Algerian Migration to France from the early twentieth century to the Interwar Period

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The early stages of migration

Algerian Migration to France in the interwar period was inextricably linked with social, economic and political conditions both in France and in Algeria. From the turn of the twentieth century to the 1950s, North African colonial immigrants came mostly from Algeria and largely from the Berber region of Kabylia.[1] Between 1904 and 1914, Algerians accounted for approximately 10,000 workers in France. Arriving mainly in the port of Marseilles where a number worked as dockers as well as in the soap industry, they moved in increasing numbers to large urban and industrial areas within France. A 1912 official report stated that 1,500 Algerians worked in mines in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais *département* in the North of France where they generally enjoyed the same salary and social benefits as other workers. In the Paris area, they worked in the building industry, in the public transport sector or in Say sugar refineries (Simon 2000: 39-40).

In the following years, Algerian migration was facilitated by the law adopted on the 15th of July 1914 which reinforced the administrative order of 18 June 1913. It removed the requirement for a travel permit that had been imposed by the administrative order of 16 May 1874 and part of the repressive 'Native Code' (MacMaster 1997: 51; Ageron 1985: 60; Simon 2000: 32).

Whilst the official statistics over-estimated the number of North African colonial workers in France in 1919,[2] their presence in France nonetheless increased significantly in the period between 1914 and the eve of the First World War (Ageron 1985). The government, who wanted to control this migration and respond to the concerns of the colons in North Africa who were forcefully complaining about the loss of workforce caused by North African emigration to France, set up a 'Department of Organisation of Colonial Workers' (*Service d'organisation des travailleurs coloniaux*- SOTC) on 1st of January 1916. It was run by the army and attached to the Office of Colonial Affairs (*Direction des affaires coloniales*) and had a monopole on colonial recruitment. It was in charge of organising the selection of North African workers to supply the industrial (mining, metal, chemical and building and other industries) and agricultural sectors (Schor 1996: 41; Ghazi 1952: 223; Meynier 1981: 459).

Between 1914 and 1919, it was estimated that approximately 80,000 Algerian colonial workers lived in France, and that 87% of them came from the mostly Kabyle regions of Tizi-Ouzou, Bougie and Constantine (Khellil 1994: 13). As MacMaster (1997) points out, Kabyle migration caused by demographic pressures amongst Algerian immigrant workers in France did not - contrary to

what French writers argued from the 1930s to the 1950s - result from the 'benign effects' of French colonial presence in Algeria. It was rather the result of centuries-old migratory practices of seasonal and long-term migration.

As for Algeria, close to 300,000 men (172,000 soldiers and 119,000 workers), equating one third of Algeria's male population - were transferred to France to contribute to the war effort and 25,000 Algerian Muslims as well as 22,000 French settlers from Algeria (known as the *Pied-noirs*) died on the battlefield (Ageron 1983: 71; Simon 2000: 49). This war had profound consequences in Algeria and its effects were felt by North Africans on both sides of the Mediterranean Sea.

Crisis and emigration in the post-war years

Only a few thousand Algerians remained in France after the end of the First World War. The French authorities repatriated the colonial soldiers and SOTC workers recruited and supervised by the army who had been brought to France during the war. It also organised police operations to deport those 'free' workers who were still in France in 1919 (MacMaster 1997: 68). However, migration to France increased markedly after 1919 (Stora 1992: 16) as Algeria experienced serious economic difficulties and social tensions. The deep economic crisis in Algeria that followed the war (1920-1921) reflected the extent to which it was dependent on the French metropolitan economy at the time. The interruption of much of the maritime communication between the *métropole* and Algeria caused by the requisition of boats for the war effort, difficulties in transportations within the Algerian territory and speculation led to steep price increases for manufactured goods and more importantly for foodstuffs that the pauperised rural Muslims could ill afford. In a context of increased social unrest - strikes no longer involved exclusively European workers but also more Algerian Muslims employed in the small but growing industrial sector in Algeria - the disastrous harvest of 1920 that followed the disappointing one in the previous year caused by drought and the inadequate and complacent response of the colonial authorities led to famine (Kaddache 2003a: 22).

