Decolonization and the French of Algeria: Bringing the Settler Colony Home

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Algeria was colonised and departmentalised by the French in the 19th century, and by 1954 around a million Algerians of European origin lived in the settler colony. Following a seven-and-a-half-year war against France, Algeria officially became independent in 1962. However, decades later, France continues to be tied to its colonial past through the communities who left the new nation for the metropole. That is to say, almost all of the European settlers and Jews, as well as some of the Algerians who had supported the French army during the War of Independence.

Sung-Eun Choi traces the intertwined and multi-layered narratives of these communities as they left Algeria at the end of the war and analyses their repatriation to France from political, economic and cultural perspectives. This was an intricate and far from coherent process which spanned five decades and continues to be a matter for political and historical debate. By looking at the decolonisation of Algeria through the repatriation of the settler colony, Choi's work adds to the increasing interest amongst historians to look beyond the official interpretation of decolonisation as an equivalent to 'flag independence' and instead consider the continuities and discontinuities across the colonial and post-colonial periods.⁽¹⁾ This has been a fruitful line of enquiry in recent years. Notably, in his seminal work, Todd Shepard argues that Algerian independence led to the remaking of France. The late colonial idea of a multicultural France was abruptly brought to an end in 1962 and, Shepard argues, France was remade as a unified, metropolitan and, importantly, monocultural nation. Choi endeavours to set her work apart from other studies of this subject, including Todd Shepard's work, in two ways. Her approach covers a much longer period of time, whereas Shepard discusses the *rapatriés* (repatriates) in France only as late as 1963. Choi is therefore able to compare the different Fifth Republican governments' approaches to repatriation from de Gaulle to Chirac. Choi's book also considers the ongoing role of the repatriates and children and grandchildren in continuing these political debates. However, she does not attempt to analyse the ways in which these policies were put into practice, something which Yann Scioldo-Zürcher's work already discusses.⁽²⁾ Rather, Choi seeks to discuss the ideas at the core of these debates and how these shaped this complex narrative of the installation and integration of the repatriates into French society.

The title of the book includes a number of contested terms. Firstly, the term decolonisation. Choi does not

really go into much depth on the issues which surround this term, which is probably understandable considering arguments about the nomenclature of decolonisation would and, in fact, do fill several other books.⁽³⁾ Choi nevertheless moves away from the line of thought that 'flag independence' signified decolonisation and instead argues that the ongoing disputes and negotiations about repatriation demonstrate that decolonisation remains incomplete.

Secondly, the idea of the 'French of Algeria' is ambiguous. The people of European origin who inhabited Algeria have had many names over the years – colons, settlers, 'Algériens', Europeans of Algeria, French of Algeria and later *pièds noirs* – to name but a few. The quantity of these names is most likely due to the nature of the community, which did indeed begin as settlers or colonisers from various parts of Europe, but they were all granted French citizenship in 1889. However, these were not the only communities to be naturalised. The majority of Jews were granted citizenship in 1870 under the Crémieux Decrees (apart from under the Vichy regime when they were stripped of their nationality until the Provisional Government reinstated it). The Jewish population of Algeria has also been a rich area of research in recent years, particularly with the work of Sarah Stein who has shed light on the case of the Sephardic Jews in Algeria. The *Journal of North African Studies* also produced a special issue on the Jews and French colonialism in Algeria, extracting the narratives of a community which has often been overlooked in the past.⁽⁴⁾ Moreover, some Muslims were naturalised, until all Algerians became French citizens in 1958.

Choi focusses her arguments, for the main part, on the French who were of European origin and counted for an overwhelming majority of the one million who fled Algeria for France at the end of the Algerian War in 1962. However, the later chapters necessarily involve the Muslim communities who were also repatriated, namely the *harkis* who fought for France during the Algerian War and also considers the context of the Muslim migrants who sought work in France and later brought their families to settle in the metropole. Surprisingly, although she conducted her own original research including an analysis of some Jewish testimonies located in the American Jewish Archives, Choi's arguments about the case of the Jews appear to mainly be limited to the narrative of their exodus and their settlement in France in the early years of repatriation. Discussion of repatriation politics beyond the 1960s mainly focusses on the narratives of the *pièd noir*, *harkis* and Algerian Muslim communities.

There are many other ambiguous terms which are integral to this subject, including rapatriates, *harkis*, etc which Choi does very well to juggle without letting the necessary explanations detract from the central narrative. This narrative is essentially the legal and political journey of repatriation for these French citizens from 1962 until the present day. It also depicts the evolution of the French government's narrative, which began as an 'ingathering of previously displaced citizens' following the dismantling of France's empire in Africa and Asia. Choi's overall focus is on the 'repatriation politics' of the French who left Algeria. By this phrase she means the French government's attempts to relinquish French sovereignty in Algeria and attach a French identity to those of European origin from Algeria, something which had been a crucial point of contention, if not unthinkable during the war. This feat was also later attempted with regards to the *harkis* and their descendants, an attempt which carried multiple complications, particularly in terms of the blurred understandings of the difference between repatriates and 'immigrants'.

