eastern French department of the Meuse in what would in the wake of 1870 become the lost provinces of Alsace-Lorraine, Bertrand took up a teaching post at the Lycée Bugeaud in Algiers from 1891 to 1900. There in 1897 Bertrand's wholly positive experiences in "Latin" North Africa prompted him to begin writing a series of novels celebrating the colonial enterprise, a propagandist endeavor epitomized by his literary commemoration of the centenary of the French invasion of Algeria, *Le Roman de la conquête 1830* (The romance of the 1830 conquest) (1930).¹⁴

Dunwoodie's own title—*Writing French Algeria*—has clear echoes of David Prochaska's important work, *Making Algeria French* (1990), and indeed these two studies have a similar objective in that they each seek to explore the historical formation of a qualitatively new settler society in the territory.¹⁵ Moreover, as a counterpoint to the attention given elsewhere in his work to the physical infrastructures and networks of power relations of the emergent settler colony, Prochaska's study includes some valuable reflections on the creation of a distinctively colonial culture in Algeria. This leads him to consider particularly the roles played by language and literature, alongside street names and picture postcards, in the settler community's processes of identity construction.¹⁶ Dunwoodie, in turn, focuses sustained and persuasive critical attention upon the very specific contribution of a variety of literary texts to the imaginative construction of *Algérie française*. While it is impossible to do justice here to the subtleties of Dunwoodie's analysis, we may trace its main conclusions with regard to the Mediterraneanist component of settler myth making in the colony.

Dunwoodie's point of departure for a study of the properly

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colonial fiction of French Algeria—as opposed to the variously exotic and erotic metropolitan productions that had preceded it, the so-called *littérature d’escale* (stopover or tourist writing)—is conventional enough in that he identifies Louis Bertrand’s *Le Sang des races* (The blood of the races) (1899)¹⁷ as representing a radical break in the depiction of the territory and both its European and Arabo-Berber inhabitants. For our purposes here, what is central to Bertrand’s ideological project is the depiction of the settlers of Algeria as a *peuple neuf* in the making: a distinct and distinctive settler race entitled to dominate the colonized territory now and in future years because of its privileged status as the “natural” heirs to the glory that was Rome. Through the notion of the Mediterranean man, a racial archetype that Bertrand claims to have (re)discovered in the mixed southern European ancestry and community of the settlers of French Algeria, the writer offers his preferred reading of Algeria’s past. This foregrounds and valorizes the Roman heritage of Algeria, while simultaneously denigrating and even denying the territory’s Arabo-Berber past and present alike. Dunwoodie explains the enormous justificatory potential of this doubly partial reading of Algeria’s history for the territory’s emergent colonial ascendancy:

While justifying the French occupation pragmatically by highlighting the hard work and sacrifices required to make the supposedly empty, unworked land fertile, Bertrand also uncovers a moral justification in the fact that “Latin” peoples (i.e. neighbouring nations) occupied the area long before the “Arabs” (i.e. outsiders from “Arabia”) who introduced only a religion. . . . The proof, for Bertrand, lies in the Roman archaeological vestiges throughout Algeria, in the unrecognized Latinity of a wide range of phenomena such as couscous, religious architecture, the burnous of riders, Turkish baths, the native plough and the irrigation methods

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used in the oases, horse-breeding, furniture and jewellery, the dalmatic and the fan. . . . These cultural traits—both material effects and social practices—form the so-called concrete proofs of the fact that Islam had only partially evicted the former Latin (and Christian) culture.¹⁸

While Bertrand's myth of *Afrique latine* received a variety of slants by the generation of "Algerianist" writers that followed him in the first two decades of the twentieth century and even some criticism for being obsolete by such resolutely modernizing literary figures as Robert Randau and Jean Pommier, its retrospective justification of the 1830 Algiers Expedition and the century of colonization that had followed it was never seriously threatened before the 1930s.¹⁹ On the contrary, thanks to the efforts of respected historians and archaeologists such as Gaston Boissier, Gustave Boissière, and perhaps especially Stéphane Gsell, this tendentious reading of Algeria's precolonial history became a commonplace of the academic and political discourses of *Algérie française*.²⁰

