

Republicanism, liberalism and empire in post-revolutionary France

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Colonies (nos): s'attrister quand on en parle.
—Flaubert, *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*.

Writers on the left in France, in publications such as the *Monde Diplomatique* and *Politis*, have been voicing frustration in recent years at the country's longstanding neglect of France's colonial history.² Whereas postcolonial studies now has a history several decades old in the Anglophone world, it has come only lately to France; indeed, a recent volume starts by making "a case for Francophone postcolonial studies."³ Broader public debates, too, have only reluctantly begun to attend to France's colonial history. This new attention has arisen in large part in reaction to the new presence of immigrants from the former colonies in public life, thanks to the struggles of the *banlieues* and the headscarf debate. Discussion of the Algerian war, long repressed, has also begun to intensify, in part because the generation that fought that war is aging and there has been a desire to capture their experience while interviews are still possible.⁴ Still, these discussions have been largely reactive, and relatively defensive: so defensive, indeed, that the National Assembly passed a law in February 2005 requiring that history textbooks and teachers,

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² Several great critical historians of the French empire of an older generation, notably Yves Benot and Claude Liauzu, have recently died, and relatively few prominent French historians now study colonial history, though a much younger generation has taken up the subject.

³ Charles Forsdick and David Murphy, eds., *Francophone postcolonial studies: a critical introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). Also see Marie-Claude Smouts, ed., *La situation postcoloniale: Les postcolonial studies dans le débat français* (Paris, 2007).

⁴ Scholars are belatedly paying particular attention to the role of the *harkis*, the Algerian soldiers who fought on the side of the French, and of their subsequent marginalization in France. See Tom Charbit, *Les Harkis* (Paris, 2006); and Gilles Manceron and Fatima Benaci-Lancou, *Les Harkis dans la colonisation et ses suites* (Paris, 2008).

and university researchers “acknowledge and recognize in particular the positive role of the French presence abroad, especially in North Africa.”⁵ The law sparked an outcry among historians, but the National Assembly refused to consider a motion to repeal it, and then-President Chirac then had to use extraordinary measures to have it rescinded.⁶ A group of French scholars known as Achac has developed the idea of a *fracture coloniale* to describe this mutual mistrust and misunderstanding on the part of the various participants in debates over France’s colonial past and postcolonial present.⁷ The phrase *fracture coloniale* derives from *fracture sociale*, which became popular during Chirac’s presidency (1995-2007) as a description of the various forces thought to be pulling French society apart. The popularity of the term *fracture* in France as a way to describe political problems suggests the degree to which national unity, or the unity of the *republic*, continues to represent a paramount goal in French political discourse.⁸

The republican tradition, that is to say, continues to frame French debates on empire, as it has done since the Revolution. French republicanism and Anglophone liberalism have shared numerous features in relation to empire: both are egalitarian traditions of moral universalism, and both uphold an ideal of political emancipation that has tended to entail assimilation to a European political model. French republicanism, even more than Anglophone political liberalism, is committed to an abstract and ostensibly universal

⁵ See Loi n° 2005-158 du 23 février 2005, at <http://www.admi.net/jo/20050224/DEFX0300218L.html>. Also see Benjamin Stora’s discussion of the law in *L’Humanité*, 6 décembre 2005, http://www.humanite.fr/2005-12-06_Societe_Debut-d-une-dangereuse-guerre-des-memoires.

⁶ See Robert Aldrich, “Colonial past, post-colonial Present: History wars French-style,” in *History Australia*, 3.1 (2006), pp. 14.1-14.10.

⁷ See Pascal Blanchard et al, *La fracture coloniale: La société française au prisme de l’héritage colonial* (Paris, 2005); Pascal Blanchard is President of the Association pour la connaissance de l’histoire de l’Afrique contemporaine (Achac).

⁸ Emile Chabal, “La République postcoloniale? Making the nation in late 20th century France,” paper presented at the conference “Loss, Nostalgia and *la fracture coloniale*: Contextualizing *l’Inde perdue*,” University of Liverpool, 2-4 July 2008.

notion of citizenship, but one that in fact rests on a culturally particular history. This problem has been clear in the debates over headscarves, where a very particularly French ideal of *laïcité* has been taken by many in France to represent the universally valid approach to the place of religion in the public sphere.⁹ And French republicanism shares some of the theoretical tensions that bedeviled British liberalism's support for empire: most important, that despite its universalist commitments, it long supported the domination of colonial subjects, and exceptional laws and institutions in the colonies. I would add that republicanism involves a particular temptation to empire: insofar as it is a tradition that celebrates political virtue and the political health of the republic, republicanism has at least since Machiavelli had a kind of affinity for militarism and territorial expansion, when these are seen to contribute to the glory of the republic.¹⁰ This aspect of the tradition is certainly visible among self-declared liberal republicans in nineteenth-century France. It led to an embrace of imperial expansion even among those like Tocqueville, who recognized the failure of European empires to serve universal values or to benefit their colonial subjects. Britain's national identity was, arguably, equally inextricable from its status as an imperial power, but British political thinkers were consistently far more circumspect than the French about drawing connections between political health at home and conquests abroad.

