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BOOK REVIEW

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Markets of civilization: Islam and racial capitalism in Algeria, by Muriam Haleh Davis, Durham, Duke University Press, 2022, xviii + 270 pp., \$26.95 (softcover), ISBN 978-1-4780-1850-6

History :

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This book analyzes 'how the market acts as a moral system that permeates the most unexpected domains' (xiii). Professor Davis' starting point is a discussion among the economists, intellectuals, and politicians assembled at the first meeting of the Mont Pelerin Society, in 1947, to promote the values of private property and competitive markets.¹ A Swiss diplomat attending the conference, which was organised by Friedrich Hayek, publicly questioned how such rational behaviour promoted by Adam Smith might apply to those 'absolutely idle' Arabs he had seen during the Allied landings in Algiers in November 1942, 'quite indifferent to what was going on' (1). 'Would Smith', he asked, 'have defended the universality of homo economicus if he had been "reared among the sun-baked race of Arabs who prefer leisure to work, security on the lowest scale to the insecurity of initiative and therefore equality to liberty?"' (2).

Rather than singling out Arabs as the possible impediments to efficient markets, Davis prefers to focus on 'the twin figures of *homo economicus* and *homo islamicus* ... also invoked by the colonial administrators, economists, and politicians who implemented economic reforms in late colonial and postcolonial Algeria' (2). It was, after all, *musulmans algériens*, Berbers as well as Arabs, who constituted the supposedly inferior native residue after the Décret Crémieux of 1870 accorded French citizenship to the Jews of Algeria. When Algerian students in 1955 launched the Union Générale des Étudiants Musulmans Algériens (UGEMA), they indeed voted against Communists and other progressives, so as to add 'Muslim', to distinguish themselves from other students, a potential majority, who opposed an independent Muslim Algeria. Davis does not mention this important turning point (on UGEMA, see Henry²⁰¹⁰). She also consecrates only a single paragraph (142) to independent Algeria's Promethean efforts of industrialisation under Houari Boumediene and Belaïd Abdesselam. While mentioning the late Ali El Kenz in her text, she omits his pathbreaking study of the El Hadjar steel plant, near Annaba (El Kenz 1987). She briefly mentions this factory (94) as part of the Constantine Plan but does not link it to Algeria's vastly expanded project of industrialisation after independence. Despite these gaps, Davis concludes that *homo islamicus* is getting its revenge in independent Algeria, as the massive *hirak* movement in 2019–2021 marched week after week to the banner of Algeria's most significant Islamist reformer, Malek Bennabi.

This book tells us less about independent Algeria than about the evolution of French neoliberal initiatives since 1931, celebrating the centenary of the French occupation of Algeria with efforts to reform the colonial settler state. Raw neoliberalism is usually associated with Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, but Davis discovers its French antecedents in the Office Algérien d'Action Économique et Touristique (OFALAC), founded in 1931 to promote 'the new Algeria'.

The economic mission was to standardise Algeria's major exports of wine, citrus, and olive oil, 'an important precedent for the development of a modern system of distribution in mainland France in the late 1930s' (47). Wine and citrus mainly concerned the settlers, but the olive oil posed special problems for this putative 'market of civilization'. Production of the olives was mainly in native hands. Standardisation discriminated against small Muslim producers and even against large successful Muslim refiners like Mustapha Tamzali, who insisted on mixing wider, richer varieties of oil having higher – and tastier – acidic content. For OFALAC modernisers, who favoured continuous closed refining processes producing lower acidic content, *homo islamicus* had 'deformed tastes' (65). So after independence, when Tamzali's refinery was nationalised, the new state management 'now sold only pure olive oil ... Once a symbol of native backwardness, the quality and purity of olive oil became a sign of national identity and revolutionary ethos ...' (66).

Davis also points to striking continuities between prewar modernisation efforts, wartime Vichy regime technocrats, and postwar economic plans crowned by the Constantine Plan of 1959. The Vichy regime further promoted OFALAC's modernisation by proposing that Algeria industrialise. Since 'Muslims were not economists', the French army's Fifth Bureau devised Arabic fables of Juha to enlist native support for grandiose economic plans in the late 1950s (90), at the height of Algeria's war for independence. Even more surrealistic were continuing efforts of OFALAC and various other rural civil and military services to modernise *homo islamicus* in the countryside, where French bombardments were dislocating up to half the peasantry from free fire zones and incarcerating them in regroupment camps. Davis even suggests a connection between Paul Delouvrier's Thousand Villages (redefined to mask the regroupment camps) and the 'thousand socialist villages' featured in Boumediene's agrarian reform, though she did not study either and misidentified Delouvrier's villages as housing units (95).²

Davis might have elaborated on the continuities between French neoliberal technocracy and subsequent economic planning in independent Algeria. The link would have been Gérard Destanne de Bernis, a student of François Perroux, whose poles of development had inspired French state planners in colonial Algeria. His theory of industrialising industries lay at the heart of Algeria's ambitious industrial policy of the 1970s. Reindustrialising Algeria is again under consideration. (Tou 2023).

In this reviewer's opinion, the author's deliberate stretching of race beyond physical traits to embrace religion is not helpful. Davis explicitly encourages us to 'think relationally about anti-Semitism and the racialization of Muslims' (6). While she would likely not stretch anti-Semitism to include, say, anti-Zionism, her concept-stretching does lead her to make curious statements, such as '... the Constantine Plan effectively elided the racial regime of religion constructed by the colonial state' (16). It is indeed true that most settlers in colonial Algeria were racists, targeting *l'indigène* or *le musulman*, but French technocrats intent on transforming *homo islamicus* into *homo economicus* were not necessarily racists unless a broadened concept makes them so.

Muriam Haleh Davis presents a fascinating account of the continuities between colonial and postcolonial industrializers, and which merits further elaboration. *Markets of Civilization* would have had a sharper focus following a subtitle of 'From Colonial Settler to State Capitalism in Algeria'. During the Boumediene era, Algerian technocrats pursued an industrial and agricultural revolution, and with less technocratic sectors of the state pursuing a cultural one as well, all with the intent of remaking Algerian society. Perhaps the subject of a future study by Professor Davis?

Notes

- 1 As The Mont Pelerin Society's Statement of Aims (8 April 1947) submits, 'Even that most precious possession of Western Man, freedom of thought and expression, is threatened by the spread of creeds which, claiming the privilege of tolerance when in the position of a minority, seek only to establish a position of power in which they can suppress and obliterate all views but their own. The group holds that these developments have been fostered by the growth of a view of history which denies all absolute moral standards and by the growth of theories which question the desirability of the rule of law. It holds further that they have been fostered by a decline of belief in private property and the competitive market; for without the diffused power and initiative associated with these institutions it is difficult to imagine a society in which freedom may be effectively preserved'. <https://www.montpelerin.org/event/429dba23-fc64-4838-aea3-b847011022a4/websitePage:6950c74b-5d9b-41cc-8da1-3e1991c14ac5>. ✖
- 2 For more on the regroupment camps, see the work by Fabien Sacriste (2022). ✖

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