In terms of the public debate on repatriation, the Fifth Republic shifted its policy from an early courting of the *rapatriés*, which sought, among other things to discourage radical political engagement, to publicly avoiding the subject in the 1960s and early 1970s, to more recently deliberately publicising its 'embrace' of the repatriates. Nevertheless, Choi highlights that this shift in the government's attitude was not reflected in the laws concerning the repatriates. Furthermore, Choi uses this book to cement her argument that a combination of the repatriates' lobbying and the French government's eagerness to assert the 'national belonging' of the repatriate citizens led to a more positive attitude towards these peoples. In contrast, those who found themselves in France and had supposedly sought the independence of Algeria, that is to say, the Muslim migrant workers and their families, were more negatively regarded.⁽⁵⁾

Many of the repatriates who fled Algeria, left behind not just their memories of 'better times' but also their

property; their homes, their belongings and their businesses. With Ben Bella's 1962 decrees nationalising 'vacant' lands and preventing non-Algerian nationals from owning land, repatriates witnessed from afar the seizure of their property. What enraged them more was the French government's refusal to intervene. In fact, during the decade following the Algerian War, many in France viewed the repatriates unfavourably as those who had abandoned Algeria and had chosen France. The Gaullist government prioritised Franco-Algerian relations and cooperation over the demands of the repatriates. Instead they preferred to 'reinstall' these peoples and draw a curtain over the past. Even the social upheaval of May '68 did little to aid the repatriates' cause, in fact de Gaulle saw it as further proof of the need to lay the Algerian past to rest. However, the repatriates had no such intentions. Coupled with their sorrow and resentment for having been forced to abandon their lives in Algeria, numerous *pieds noirs* began to react aggressively towards the government. Many joined associations and mobilised movements to build a 'repatriate electorate' that was less easy to ignore. However, not all of these associations were radical and anti-Gaullist. Several focussed on lobbying the government for financial support, and others, such as the Cercle Algérieniste and the Centre d'études Pied-Noir, sought to safeguard the *pied noir* history and culture.⁽⁶⁾

While depicting the struggle of these displaced peoples, Choi simultaneously analyses the ever more complex situation for the other repatriates, namely the *harkis* who became embroiled in disputes over their situation in comparison with that of the Algerian migrant workers. These peoples were often pitted against each other by officials and political parties, most notably the Communist Party (PCF). Despite the government's attempts to cast the *harkis* in a more positive light, often reducing them to being 'loyal patriots' of the French state, little was done to improve their situation in real terms, which led to increasing discontent amongst their youth from the 1970s onwards.⁽⁷⁾ Choi suggests that government efforts to improve these circumstances were as a result of the mobilisation of *harkis* youth.

Considering the complex and multi-faceted nature of this subject, a clear explanation of the historical and sociological context of the end of the Algerian war is necessary. However, because of this need to set the scene, Choi's stronger analytical arguments are found in the later chapters when she begins to discuss the evolution of the repatriation laws within the context of immigration and the diplomatic tensions between France and Algeria during the 1960s and 1970s. Choi argues that the 1970s marked a turning point in the Fifth Republic's attitude towards the repatriates, most particularly during Valéry Giscard d'Estaing's presidency. Here, she suggests, the state increased their efforts to appease the repatriates, including the *harkis*, regardless of their success. Under increasing pressure from repatriate lobby groups to resolve their concerns, the state attempted to rewrite its Algerian past, rather than to continue to simply bury it.

Choi then speeds up the timeline of her narrative, tracing the socialist government of the 1980s and 1990s and its relations with the *pieds noirs* and the French Muslims of 'repatriate origins'. She argues that under Mitterrand attempts were made to resolve the issues of the previous decades and thereby improve relations with the still-to-be-fully-integrated community. In doing so the state re-wrote the Algerian past to celebrate the careers and lives of the repatriates, even seeking to emphasise the cultural identity of the French Muslims by preserving their so-called 'right to difference'. This was quite a U-turn from the colour-blind Republican values of old. But, as Choi highlights, ultimately this was of little significance to the *harkis*. The government's only concrete plans to execute this idea of 'right to difference' were actually based on a vague attempt to 'educate' the French (Français de souche) people about the *harkis*' culture. Choi traces the evolution of subsequent generations and how their attitudes changed with the evolving nature of immigrants from North Africa, from just workers, to later whole families. However, Choi notes that the socialists attempted to build a unified France with multiple ethnically and culturally distinct repatriate communities. Nevertheless, this attempt fell short and in fact the government reverted to their previous stance of selectively interpreting history and leaning on the repatriate origins of these peoples in order to distinguish certain French Muslims from others of Maghreb ethnicities.