The interwar period was also marked by rapid demographic, social and economic change and tensions in Algeria that had an impact on internal migration and emigration to France. The Muslim population increased from 5,806,000 in 1921 to 7,235,000 in 1938 – with 988,000 French citizens living in the three Algerian *départements* on the eve of the Second World War. Colonial expansion and seizure of land had constrained Muslims into less fertile and smaller land holdings, and semi-nomadic populations were forced into sedentariness. These factors, together with economic crisis of the 1930s led to further weakening of the economic fabric of Muslim society, to rural exodus and the multiplication of shanty towns (*bidonvilles*) around the main towns and cities (Pervillé 1993: 56).

The colons who were consistently hostile to any reform in favour of the colonised and concerned about the loss of their 'native workforce' and the ability of Algerian migrant workers to "swipe millions in France" to buy back land in Algeria, demanded that migration to France be stopped. On 10 August 1924,

Interior Minister Camille Chautemps issued an administrative order ending free travel to France by introducing the requirement for a work permit for aspiring migrants (Ageron 1983: 73). This order was reinforced by other restrictive measures in the following years and led to an increase in illegal migration. In spite of these orders and the tacit inertia of the colonial authorities in charge of processing applications for migration, the number of Algerian immigrants in France almost doubled by 1926 (69,789) and reached 85,568 when the French economy was hit by the economic recession of 1931-1933. Those numbers declined marginally in the following years (72,891 in 1936) before Algerian emigration was virtually - and temporarily - brought to a halt during the Second World War (there were only 22,114 Algerians in France in 1946) (Talha 1973: 18). This migration was almost exclusively composed of men during the inter-war period. Both Kabyle tradition and employers' preference for a migration of single male workers from Algeria contributed to this trend.

Employment and housing

Many of the Algerians who, in the initial phase of migration, reached Marseilles, moved to other parts of France in extremely precarious conditions. By 1937, whilst a fifth lived and worked in the Provence-Côte d'Azur region around Marseilles, many had settled in industrial centres in the Paris, Lyon-St Etienne, Lorraine and Nord/Pas-de-Calais region, as well as other mining and industrial areas.[3] They often occupied the most difficult and lowest paid jobs in sectors such as engineering and metal-working, mining, the chemical, rubber and paper industries, transport and warehousing, loading and construction (MacMaster 1997: 76-77).

In the Parisian basin where 40% of Algerian worked, they were mostly employed in the engineering and mechanical industries such as armament factories were they constituted 80% of the workforce (the arsenals of Puteaux, the cartridge factory of Vincennes), in car manufacturing (Renault in Boulogne-Billancourt, Delauney-Belleville in Saint-Denis, Hispano-Suiza in Courbevoie, Dion-Bouton in the northern suburb), in the chemical industry, refineries and the aviation industry (Simon 2000: 72-73).

The French economy relied on immigrant labour not only to meet the demands of an expanding industrial economy and fill job vacancies in the most dangerous, dirtiest and lowest paid jobs[4] but also to constrain the social and economic demands of the established workforce. Salaries were kept down by recruiting poorly paid foreign and colonial workers who were assigned to the least qualified jobs. In 1930, only 1% of North Africans in France were employed as skilled workers (Ghazi 1952: 226). Newly employed foreign and colonial workers were used to break up strikes. European immigrants such as Italians and Belgians had been recruited partly to break strikes started by a unionised French workforce. As they, too, progressively took part in strikes and union action, other foreign and colonial workers were employed. The case of Marseilles is quite revealing of this trend. Some of the Kabyle migrants who arrived in Marseilles in 1907 had been recruited by a French foreman from the Maurel oil mill who had lived for some time in the town of Tizi-Ouzou in Greater Kabylia. The union of oil manufacturers had come to the conclusion that Kabyle

workers could replace part of the Italian workforce and undermine industrial action and demands for higher wages. Those new ‘strike-breakers’ were replacing those who had previously been ‘strike-breakers’. In 1910, the same strategy was used in the St Louis, St Charles and La Méditerranée sugar refineries that employed between 500 and 2,500 workers. By 1915, the exposure of Algerian workers to French industrial labour practices led to their increased involvement in spontaneous or union led industrial action (Viala 1986-1987: 73-95).

