

Walls of Algiers. Narratives of the City Through Text and Image

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This is a beautifully illustrated book of serious scholarship and the three editors and the other contributing authors are to be congratulated. Furthermore, although some of the visual material is more widely available and consequently has been previously used elsewhere (for example the postcard images of women discussed by Çelik in chapter four) one of the authors, Frances Terpak, is Curator at the Getty Research Institute and has given all those concerned in this production access to a range of normally unseen visual material. This gives the book a unique quality, offering anyone interested in colonial and post-colonial Algeria a different way of looking not only at the city of Algiers but also at the nature of the colonial experience in Algeria. To read *Walls of Algiers* is therefore to stimulate reflection. This is not because one disagrees with the analytical stance of the authors but because *Walls of Algiers* provokes new questions especially for those of us who experienced the period of decolonization, however distantly, and who have since spent much of their subsequent academic career studying the events of the period.

The first question is posed by the reflection that the different struggles of colonial peoples for liberation in practice framed the subsequent analysis of 19th-century colonial empire building. This is because, in large measure, those struggles coincided with the dominance of Marxist-based ideas in the political movements of the colonizer states. Those ideas not only shaped contemporary generations but have continued to shape the wider debate since. As such there are aspects of their framing that reflect what Paul Ricoeur in the French edition of his 2000 book, *La Mémoire, L'Histoire, L'Oubli*([1](#)) alludes to with his use of the double-meaning in the word *l'oubli* of both 'forgetting' and 'omission'. In a very real sense, the horrors of the struggles that were undertaken for independence make one forget that there are aspects of what the colonizer powers did that were not unique to these colonizers but had been done before. For example, in Çelik's chapter 'A Lingering Obsession' she charts the various ways in which the city was reconstructed to conform to the idea of a French city. Yet such reconstruction by a new conqueror is not new. For example, the early 16th-century Ottoman architect Sinan set out to rebuild the old Romano-Christian city of Byzantium as both an Ottoman and a Muslim space.[\(2\)](#) Indeed in her later chapter 'Historic Intersections. The Center of Algiers', Çelik opens it by remarking that when the Ottomans had themselves taken over the city of Algiers in 1529, they too had imposed their imperial presence via architecture and urban forms (p. 198).

It is also important to note that 19th-century France more generally was seeking to rid itself of its mediaeval heritage. As a result the city of Paris was extensively reconstructed during this period. Under the imperial rule of Napoleon III and his architect Baron Haussmann, Paris was rebuilt to represent both the contemporary image of what a modern city should be like but equally to ensure that the physical layout of the city would not favour the 'people' as in 1848. Walter Benjamin (3) refers to Paris as like the volcano Vesuvius, and writes of it:

Paris est, dans l'ordre social ... un massif dangereux et grondant, un foyer de révolution toujours actif. (Paris is in its social organization a dangerous and rumbling mountain, a home of all active revolution.)

Such was the intensity of the re-building and reconstruction of Paris that it almost saw the pulling down of what has since become one of the iconic buildings of Paris – the Cathedral of Notre Dame.(4)

This intense desire to get rid of the past can be seen as an expression of a French ambivalence to the 'old' that stood as a reflection of the 1789 Revolution which saw these buildings as representative of an age of monarchy and an absence of enlightenment. Although Eric Breitbart's chapter opens with a quotation from Walter Benjamin *Essays II, 1935–40* (p. 161), Benjamin is otherwise only subliminally present in spite of the fact that Julia Clancy-Smith in chapter one 'Exoticism, Erasures, and Absence. The Peopling of Algiers, 1830–1900', asks 'what would a *flâneur*, or stroller, in the streets of Algiers just prior to the summer of 1830 have seen and whom would he or she have encountered?' (p. 23). This is the question that Benjamin is asking when he describes and analyzes the processes of rebuilding and reconstructing Paris.(5) However, although Napoleon III's reconstruction was intended to prevent the city becoming a site of future revolutionary activity it did not prevent the 1870 Paris Commune, just as French officials attempts to reconstruct Algiers throughout the period of colonial rule did not prevent that part of it that had been left more or less intact – the Casbah – becoming the core of resistance in the 1957 'battle of Algiers'.

