


Markets of Civilizations: Islam and Racial Capitalism in Algeria

Muriam Haleh Davis (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022). Pp 288. \$99.95 cloth, \$26.95 paper. ISBN: 9781478018506

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For some time now, scholars have devoted considerable intellectual energy to analyzing how France's colonial project in Algeria depended on racial claims of Islam being incompatible with modernity or civilization. Although this scholarship has remained largely distinct from Algeria's economic history, in *Markets of Civilization*, Muriam Haleh Davis traces how such claims spilled into economic planning, as French economic planners envisioned free market economics as a tool to civilize their Muslim subjects. Davis demonstrates how, from the beginning of the French colonial project in Algeria, racial claims informed economic policy and Islam retained explanatory economic power even in the post-independence period. In so doing, she inserts Algeria into the growing historiography of global racial capitalism.

For historians of Algeria, this book's importance lies in its mapping of how French colonial policy was shaped by what Davis calls a "racial regime of religion" (p. 3). This succinct shorthand immediately makes clear that while Islam was the object of Algerian inferiority, ideas about Islam could be marshalled much like ideas about race in other contexts. For French colonial officials, Islam was not a fluid and everchanging set of religious practices. Instead, it was a set of immutable characteristics, including laziness and licentiousness, and thereby impervious to reform or modernization. In terms of economics, French planners, thinkers, and lawmakers described Muslims as psychologically, religiously, and socially incapable of adapting to a liberal market economy. Davis shows that as economic policies in colonial Algeria shifted throughout the twentieth century, influenced by European economic and political developments, so too did the racialized language officials and economic planners used to describe Algerians. Even as European thinkers valorized colorblindness in the aftermath of World War II, planners found new ways of inscribing racialized ideas of Algerians into their economic visions for Algeria. Islam, for example, continued to be associated with an "extraordinary passivism" and "frozen in immobility" (p. 72).

The author's close attention to racial language, notably, speaks to the contradictory nature of racial discourses as both enduring and mutable. On the one hand, there needed to be essential racial differences to legitimize the policies and practices of colonial Algeria, but, on the other, there also needed to be a narrative of mutual economic collaboration to ward off any notion of incompatibility between Europeans and Algerians. European planters and Algerian workers' collaboration on the production of important crops—like citrus, for example—reflected their shared belonging to the Mediterranean family. Recent work from Judith Surkis has shown how ideas of Muslim sexuality were central to the colonial confiscation of Algerian land and creation of a bifurcated legal system in which Algerians had limited rights. Davis extends this analysis to show how such ideas served economic interests and aligned with the racial capitalist discourses of the time. Some French colonial officials claimed that land confiscation and labor, for example, under the right conditions, could offer Algerians a path out of idleness.

One of *Markets of Civilization's* strengths is the long timespan covered by Davis, from the nineteenth century into the 1960s, which illustrates some of the continuities at play. The author, for instance, shows how the Saint-Simonian model, which was popular in the nineteenth century and maintained that economic development could enable harmony

between Orient and Occident, informed French economic strategy in the post-independence period as well. This long timespan proves especially helpful in tracing continuities between colonial and post-independence Algeria. Colonial Algeria functioned at once as an allegedly free market liberal economy and a colonial economy. The flow of goods out of Algeria to Europe, for example, was not handled by individual companies; instead, it was centralized, shipped in bulk, and uniformly packaged. The newly independent Algerian regime's economic policy was equally contradictory. Ben Bella's regime continued to take a centralized approach to the economy, including banning the private export of olive oil and maintaining a monopoly over public sector exports, consistent with its status as a socialist state, but also retained shockingly strong economic ties to France.

While *Markets of Civilization* is primarily concerned with the relationship between France and Algeria, Davis also contributes to a growing body of scholarship that considers Algeria's regional connections beyond its colonial relationship to France. Foundational nineteenth-century myths about Europe's natural domination of Mediterranean space took on new meaning in the twentieth century as European thinkers stressed enduring ideas of the inviolable wholeness of the Mediterranean to counter the threat of pan-Arabism and minimize Algeria's inherently Arab, Muslim identity. In the post-independence period, Davis also shows how Algeria struggled to find its place within pan-Arab and pan-African movements. The way Davis draws out these larger regional connections is a refreshing move, given how fixated the historiography of colonial Algeria has been on the colonial relationship between France and Algeria, to the detriment of highlighting other transnational connections.