Recent literature has stressed the degree to which nineteenth-century French liberalism had its roots in the distinctively republican discourse of the revolutionary

⁹ The law that banned conspicuously religious clothing was written in ostensibly universal terms: large crucifixes and kipas are also banned. And yet the law is clearly directed at headscarves worn by Muslim girls and women. See Olivier Roy, *Secularism confronts Islam*, trans. George Holoch (New York, 2007), chapter 1; and Joan Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton, 2007).

¹⁰ Republicanism also had the particular worry that empire would cause the death of republican liberty; Montesquieu's *Considerations on the decline and fall of the Romans* was the locus classicus for French revolutionary claims of this sort. I am grateful to Samuel Moyn for a conversation on this point.

period.¹¹ This paper is an effort to explore the course of French debates over empire from the period of Napoleon through the July Monarchy — the broader context for the thought of the iconic liberal republicans Constant and Tocqueville — with particular attention to the ways in which liberal and republican registers were deployed in both support and critique of empire, and to how the articulation of liberal and republican agendas in France was affected by the Algeria conquest.

The first decade of the subjugation of Algeria marked a critical moment in French liberalism's evolving relation to empire. When France captured the city of Algiers from its Ottoman rulers in 1830, the elements of a thoroughgoing liberal critique of French imperial expansion were available: Benjamin Constant and other liberal republicans under Napoleon's empire and the Bourbon restoration had continued a tradition of thought, stretching back to the pre-Revolutionary Enlightenment, that held that liberty and empire were incompatible, that conquest could only be accomplished with barbarous levels of violence unbecoming a modern nation, and that the right of peoples to independence and self-government was universal. Not only was principled criticism of the Algeria conquest muted, however, but the languages of both liberalism and republicanism were invoked more often in support of the conquest than against it. As in so many areas of domestic policy, the liberals who came to power under the July Monarchy failed to live up to the promise of their opposition politics under the Restoration.¹² What criticism there was of the conquest was almost entirely restricted to

¹¹ See Ira Katznelson and Andeas Kalyvas, *Liberal beginnings: making a republic for the moderns* (Cambridge, 2008), and Andrew Jainchill, *Reimagining Politics after the Terror: The republican origins of French liberalism* (Ithaca, 2008).

¹² See G.A. Kelly, *The Humane Comedy: Constant, Tocqueville, and French Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pages 2-4; and Sudhir Hazareesingh, *From Subject to Citizen: The Second Empire and the Emergence of Modern French Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 165-69.

claims, made by liberal political economists during the conquest's earliest phase, that the national interest lay in free trade rather than in conquest and colonization. These arguments soon caved before the embrace of a new colonial mission by most thinkers from the left and liberal center, most prominently Alexis de Tocqueville.

The sputtering and then quick extinction, during the liberal July Monarchy, of a critique of imperial expansion among the putative heirs of Diderot and Constant was due in part to the longstanding anxiety among French liberals and progressives about France's international stature.¹³ During the Revolution, political discourse had been inflected with a sense of entitlement to empire that stemmed from memories of France's earlier status as a great colonial power and from the desire to erase the long history of defeat by Britain that stretched back to the loss of the bulk of French colonial territory in the New World and India at the end of the Seven Years' War. Debate about overseas colonies was muted, though the Constitution of the Year III (promulgated after the emancipation of the West Indian slaves) declared the French colonies to be "integral parts of the Republic," subject to the same constitutional law.¹⁴ But as Andrew Jainchill has recently shown, the years between the Terror and the rise of Napoleon witnessed an impassioned debate, carried on in republican terms, about whether expansion into contiguous European territory was justifiable and advisable. Jainchill argues that during the Revolution critics of expansion, such as Robespierre, tended to argue from classical republicans premises that empire threatens liberty, while advocates of annexation (of the Rhineland, the Austrian

¹³ Perhaps, too, to the odd timing of the conquest: while the liberals opposed Charles X's military expedition and might not have initiated it themselves, they inherited the conquest a few weeks later and were loath to give it up. Still, such a conquest had long been contemplated; see Ann Thomson, "Arguments for the conquest of Algiers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries," *Maghreb Review* (1989) 14.1-2, pp 108-118. On Diderot, see Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

¹⁴ See Jacques Godechot, ed., *Les constitutions de la France depuis 1789* (Paris, 1979), 104; and Godechot, *La grande nation: l'expansion révolutionnaire de la France dans le monde de 1789 à 1799* (Paris, 1983).