In fact the regular appeal made to this theme in the literature generated during and after the 1954–62 war of national liberation underscores the mythical construct's power to retain its grip on the imaginations of the settlers' literary defenders long after this date. So for instance in Frédéric Valmain's novel *Les Chacals* (The jackals) (1960), a new arrival in Kabylia from "metropolitan" France is informed that "Nearly all the houses in the village are built from stone taken from the Roman ruins." This local reliance on the ancient labors of the territory's Roman occupiers extends even to that most powerfully symbolic of French public edifices, the local war memorial or *monument aux morts*. In the case of Tizirt's particular commemorative monument, we are solemnly informed that "It is the most beautiful memorial in existence!" for reasons that

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Valmain's narrator goes on to explain: "the Tiggirt town council had demonstrated its good taste by using a splendid Roman column in all its strict simplicity. . . . They had no money to pay for a real monument. So the only solution was to help themselves from among the Roman ruins."²¹ I have commented elsewhere on Jean Lartéguy's depiction of French paratroopers as the descendants of the Augusta Legion in his bestselling novel *Les Centurions* (1960), together with the exiled *pied-noir* Gabriel Conesa's systematic recourse to the Latin theme in his *Bab-El-Oued* (1970).²² In these and similar cases, and from Bertrand to Conesa and beyond, we find evidence to support the Fanon-inspired counterreading of the myth of Afrique latine put forward by Azzedine Haddour in his study of *Colonial Myths: History and Narrative* (2000).

Haddour's deconstruction of Bertrand's writings permits a sophisticated critique of the internal contradictions of a representation of Algerian history, which intended to legitimize colonial development and to encourage the progress of the settler community, but which can ultimately result only in a stultifying ideological immobility:

Louis Bertrand's mythic representation offers at one and the same time an image of the colonized culture as "both present and mummified" and an image fetishizing Roman ruins and reflecting the mummification of the colonizer's society, its closure, its fixity. An analysis of Bertrand's mythic representation confirms [Albert] Memmi's claim [in his *Portrait du colonisé précédé du portrait du colonisateur* (1957)] that colonial society is "frozen," that its social structures are "corseted" and "hardened."²³

The practical political implications of this inability to give ground conceptually would of course be made only too painfully apparent in the period between 1954 and 1962 and would thus ultimately lead in the most bitter of historical ironies to the definitive physical

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expulsion of the settler community from its adopted homeland. However, a new generation of French Algerian writers was to emerge in the 1930s that would make strenuous literary efforts to discover strategies for coming to terms with the increasingly conflictual politics of the territory. This was the so-called *Ecole d'Alger*, and in the “second-generation” Mediterraneanism of this group and especially that voiced by its most celebrated member, Albert Camus, we find further evidence of the settler community’s abiding weakness for engaging artistic misrepresentations of harsh colonial realities.

This said, we should not underestimate the extent to which the writings and public pronouncements of Camus and his group of young writers—which included particularly Gabriel Audisio, René-Jean Clot, and Emmanuel Roblès—represented a genuine attempt to break with the culturally and politically debilitating ideology of Latin Africa. Roblès was among the very first European writers in Algeria to reflect seriously on the condition of the colonized population of Algeria and would make indigenous characters important and even central figures in such pioneering novels as *L’Action* (1938) and *Les Hauteurs de la ville* (1948).²⁴ Camus, for his own part, would in 1939 famously plead the case for a more just treatment of the suffering Berber population of the impoverished region of Kabylia in an important series of articles published in the leading leftist newspaper of the territory, *Alger Républicain*.²⁵ However, the group’s collective challenge to the Algerian colonial establishment, like the liberal humanism that underpinned their analysis of the settler community’s ills particularly as regarding its relations with the territory’s Arabo-Berber population, was from the outset and throughout undermined by its own internal contradictions. This underlying failure to break with what we might regard as the epistemological orthodoxy of *Algérie française* has been shrewdly characterized by Neil MacMaster, following Peter Dunwoodie’s analysis:

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Fundamentally they remained trapped in the same historic/colonial impasse as the Algerianists and what is perhaps more striking is not the supposed break between the Ecole d'Alger and the older, conservative group, but the underlying similarities or continuities. The Ecole remained grounded in a myth of a Mediterranean people but one which shifted away from the Roman/Latin symbolism of the Algerianists, rejected for its identification with colonial militarism as well as the founding myths of Italian fascism, toward an aesthetic denoted by Greece, Odysseus and "open" seafaring communities.²⁶

