



Gilbert Meynier.- *L'Algérie révélée. La guerre de 1914-1918 et le premier quart du XX^e siècle*, Nouvelle édition revue et corrigée (Paris: Bouchène, 2015).

It may seem odd to review a book published almost four decades ago.¹ To be sure, a new edition was published recently, in 2015, with a new foreword by the author and a new afterword by André Nouschi, who directed the thesis that later became the book. But there are other reasons to revisit this magisterial publication, the importance of which it is impossible to exaggerate. It remains, unquestionably, the most penetrating

and thorough study of Algeria during the First World War and a key contribution to our understanding of the emergence of the modern Algerian nation. Research relating to these topics must reckon with Meynier's exhaustively researched study, a work written with equal parts passion and erudition.

In the years during and immediately after the French empire dissolved in the varied processes of decolonization, Gilbert Meynier, along with other pioneering scholars such as Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch and Marc Michel, was one of relatively few French historians who paid serious attention to France's colonial history by focusing in depth on the recent past in the colonies themselves. Although the work of these three historians is very different in many respects, they all root their work deeply in the economic realities of colonialism.² *L'Algérie révélée* explores the economic impact of the Great War in detail. As Meynier notes, because Algeria was a poor country, with an agricultural economy principally dependent upon French markets, the disruptions of the war reverberated very quickly in the economic sphere. Between 1914 and 1918, Algeria suffered a "triple crisis" –budgetary, credit, and currency– but this did nothing to alter the social or political situations, which were predicated upon French settler domination and expropriation. Even the crises of the war years were temporary, so determined were French interests to maintain the *status quo ante bellum*. But what was new was that economic dependency was reinforced in a context where larger aspects of

1. Gilbert Meynier, *L'Algérie révélée. La guerre de 1914-1918 et le premier quart du XX^e siècle* (Genève: Droz, 1981).

2. Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Le Congo au temps des grandes compagnies concessionnaires, 1898-1930* (EHESS, 1972), Marc Michel, *L'Appel à l'Afrique. Contributions et réactions à l'effort de guerre en A.O.F. (1914-1919)* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1982).

French power, and thus the relationships between France and Algeria and Algerians, were under increasing pressure and forced to adapt to new realities.

This is why the discussion of the economic effects of the war is so important. It supports Meynier's overarching arguments about the crucial place of the Great War in the development of Algerian nationalism and the Algerian nation. What made *L'Algérie révélée* such an important study when it appeared, aside from its comprehensive research, was its claim that Algeria was "revealed" to itself during the war. And the subtitle announced that the events of the First World War had to be situated in a larger context, one that embraced broader forces and developments of the first part of the twentieth century. Why this insistence on the importance of the First World War mattered so much had a great deal to do with the work of Meynier's contemporary and fellow great historian of Algeria during the period of French colonization, Charles-Robert Ageron. Ageron's own influential and authoritative thesis, published in two volumes in 1968, conceded the importance of the First World War in the development of a modern national consciousness among Algerians, but identified an awakening of nationalism taking place immediately after the war and accelerating from there.³ In contrast, for Meynier a new national consciousness was rooted even in the prewar years, and developed progressively from the moment war broke out in 1914. By 1919, Algeria was already "revealed" to itself.

Although Meynier, in a Marxist analysis, pays a great deal of attention to the economic and political structures of French domination in Algeria, he was equally attuned to the superstructures of ideas and states of mind. Declaring, "Les superstructures idéologiques sont particulièrement importantes dans les cas de l'impérialisme colonial français (1)," he is especially interested in how the native people of Algeria responded to unprecedented wartime pressures and demands. Asked to contribute to the French war effort during a period of existential crisis for the metropole, "Solicités sans relâche, et pour le premier fois, pendant plus de quatre ans, l'univers et l'horizon des Algériens ne pourront pas rester les mêmes (4)." And it was not merely the approximately 175.000 Algerians who served in the French army (120-125.000 of whom served in France) and the approximately 120.000 workers who labored in France during the war who had their horizons changed and expanded. New "données" appeared in Algeria itself, making the effect on

3. Charles-Robert Ageron, *Les Algériens musulmans et la France, 1871-1919* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968; New Edition Paris: Bouchène, 2005).

national consciousness that much more widespread and that much more quickly apparent during, not only after, the war.

First of all, of course, Algerians who traveled outside North Africa felt the full impact of new experiences and ideas. Algerian soldiers discovered a social order, both within the military and in French metropolitan civilian society, more egalitarian than the rigid and oppressive colonial and racial hierarchies that structured life in Algeria. To be sure, racism and discrimination were not absent in the army, and one of the virtues of Meynier's account is his forensic attention to the details of the experiences of these men. A Kabyle soldier could write in 1916, "Je me plais très bien au milieu de mes frères d'armes (...). J'ai partagé le sort du soldat français depuis le debut de la guerre. Je viens d'être nommé sergent (...) (442)." But, for instance, Algerians took note of discriminatory policies that allowed native French soldiers to visit their homes, while Algerians did not benefit from the same privilege. It seemed as if France was saying to Algerian mothers: "Tu ne verras pas ton fils, ne le soigneras pas, ne l'embrasseras pas (421)." Workers who came to France from Algeria benefited even less from France's official republican commitment to egalitarianism. Laborers were strictly segregated from French civilians, both in living quarters and in the workplace, whenever possible, and they were subject to military discipline and restrictions on their movements. Nonetheless, Algerians could not fail to interact with native French people from time to time, to encounter new ideas, new technologies, and new possibilities. The contradictory impulses that shaped their experiences are evident in the complaint of one official in 1917, who wrote that Algerian workers "sont traités sensiblement comme des Européens (...). Il serait temps de réagir vigoureusement contre cette absence d'organisation et cette liberté (462)."