Netherlands, and other territories) tended to the invoke “modern” republican argument that representative government made territorial expansion safe for republicanism, though he recognizes that Constant later made his iconic critique of conquest precisely in modern terms.¹⁵

But despite efforts by various revolutionary governments to restore the colonial empire and to extend France’s boundaries within Europe, France ultimately lost further territory during the Revolution.¹⁶ Napoleon, in addition to his spectacular and disastrous expansion across Europe and his Egyptian expedition, nursed aspirations of global hegemony even more ephemeral and illusory. The “colonial madness” under Napoleon (his own and his supporters’) included projects, all failed, to recover the prosperous West-Indian sugar colonies, to retrieve “l’Inde française” (reduced since 1763 to five small outposts), and to acquire new colonies in Senegal, Madagascar, Java, and Cochinchina.¹⁷ Criticism in this period was stifled: Napoleon made it illegal, for instance, to publish abolitionist arguments after he reinstated slavery in the French colonies in 1802.¹⁸ Occasional tracts published under Napoleon kept up a weak current of anti-

¹⁵ Jinchill, *Reimagining Politics*, chapter 4; among “modern” supporters of expansion, he focuses on Charles-Guillaume Thérémis, a liberal republican and a Prussian-born descendant of Huguenots whose political views under the Directory in other ways nearly anticipated the liberal republicanism Constant would develop in the 1810s.

¹⁶ France lost its colonies in India and Canada to the British in 1763 after the Seven Years’ War and a number of its Caribbean colonies during the Revolution and Empire, including most significantly Saint-Domingue, which became independent Haiti in 1804, though it was recognized by France only in 1825. France ultimately regained Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Guiana from the British in 1814, 1816, and 1817 respectively. See Yves Benot, *La Révolution française et la fin des colonies, 1789-1794* (Paris: La Découverte, 2004). Also see Paul Cheney, *The Enlightenment Science du Commerce: Colonial Expansion and the New European Political Order* (Harvard University Press, forthcoming).

¹⁷ See Yves Benot, *La démente coloniale sous Napoléon* (Paris: La Découverte, 1991).

¹⁸ See *1802: Rétablissement de l’esclavage dans les colonies françaises*, ed. Yves Benot and Marcel Dorigny (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2003). The indefatigable revolutionary Abbé Grégoire was one of the few who continued to press the abolitionist cause (and did so through the 1820s); he evaded the censors by inserting his abolitionist arguments into a work apparently of literary scholarship; see, Grégoire, *De la littérature des nègres ou Recherches sur leurs facultés intellectuelles, leurs qualités morales* (Paris: Maradan, 1808), and David Geggus, “Haiti and the Abolitionists: Opinion, Propaganda, and International

colonial argument, though there was little in this period that might be described as a republican or proto-liberal critique of colonization. The boldest rejection of empire came from the abbé de Pradt, an émigré archbishop who held in *Les Trois Âges des Colonies* that emancipation of the colonies was simply the inevitable result of the revolution and must be accepted as such by post-Revolutionary Europe.¹⁹ Pradt exempted British India, however, arguing that British rule there remained in Europe's interest until Europeans succeeded in instilling a taste for their products in India, at which point colonial emancipation and free trade would be the only sensible course. Notably absent under the Empire were criticisms of colonization on moral grounds of common humanity or the right to self-government, of the kind articulated by Diderot in his contributions to Raynal's *Histoire des Deux Indes*.²⁰

The early years of the Bourbon Restoration, in contrast, did see a flourishing of self-consciously liberal and liberal-republican criticisms of conquest and colonization, beginning with Constant's *De l'esprit de conquête*, first published in 1814 when Napoleon's (first) fall appeared imminent. There was, too, a renaissance of abolitionist argument and of critiques of French policy in the slave colonies among leading liberals, including Constant and others in the Coppet group such as Germaine de Staël and Sismondi; and indeed during the later years of the Restoration, political debate about

Politics in Britain and France, 1804-1816," in *Abolition and its Aftermath*, ed. David Richardson (London Frank Cass, 1985), p. 117.