This book features a somewhat surprising cast of characters, with cameos from giants of critical theory such as Karl Marx and Pierre Bourdieu, and important Muslim thinkers like Malek Bennabi. Davis successfully brings together the varied conversations among scholars of intellectual history and critical theory alongside the economic histories connected to her immediate object of study. Those interested in the history of the Left, in particular, will enjoy the amount of intellectual history that peppers the text, as Davis devotes considerable energy to mapping the varied positions of the French Left on Algerians and their capacity for progress.

The book, to be certain, could have operated solely at the level of economic discourse and still be a valuable contribution, but Davis's object of study extends beyond discourse alone. Davis successfully reconstructs the world that her historical actors occupied through strategies like painting succinct portraits of thinkers and planners who move in and out of the narrative. We see how specific actors understood themselves with respect to the various forces under analysis, including colonialism, Islam, and economic liberation, alongside the fluidity in how these forces intersected with lived realities. Her approach thus often presents us with new perspectives, even of old ideas. While historians have extensively studied Muslim reformists in Algeria, Davis connects them to the economic and racial dynamics she analyzes. More specifically, while all reformists embraced a vision of potential renaissance in the Arab world, Malek Bennabi insisted that such would require Arabs to embrace productivity as an ideal.

These detailed narratives are also, however, one of the text's weaknesses. Davis's portraits of some economic thinkers and planners include their educational pedigree and wide range of positions on various political developments and government projects. In the chapter cheekily titled "Fellahs into Peasants," Davis spends a considerable amount of time on agricultural minutiae, including soil erosion. In both instances, she risks losing non-specialist readers. In general, though, Davis often neatly defines complicated people, moments, and developments, making the text largely accessible to a wide readership beyond scholars and students of Algeria, including those interested in the histories of economics and racial thinking in the Middle East.

The two most important and interesting chapters, arguably, are Chapter 3, "Decolonization and the Constantine Plan," and Chapter 5, "Communism in a White Burnous." Chapter 3 illustrates why the previously underexamined Constantine Plan was a turning point in French

colonial history. Longstanding tensions between metropolitan politicians, who were open to more rights for Muslims, and European settlers in Algeria, who were unwilling to concede any power, all but evaporated under the pressure of the War of Independence. On October 3, 1958, De Gaulle announced the five-year Constantine Plan, which sought to rapidly develop Algeria both economically and socially, including a major expansion in housing. The very next day, Muslims were finally granted full citizenship rights on par with settlers. In the fifth chapter, “Communism in a White Burnous,” Davis shows how the newly independent Algerian state posited its own relationship between religion and economics. While the French claimed Algerians were fundamentally incapable of participating in a free market economy due to Islam, Ben Bella’s regime insisted it was Islam’s socialist principles that made it so powerful. Davis shows how Ben Bella charted his own socialist path, one that rejected the irreligiosity of the Soviet Union and left economic trade with France intact. Even after independence, for example, 75% of Algerian exports went to France and 80% of imports came from France (p. 122). Here, Davis draws interesting parallels to concurrent discussions among the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Syria that similarly used new readings of Islamic history to argue socialist principles were part of Islam from its inception.


The final chapter speaks to the growing body of scholarship that considers how capitalist imperatives can operate under the guise of humanitarianism or philanthropy. After World War II, the older, so-called civilizing mission was replaced with a modernizing, humanitarian mission meant to create a modern Algeria ready to take its role on the regional stage. Even in the post-independence period, Davis explains, French economic planners argued “the goal of development was to shape psychological structures, not to produce concrete results” (p. 149). Although the colonial tie between France and Algeria was severed by 1962, there is an important afterlife to the Constantine Plan, as many of its architects later worked in development in France and helped forge new ties between the countries. Davis offers a very useful history of the immediate aftermath of independence, helping to answer many lingering questions about how to make sense of France’s role in Algeria’s post-independence.

Ultimately, *Markets of Civilization* makes a significant contribution to the field of Algerian history through its explication of the entanglements of racial, economic, and colonial imperatives. Its long timespan sheds new light on previously underexamined continuities between colonial and post-independence Algeria, while its in-depth analysis of the economic history of the 1950s and 1960s is also useful for revealing the very particular dynamics at play in the late colonial, early independence period; dynamics that can be obfuscated by texts telling a much longer story in less detail. I recommend the book to scholars and students interested in the study’s widely-ranging themes, including racial capitalism in the Middle East, the connections between economic and intellectual histories, the enduring nature of colonial, racial thinking, and how post-independence Arab regimes negotiated and remade older colonial ideas and policies.

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The Egyptian Labor Corps: Race, Space, and Place in the First World War

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