It will not be necessary to dwell here on the Ecole d'Alger's "quasi-racist aesthetic of beautiful, bronzed youth," although we might usefully underline its inherently escapist, obfuscatory, and, indeed, even hallucinatory qualities.²⁷ However, we do need to consider the representation of the colonized population of Algeria derived from its patent model of Mediterranean humanism. Central to this representation is a vision of colonial Algerian society as the culturally inclusive creuset or melting pot noted earlier in this discussion. While Gabriel Audisio is usually credited with the invention of this mythic trope in the 1930s,²⁸ it is Albert Camus's continued commitment to this key theme over a period of some thirty years that is worthy of comment here. More specifically, it is in that long-term failure to see through the myth of a common Mediterranean humanity that Camus demonstrates his inability to conceive of an Algeria outside the cultural and political straitjacket of continued French colonial rule. For ultimately, as Azzedine Haddour argues, "Although he [Camus] stressed the unity of the Mediterranean world he was incapable of thinking in terms other than those of a French colonizer."²⁹ A brief examination of two very different texts by Camus will suffice to make this point.

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The first of these texts is an article published by Camus in *L'Express* on 9 July 1955 in which he wrote, "If I feel myself to be closer, for instance, to an Arab peasant, or a Kabyle shepherd, than to a shopkeeper in one of our northern French towns, then that is because a shared sky, an imperious nature, and a common destiny have proved stronger, for many of us, than natural barriers or the artificial divisions maintained by colonization."³⁰ Neither Camus's good faith nor his goodwill are in question here. However, nor can there be much doubt that such comments almost a year into the Algerian war reveal the great writer to be precisely that archetypal liberal humanist *colonisateur de bonne volonté* or colonizer of goodwill famously identified just two years later by Albert Memmi, the now well-known Tunisian Jewish intellectual critic of French colonialism.³¹ Having failed to influence the Algerian war directly in 1956 when both the nationalists and especially his own settler community roundly condemned his courageous but futile "Appeal for a Civilian Truce," Camus would be hailed the following year by a worldwide audience when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. However, Camus's infamous declaration while in Sweden—in response to a heckling Algerian student in the course of a university visit—that he preferred his "mother" to "justice"³² was widely interpreted and almost universally condemned as revealing his underlying fidelity not only to his actual mother still living in Algiers, Catherine Sintès, but also to Algérie française and its obdurate pied-noir community. With Camus's decision in the wake of this outcry to remain silent after the publication of his *Actuelles III: Chroniques algériennes* in 1958, which was followed quickly by the writer's premature death in 1960, little additional evidence existed to chart the evolution of his thinking as the Algerian conflict continued and intensified.³³

Camus's silence served as background to the huge interest generated in France and internationally by the posthumous publication

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of *Le Premier Homme* in 1994. Although there is much of value in this unfinished novel, there is also much that inclines this reader at least to situate the text within a tradition of variously epic and heroic fictional accounts of the French colonial project in Algeria. This tradition is arguably at its best (and certainly at its most developed) in Jules Roy's six-volume novel cycle *Les Chevaux du soleil* (The horses of the sun) (1967–75). It is more typically (and thus less impressively) represented by *Le 13e convoi* (The thirteenth convoy) (1987) and *Le 113e été* (The 113th summer) (1991), two halves of a *chronique romanesque* by Jacques Roseau and Jean Fauque that, as the titles suggest, focus respectively on the rise and fall of colonial Algeria.³⁴ Jules Roy was a former career soldier who had resigned his commission in protest at France's Indo-China war (1946–54) and who went on to write a stinging critique of the Algerian conflict, *La Guerre d'Algérie*, published in 1960, which included a sustained attack on his own community that many of the settlers would never forgive.³⁵ However, even in the hands of such a clear-sighted and critical member of the pied-noir community, what we might conveniently characterize as the novel of settler possession and dispossession appears to display an apparently inherent tendency to function as an apologia for *Algérie française*. More particularly, recounting the settler experience of diaspora post-1962 can all too easily turn into an Algerian colonial variation on the theme of Paradise Lost.³⁶

However, what is striking in the present context is the ease with which the Nobel Prize-winner was drawn in *Le Premier Homme* into the mythifying mainstream of colonial literary reaction to the Algerian war. Camus's silence from 1958 on was only broken nearly forty years later when the text that he had been working on at the time of his death was finally made public; and that text is in fact a colonialist novel that sits all too easily alongside those *post*

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