A final point with regard to the general aspect of the city (as illustrated by figure 4.1 (p. 137)) is how similar the shape of the city is to that of other coastal towns of the Mediterranean shoreline. For example Nice 'old city' is also situated on a promontory with a steep climb up to castle ruins and also has some remaining narrow staircase route ways climbing up to the castle core. It raises the question also posed in the introduction as to just how different Algiers really looked when the French army disembarked in 1830. Asking this question draws attention to the significance of hermeneutics in the interpretation of the 'other'. 19th-century colonization allied to home industrialization dramatically changed what may have been rather more delicate differences between north and south, west and east, while the subsequent processes of decolonization and the rise of political consciousness about the manifest ways in which not only territory but also the mind were colonized have shown how contemporary economic inequality took root. It also emphasized those 19th century ideas that predicated a future of natural advancement and progress and in doing so inadvertently subscribed to the basic premise of the colonial experiment that the western state had always held a position of greater advancement, a premise that was perhaps less securely based when the colonial project started in the early 19th century (as the accounts of the state of cities such as London and Paris have illustrated) than it would have seemed when the 20th century began.

Indeed the difficulty of retaining the idea that difference was probably less in evidence when colonization began is recalled in Carlier's chapter examining the emergence of a Muslim civil society between the two World Wars. Carlier opens his chapter with a quotation and reference to Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* and Hegel's argument that the creation of 'civic community' is only possible in the context of the modern world. (6) Carlier might easily have also drawn upon Emile Durkheim's distinction in *The Division of Labour in Society* between *mechanical* and *organic* solidarity (7), that is that in the pre-modern world 'solidarity' is simply there, it does not require activity or action on the part of individuals and groups whereas in modern society, solidarity has to be actively engaged in, hence the emergence of trade unions and other kinds of

voluntarist organizations. Clearly, some kinds of organizations that illustrated *organic* solidarity would have existed in Algiers at the time of the French conquest. What the conquest did was to disrupt those processes, certainly in part because of the repressive apparatus that was central to the conquest. That apparatus made it necessary for Muslims to shift where they would organize to those realms that would generally have been seen as not threatening to the state. What Carlier shows is just how effective were Muslims in doing this. In some senses they were even able to ‘colonize’ certain realms such as sport but they were also by doing this finding new and perhaps for the French colonial administration, less palatable ways of engaging with Islam itself.

A second question that *Walls of Algiers* succeeds in raising relates to the explosion of visual imagery during the 19th century that brought to a wider audience the ‘exotic’ character of the city and its inhabitants. Nevertheless, it has to be remembered that the 18th and 19th centuries were a time of ‘collecting’ whether it was music and songs, or almost forgotten histories, stories and languages, and often in the process inventing them.⁽⁸⁾ It was through such folk histories that nationalists sought to enhance the authenticity of their claims by showing that there was another world to be found on the fringes of the recently constructed national states. Collectors were everywhere, collecting new plant and animal species, recording their findings and distributing them through the new media: photography, postcards, etc. In a sense, it is why this period provides such a rich source material for commentary today. Indeed, the very richness of what is available has enabled those of us studying and writing in the 20th and 21st centuries greater opportunities for understanding the processes of conquest, colonization and decolonization than were available previously. Both Frances Terpak’s chapter on ‘The Promise and Power of New Technologies’ and Çelik’s chapter ‘A Lingering Obsession. The Houses of Algiers in French Colonial Discourses’ explore changing techniques of representation, that is, the movement away from painting to the use of photography, particularly as a mechanism for depicting women. However, in a collection of postcards of North African women for the period 1885–1930 edited by Algerian born novelist, Leïla Sebbar, and Jean-Michel Belorgey ⁽⁹⁾, Sebbar argues in her introduction that the majority of young women who were portrayed on these postcard were by origin street children or orphans (who then worked as servants, or continued life on the streets as beggars and street thieves before finding themselves in brothels or even prison) – they were not women who belonged to an identifiable ordinary family, they were not your mother or your sisters or aunts.⁽¹⁰⁾ In other words, they were in one way or another, women whose lives were already lived on the streets and could therefore be used as models to be dressed in combinations of exotic costumes favoured by the photographer as several recent exhibitions of paintings held in the UK have illustrated.⁽¹¹⁾