Algerians, like some other colonial or immigrant proletarians, lived in extremely precarious conditions in France. Many were housed in workers hostels, collective dormitories (barracks, cellars, hangars, hovels) and boarding houses in areas such as Gennevilliers – particularly in the shantytown of Les Grésillons - where a majority of Moroccans and an important minority of Algerians lived in close national groupings.

The difficult living conditions of mostly male migrants were marked by social and spatial segregation. By the end of the First World War, the districts of industrial areas where many tended to live soon became areas of Maghrebi settlement. These ‘isolates’ were generally close to the factories that employed them in industrial towns, cities and ports: in Marseilles, they settled mostly in the St Martin district near the Porte d’Aix, then, at the end of the war, towards the Vieux Port district. In Lyons, most lived in the Guillotière district and the suburbs of La Mouche, Le Moulin-à-Vent, Montplaisir-la-Plaine, Saint Fons and Vénissieux. In the Paris region, they settled in four main areas: in the south-west (part of the 15th *arrondissement* and Boulogne); the north-west (the suburban industrial boroughs of Asnières, La Garenne-Colombe, Courbevoie, Clichy, Puteaux); the south east (mainly in the 13th *arrondissement*, but also in the 12th and 5th *arrondissements* and towards Ivry and Charenton); and the north-east, the poorest part of the capital where 40% of Algerians in the city lived (10th, 13th, 19th and 20th *arrondissements*, and towards Saint Denis, Aubervilliers, Pantin and Les Lilas) (Meynier 1981: 475-476).

Whilst a number of workers’ housing developments for ‘free’ Algerian workers and later, other North Africans, were put in place by industrial employers, many avoided or left these largely because of the rigid rules and regimented life that were imposed on them and the surveillance to which they were subjected. The creation of foyers attached to the Section of North African Native Affairs (Section des Affaires indigènes nord-africaines / SAINA) based in rue Lecomte, Paris, was the most prominent of those projects. However, the French authorities and employers did not put in place any large-scale or national programme to organise the life of North African migrants outside the workplace. Those men relied mostly on their own means and resources to reach France and soon joined relatives or compatriots from the same village or locality within specific isolates, lived in rented dormitories or furnished rooms in run-down buildings which were commonly called *garnis or hôtel-garnis*. On a social level, as Bouguessa (1981) notes, these *garnis* were often closely linked to *cafés* or *café-restaurants* – coined ‘Moorish cafés’ (*cafés maures*) by the French - and were structured along regional, local or ethnic lines: solidarity in the isolate and within the workplace and employment patterns were based on

close communities originating from the same family or village. The *café* and the *hôtel garni* were, in many cases, located within the same spatial unit. This 'inner' unit within the isolate constituted a point of anchorage where North African migrants could settle when they arrived from Algeria, the place where they lived, ate, and got help and assistance from 'compatriots' in their search for a job. It was also there that they socialised, exchanged news from their homeland, and shared their nostalgia for their homeland. In the *café-hôtel garni*, established rules of solidarity and behaviour were established. The unemployed were able to remain within their community and get help, and when those who wished to return to Algeria left their job, the unemployed within the unit were given priority to replace them. Collections were made to repatriate the bodies of those who had died in emigration and help their family. Solidarity towards compatriots from the same family or village was also a duty that all had to fulfil. Those who failed to help had to pay a fine and were sometimes faced with harsher penalties (Bouguessa 1981, Muracciole 1950).

This social organisation resulted in complex tensions. On the one hand, life in the isolate reinforced the social, economic and cultural marginalisation of North African immigrants within French society and constrained their ability to become involved in French political and social life. On the other, the close relationship maintained through the social maintenance of social and cultural codes and practices attenuated some of the effects of isolation, loneliness, racism and economic hardship experienced during their stay in France. In exile/migration, life in the *isolate* and a migration process based on the *noria* – on the movement back to and from the homeland – ensured that the distant homeland remained at the core of the migrant's imaginary.

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