¹⁹ Dominique Dufour Pradt, *Les Trois âges des colonies, ou de leur état passé, présent et à venir* (Paris, 1801-1802).

²⁰ See Benot, *La démenche coloniale*. The two chief critics of colonization during the Napoleonic era whom Benot discusses were by no means liberals: in addition to the émigré abbé de Pradt there was Félix Carteau, an ultra *colon* and an enemy of the Société des Amis des Noirs, who declared the sugar colonies detrimental to the prosperity of the metropole and said that the only useful colonies were those that France no longer had: namely, sparsely populated territories available for settlement; see Benot, pp 272-81.

France's colonies was largely confined to debate over slavery and the slave trade.²¹

Charles de Rémusat, an aspiring liberal politician and a member with Constant of the *Société des morales chrétiennes* who later, as a liberal deputy, was a supporter of the Algeria conquest, made an early impression on liberal Paris society with an abolitionist play that excoriated the moral corruption of planter society.²²

The great colonial (and anticolonial) historian Yves Benot has argued that the global vision of the early Restoration critics of empire rested on two ideas, twin reactions against Napoleon's project for global hegemony through war and conquest: first, the end of colonial rule, an idea nourished by Haitian independence and the movements for independence in Spanish America; and second, the idea of a peaceful and benevolent regime of global commerce.²³ These writers, as Benot notes, tended to place naïve faith in the possibility for equal, non-coercive commerce among states of differing levels of economic and military development. This faith would give way among later liberals to the view that if trade required the development of backward nations, colonial rule might be a necessary prerequisite of free trade.

In a pattern that would persist into the July Monarchy, the dominant strand of anti-colonial argument under the Restoration stressed on grounds of political economy that colonial regimes, and especially slavery, were detrimental to both colonies and metropolises. Jean-Baptiste Say and Victor Destutt de Tracy are representative figures; according to Say, colonies imposed an "enormous burden" [*énorme fardeau*] on

²¹ See Lawrence C. Jennings, *French Anti-Slavery: The Movement for the Abolition of Slavery in France, 1802-1848* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Nelly Schmidt, *Abolitionnistes de l'esclavage et réformateurs des colonies, 1820-1851* (Paris: Éditions Karthala, 2000); Serge Daget, "L'Abolition de la Traite des Noirs en France de 1814 à 1831," *Cahiers d'études africaines* 41 (1971), pp 14-58.

²² The play, read aloud in Paris salons, remained unpublished; see Rémusat, *L'habitation de Saint-Domingue, ou l'insurrection*, ed. J.R. Derr (Paris: Editions du C.N.R.S., 1977).

²³ See Benot, *La démente coloniale*, p. 288; the following paragraph is indebted to chapter 9 of Benot.

European peoples, “an obstacle and not an aid [*auxiliaire*] to their prosperity,” which would be furthered instead by the “complete emancipation of the world.”²⁴ The Abbé de Pradt, the legitimist archbishop cited earlier, remade himself as a liberal under the Restoration and in 1817 argued that the time had come for the separation of all colonies from their metropolises, for a “new world of relations” in which European states would have to accept all former colonies as sovereign powers.²⁵ “If the bloody opposition to the emancipation of America be cruel to that country,” he argued, “it is equally fatal to the prosperity of the whole world,” which could be pursued only when free commerce among sovereign states supplanted colonial monopolies.²⁶ The young abolitionist Civique de Gastine (ca. 1793-1822) departed from political economy to argue on more purely moral and political grounds that the principles of the revolution, and indeed the survival of liberal government in the metropole, required colonial emancipation:

The liberal, constitutional, and representative form of the new governments being established in Europe, and especially in the New World, absolutely necessitates the abandonment of the abominable policy that was the basis on which rested the system that subordinated colonies to metropolises, just as the slaves in Rome were subordinated to the patricians....Humanity urgently demands, for the tranquility and happiness of the human race, that the governments of the Old World adopt the just and equitable system of the liberty of peoples.²⁷

²⁴ See J.B. Say, *Cours complet d'économie politique pratique*, ed. Horace Say (Paris, 1852); part 4, chapter 23, “Résultats de la politique coloniale des Européens,” quoted passage at 632. But Say also argued that “Asia is the birthplace of arbitrary and unlimited government,” and that in India the “salutary influence of a civilized metropole” made itself felt in the administration of justice from Britain even if the colonial authorities could be abusive, as evidenced by the impeachment trial of Warren Hastings (649 ff). Say and Tracy were active opponents of slavery under the Restoration, again with an emphasis on political-economy arguments from metropolitan interest; see Jennings, *French Anti-Slavery*. [Citations for Tracy needed here.]