This idea that there may be few true or authentic images is both explored implicitly and explicitly in Eric Breitbart’s chapter on the fairly small number of films that have used Algiers as their location. Breitbart shows that even in an apparently realist film like Gilles Pontecorvo’s *The Battle of Algiers* filming technologies were required just as extensively as they had been in the much earlier studio filming of *Pépé le Moko* (1937). *Pépé le Moko* was a film that explored the Algiers’ Casbah as sufficiently ‘closed’ to provide a place of refuge and security for even a French gangster but only as long as he remained within its walls. Breitbart sees parallels between this essentially fictional story (remade almost immediately afterwards in 1938 by Hollywood as *Algiers*) and the Casbah’s role in *The Battle of Algiers*. Thus in neither film are people or places truly present, rather they are present as representations of the wider political and cultural preoccupations of their age.

The third reflection that is raised by *Walls of Algiers* is from the concluding review of ‘historiographies of Algiers’ by Patricia M. E. Lorcin that begins by suggesting that even for the early modern period the view of the city is essentially a western one as it is largely dependent upon ‘captivity narratives’ such as those provided by Linda Colley.⁽¹²⁾ These narratives, Lorcin argues, reflect the struggle for supremacy in the Mediterranean between European privateers and Ottoman corsairs. Methodologically, this raises two main issues. The most important is clearly the implication that Istanbul-located Ottoman archives have been relatively little studied. This would seem to be the case as the two main references for this period and the ones used by Lorcin are William Spencer and John B. Wolf, respectively published in 1976 and 1979.⁽¹³⁾ It is itself interesting that so little work has been done on the Ottoman era, with historians seeming to have

preferred to focus on the pre-Ottoman period when there were close links between north-west Africa and Spain. This suggests that an opportunity exists for new research to be done, which would be an additional positive outcome of what is a pioneering study of the city of Algiers.

The feeling that this is the case is also borne out by the least satisfactory chapter in this study (despite the valid points that it makes), Isabelle Grangaud's 'Masking and Unmasking the Historic Quarters of Algiers. The Reassessment of an Archive.' Central to her reassessment is her use of the Ottoman archives. This enables her to question some received ideas such as the use and meaning of the category *hawma*. A concept that in her view (p. 180) makes 'no sense unless it is interpreted as the consequence of the conquerors' imposition of new urban spatial relationships' central to which was the reorganization of the city along linear lines (p. 190). However, the reorganization of cities along such lines at this period was not only French but is characteristic of how architects and intellectuals of the period viewed the enlightenment city. One classic example is Edinburgh New Town. This almost hermetic treatment of what is happening in Algiers at this time is as my initial discussion suggested also a general feature of the book. What is not is Grangaud's curious opening paragraph appearing to suggest that because it was the Ottomans who were defeated by French conquest, there is no possibility of their archives or their historians being neutral (p. 179). Of how many other archives and historians might this apply to?

The second methodological issue regards the somewhat ambiguous terms of 'privateer' and 'corsair'. These are frequently used as if they were interchangeable. However, a 'privateer' was a private individual operating for their own benefit, while by contrast 'corsair' derives from the Italian word *corsari* and its original meaning is that of an armed ship whose commander while not directly in the employ of a state was authorised by the government of a state. The corsairs therefore occupied one of those intermediary positions where they were simultaneously of a state and outside it, perhaps possessing more of the character of mercenaries – a not uncommon relationship between states of this period and certain elements of their armed support forces (the 'Swiss Guard' who protected the Pope is part of the same category). The later running together of the two terms: pirate and corsair, is perhaps a direct reflection of the need for the French expedition to Algiers to discredit its opposition, something that Clancy-Smith perhaps highlights (p. 19) when she draws attention to the size of the 1830 French expeditionary force. That it was a force that comprised more than 64,000 troops might be seen as an indication of the power that the Ottoman Empire still held and was able to exercise in the first half of the 19th century. The remainder of Lorcin's overview would be a very useful starting point for someone coming new to the subject area. Having said that, there is one surprising orthographic mistake on page 237 where the leading French anti-Semite Edouard Drumont has his surname consistently spelt as 'Drummont'.