Clearly, Algerians sometimes benefited from freedoms in the metropole, but official policies were designed to reduce and constrain these opportunities. In the end, the experiences of these men outside of Algeria and its colonial order, whether in the army or the factory, "ramènent en Algérie de graves structures de déséquilibre pour le pouvoir coloniale (484)." Not only were their outlooks and minds altered, but these men brought back their experiences and shared them with others, meaning that some Algerians did not even have to leave North Africa to have their horizons expanded. In fact, the real danger for the future of French control in Algeria was that the words and new perspectives of the 250,000 men who worked or soldiered in France resonated in an "ordre colonial déjà ébranlé (744)."

Meynier's analysis is not rooted only in the changed perspectives of the men who served in France during the war, as important as they were, or even in the economic effects of the war that he discusses so ably and thoroughly. He devotes a large part of his lengthy study to an examination of wartime events in Algeria itself, employing the same attention to detail and deep research in a wide range of sources to examine domestic changes in the colonial situation and in the thinking and politics of indigenous Algerians. The book explores every relevant event in the region between 1914 and 1919, including naval and submarine warfare, unrest in Tripolitania and Morocco, espionage and propaganda carried out by France's German and Turkish enemies, and the policies and actions of France's colonial administration. On this last topic, Meynier notes that to the constant solicitation of help from Algeria's indigenous population, French officials added "tentatives de séduction." These were purposeful and direct, and included attempts to shape a more "liberal" colonialism and to enact meaningful reforms in the areas of political representation for Algerians and relief from acute indignities such as the worst aspects of the *indigénat*, or the punitive and discriminatory legal code that governed Algerian, but not European, civil and juridical status in the colony.

Yet these attempts failed decisively. "Liberal" colonialists dreamed that France could live up to the millennial promise of republican egalitarianism and universal humanity even within the context of empire, but failed to realize that repression was "la réalité objective –et aussi formelle– du pouvoir colonial (741)."

Here Meynier echoes the penetrating insight of Albert Memmi, first articulated during the Algerian War of Independence that was the product of the kind of nationalism and revelation of nationhood that Meynier saw emerging in the era of the Great War.⁴ That this state of mind was present before 1919 is indicated by the pessimistic prediction of an Algerian soldier right at the beginning of the war, in October 1914: "Quand nous aurons versé notre sang pour la France, nous recommencerons à être traités dans notre pays comme les derniers des païens car nous ne pourrons jamais compter sur la reconnaissance de ceux pour lesquels nous faisons tuer (690)."

This soldier saw clearly that the promises of a liberal colonialism, and of even a just recompense for helping to defend a *patrie* that was not really his own, were ultimately empty. In the fifth and final part of his massive tome

4. Albert Memmi, *Portrait du colonisé précédé du portrait du colonisateur* (Paris: Buchet/Castel, Corrêa, 1957).

(the published book was actually abridged to 793 pages, from a thesis of 2500 pages in four volumes), Meynier meticulously charts the development of national awakening among Algerians during and immediately after the war through open resistance to French wartime demands, increasing reaction and repression from European settlers and the colonial administration, and realignments of economic status and class. “Luttes et solidarités nouvelles” emerged during these years, and though the essentially integrationist demands of nationalists such as the “Jeunes Algériens” did not disappear, new aspirations awakened in the crucible of the war clearly could not find satisfaction within the framework of French settler colonialism. In sum, “C’est au cours du premier quart du XX^{ème} siècle qu’on peut observer à la fois, au niveau du pouvoir colonial, les hésitations et les crispations, et dans le peuple algérien, les ruptures et les replis qui structurent l’Algérie contemporaine (738).”

The brilliant analysis and exhaustive research (including the use of sources in Arabic and interviews with participants that differentiate this work from many others) of *L’Algérie révélée* has stood the test of time. After almost four decades, it remains indispensable and compelling, even as subsequent research by other scholars has added further nuance and detail. In his afterword to the 2015 reedition of the work, Meynier’s mentor and fellow historian of Algeria André Nouschi wrote: “Le mérite de Gilbert Meynier est d’avoir, dans une grande et incontournable analyse, démêlé les racines d’une histoire multiple dans laquelle les Algériens jouent un rôle éminent; il deviennent les acteurs de leur destin.”⁵ Sadly, Meynier and his mentor Nouschi both passed away in 2017, but they leave behind a monumental study that gives to the Algerian people a voice in their own history, and that will provide historians of Algeria, French colonialism, and the Great War with valuable insights well into the future.

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5. Meynier, *L’Algérie révélée* (2015), 781.