The later chapters discuss the memorialisation of the repatriate narrative by the *rapatriés* themselves, particularly the *pieds noirs*. These accounts tend to reflect an intense nostalgia for past lives and an idealised Algeria. The study of nostalgia, in particular pied noir nostalgia, is a well-established research area.⁽⁸⁾ Choi

uses certain narratives to demonstrate how repatriate perspectives were reinserted into the national past and were used to capture a wider public interest in ‘what might have been’ had Algeria remained French. In doing so, she argues, certain repatriates were able to detach their histories from the controversies of the past and begin to be regarded more favourably in the French public eye. Choi also takes a closer look at the historiography of this subject, in particular the works of Eric Savarèse, author of *The Invention of the Pieds-noirs* (2002) and Jeannine Verdès-Lerous.⁽⁹⁾ According to Choi, both of these scholars focus on the interactions between the different ethnic and cultural groups in colonial Algeria and identify the complexities, but lack critical historical analysis in their readings of key literature such as Albert Camus and Jean Pélégri, and are therefore unable to successfully deconstruct colonialism. It would be interesting to read a more expansive analysis from Choi on how she would more directly approach explaining or deconstructing colonialism through interpretations of colonial and even post-colonial literature. For this study, however, it is clear that Choi seeks to note the often contrasting perspectives of politicians and scholars in their readings, through a variety of lenses, of history and the French colonial past in Algeria.

Choi finishes her monograph by bringing the reader almost up to date with reflections on the repatriation politics of two of the latest regimes, Chirac and Sarkozy. Here she observes that there has been more of a consistency in political approaches to the repatriate communities. These approaches she dubs ‘double politics’, which indeed they have been, with attempts to both appease the repatriate communities, as witnessed with the debates on recognising ‘positive’ colonialism in the early 2000s, and also continue to seek diplomatic and economic cooperation with Algeria.

With this ambitious book, Choi has been able to draw together the multiple historical narratives of the repatriates from Algeria and analyse their political and legal integration into France during the last four decades. Moving away from focussing on collective amnesia, Choi rather centres her work on what she terms the ‘politics of remembering’. Furthermore, she adds to the continued discussions on the terminology behind the end of empire and the never-ending questions revolving around what precisely was decolonisation and whether or not it has actually come to pass. Students and established scholars alike will find this a useful resource, particularly in terms of studying decolonisation and unravelling the complex narrative of the repatriation of the French and Algerians following the end of the French colonial period.

Notes

1. This term is used by Michael Collins in his article defining decolonisation to signify a previously colonised territory achieving sovereign nation-statehood, something which he suggests is a common understanding of decolonisation. M. Collins, ‘Decolonization’, *The Encyclopedia of Empire* (2015), 1–15.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Y. Scioldo-Zücher, *Devenir metropolitain, Politique d’intégration et parcours des rapatriés d’Algérie en métropole, 1954–2005* (Paris, 2010).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Key texts which narrate French decolonisation and attempt to define the term include (notably) the works of C. Ageron, *La Décolonisation française*, (Paris, 1994); H. Brunschwig, ‘Décolonisation, néo-colonialisme: un essai sur le vocabulaire de la politique colonial’, *Cahiers d’Etudes Africaines*, 13 (1973), 5–8; M. Shipway, *Decolonization and its Impact: A Comparative Approach to the End of the Colonial Empires*, (Oxford); *The Decolonization Reader*, ed. J. Le Sueur (London, 2003).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Stein in fact contributed to this special issue on ‘Jews and French colonialism in Algeria’, see in particular her article S. Stein, ‘Dividing south from north: French colonialism, Jews, and the Algerian Sahara’, *The Journal of North African Studies*, 17 (2012), 773–92.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Massive literatures on both the study of North African migrants and the study of harkis relations with the French state already exist, see in particular; V. Crapanzano, *The Harkis: the Wound that Never Heals*, (Chicago, IL, 2011); J. Jordi, *Les harkis, une mémoire enfouie*, (Paris, 1999); Silverstein, *Algeria in France: Transpolitics, Race and Nation*, (Indiana, 2004).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. A. L. Hubbell, *Remembering French Algeria: Pieds-Noirs, Identity, and Exile*, (Lincoln, NE, 2015).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. There is a wide literature on the mobilisation of the *harkis* and the ‘second generation’. See in

particular C. Eldridge's, "'We've never had a voice': Memory construction and the children of the *harkis* (1962–1991)", *French History*, 23 (2009), 88–107. This article traces the history and memory of the *harki* community, from being represented externally by governments, *pied noir*, veteran and Algerian elite associations to internal representation by activists within the *harki* community. [Back to \(7\)](#)

8. Recent contributions to the field include H. Dauncey and C. Tinker, 'Media, memory and nostalgia in contemporary France: between commemoration, memorialisation, reflection and restoration', *Modern and Contemporary France*, 23 (2015), 135–45; C. Calargé, 'Re-voir le paradis perdu : Distorsions, amnésie, silences, et ... nostalgie de Quand l'Algérie était française', *Contemporary French & Francophone Studies*, 16 (2012), 45–53. [Back to \(8\)](#)
9. E. Savarèse, *The Invention of the Pieds-noirs*, (Anglet, 2002); J. Verdès-Leroux, *Les Français d'Algérie de 1830 à aujourd'hui: une page déchirée* (Paris, 2001). [Back to \(9\)](#)

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