Finally, it can be argued that to some extent the tensions that *Walls of Algiers* describes between the city's inhabitants and its French military occupiers are the most obvious of the tensions present in the city. However, what the study also achieves is to bring out the less generally acknowledged tensions that existed between the European migrants who came to the city and its French colonial authorities. Partly perhaps, as Clancy-Smith (p. 21) points out, because these migrants (Spanish, Italian and Maltese for the most part) were themselves viewed ambivalently by the colonial state as they were for the large part poor and even to some extent perhaps not even European at all. Clancy-Smith records that they were initially referred to as 'not-quite-Europeans' (p. 20) and later as 'not quite Frenchmen and women' (p. 23). Racial categories of the period did not only make distinctions between the 'other' as represented by native Algerians but also made distinctions between more and less civilized Europeans. Furthermore, in Algeria, there was another population that would be viewed in this way (in spite of the Third Republic in 1870 granting mass naturalization) and that was Algeria's native Jewish population. Algeria's Jews would however still be viewed (much as would be Iraq's Jewish community after the foundation of Israel in 1948) as too close to the local Muslim/Arab population and therefore in need of re-education before they too could rejoin their more sophisticated European brethren.⁽¹⁴⁾ Overall, however, the picture of Algiers that emerges from the *Walls of Algiers* is one that fulfils the ambitions of its authors and the book and the different contributions that are made offer much to both the casual reader and the specialist. It is a fascinating collection that should

be read by anyone interested in Algeria and the multivariate processes of Algeria's colonization.

Notes

1. Paul Ricoeur, *La Mémoire, L'Histoire, L'Oubli* (Paris, 2000); The English edition is *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago, 2004).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. J. M. Rogers, *Sinan* (London, 2006).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Walter Benjamin, *Paris, Capitale du XIXe Siècle*, (3rd ed., Paris, 2002), p. 108; translated from the German of Rolf Tiedemann's original edition of 1982 by Jean Lacoste.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Michael Camille, *The Gargoyles of Notre Dame: Medievalism and the Monsters of Modernity* (Chicago, 2009).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Walter Benjamin, *Paris, Capitale du XIXe Siècle*.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Carlier quotes from the translation by S. W. Dyde (New York, 2005), p. 96.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society*, (Later ed., New York, 1968); translated by George Simpson using the 1893 and 1926 editions.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. One such example is the publication by James Macpherson in 1761 of *Fingal* that he claimed was the work of an ancient bard called Ossian, see T. M. Devine, *The Scottish Nation 1700–2000* (London, 1999), pp. 242–3. Indeed much of what is popularly associated with Scotland falls into this category including the 2009 Homecoming project.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Leïla Sebbar and Jean-Michel Belorgey, *Femmes d'Afrique du Nord. Cartes postales (1885–1930)* (Saint-Pourçain-sur-Sioule, 2002).[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Sebbar in Sebbar and Belorgey, *Femmes d'Afrique du Nord*, pp. 11–20.[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. *The Discovery of Spain. British Artists and Collectors: Goya to Picasso*, ed. David Howarth (Edinburgh, 2009); and *The Lure of the East. British Orientalist Painting*, ed. Nicholas Tromans (London, 2008).[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. *Captives. Britain, Empire and the World 1600–1850* (London, 2002).[Back to \(12\)](#)
13. William Spencer, *Algiers in the Age of the Corsairs* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1976); and John B. Wolf, *The Barbary Coast. Algeria under the Turks* (New York, 1979).[Back to \(13\)](#)
14. I discuss French colonial policy towards Algerian Jews extensively in Kay Adamson, *Political and Economic Thought and Practice in Nineteenth-Century France and the Colonization of Algeria* (Lewiston, New York, 2002). On colonial and European Jewry's ambivalence to Iraq's Jews, see Marina Benjamin, *Last Days in Babylon. The Story of the Jews of Baghdad* (London, 2007).[Back to \(14\)](#)

The authors wish to thank Professor Adamson for her review. They regret, however, that she did not address their volume more directly.

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