²⁵ See de Pradt, *Des colonies et de la révolution actuelle de l'Amérique* (Paris: F. Bechet, 1817) II. pp 86-87. De Pradt stressed the historical inevitability of colonies' independence rather than Europeans' moral obligation to grant it (see, e.g., his chapter on British India, II. pp 327-52).

²⁶ de Pradt, *Des colonies*, I. pp xxiv; quoted from the English translation, *The colonies, and the present American revolutions*, by M. de Pradt, formerly Archbishop of Malines (London, 1817), pp xvi-xvii.

²⁷ *Histoire de la République de Haïti* (Paris: Chez Plancher, 1819), pp 263-4. He argued that the Haitians, with their peaceable respect for rights and treaties, had made far better use of their independence than European states had. The portrait of Haiti is far more sanguine than that of his slightly earlier book, *La liberté des peuples* (Paris: Chez les marchands des nouveautés, 1818), in which Gastine had acknowledged

Gastine's works, published just a few years after Constant's seminal and multiply reprinted *On the Spirit of Conquest*, shared the latter's core idea that the liberal project of representative government at home was inextricable from an international politics of peaceful commerce and the mutual respect of sovereign states. Gastine arguably went further than Constant in not simply condemning conquest but in calling for the emancipation of all existing overseas colonies, something that Constant did neither in *Spirit of Conquest* nor in his many parliamentary speeches and other writings during the Restoration on French colonial policy in the West Indies.

2. Constant and Conquest

In *On the Spirit of Conquest*,²⁸ Constant provided the classic articulation of a liberal republican critique of empire and a powerful indictment of the peculiarly dangerous interplay between populist politics and imperial adventurism. Constant's immediate target was Napoleon's militarization of French society and his expansion across Europe and into Egypt, but the pamphlet's broader, biting condemnation of projects of global conquest suggests that he understood Napoleon's continental wars to be just one aspect of the Emperor's larger fantasy of global hegemony. He writes of such a government's desire to "conquer the world," "to acquire remote countries, the possession of which will add nothing to national prosperity," and he describes the conquering soldiers as "victims,

the charge that the Haitian government was despotic, arguing that it had to be so because the slaves in Saint-Domingue had regarded their masters, who lived under a similarly despotic monarchy, as free, and so knew no better; and that in addition "they were not civilized enough to create for themselves a truly liberal government. . . . They have done all they can for the moment; later they will do the rest" (57). See also the discussion in Benot, *La démenche coloniale*, pp 284-5.

²⁸ *De l'esprit de conquête et de l'usurpation dans leurs rapports avec la civilisation européenne*, in *Oeuvres*, ed. Alfred Roulin (Paris: Pléiade, 1957). Passages cited are from *The Spirit of Conquest*, in Constant, *Political Writings*, ed. Biancamaria Fontana (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

doomed to fight and die at the far ends of the earth.”²⁹ Constant, like Gastine a few years later, depicted conquest as the antithesis of, and the greatest threat to, liberal constitutionalism. One of Constant’s achievements in the work was to perceive so early and so clearly the social dynamics, and the moral and political dangers, of expansionism by “modern nations.”³⁰ Constant intertwined moral and historical arguments against what he identified as the “spirit of conquest,” which had reached its apogee in Napoleon’s Empire but which, Constant believed, could be seen more broadly as a danger distinctive of post-revolutionary, indeed of all modern, politics. Though enthusiasm for Napoleonic militarism was, to be sure, at a low ebb when the work was published, Constant was sufficiently shrewd and farsighted to identify in advance many of the political and rhetorical strategies which the advocates of the Algerian conquest would use to sell that conquest to the French nation.

Against the spirit of conquest, Constant’s pamphlet proposed a liberal counter-narrative of post-revolutionary France, a redemptive story according to which the nation might purge itself of its Napoleonic heritage and declare itself for peaceful, restrained, commercial relations with its neighbors and the globe. The essay offers what at times seems a naïve portrait of commerce as antithetical to war: commerce “rests upon the good understanding of nations with each other, it can be sustained only by justice; it is founded upon equality; it thrives in peace.”³¹ In its argument that commerce might make possible a new sort of mutuality among states, *On the Spirit of Conquest*, like so much of

²⁹ *Spirit*, p. 67.

³⁰ *Spirit*, p. 54. See especially pp 63-70 for Constant’s analysis of conquest’s corruption of public life. I discuss Constant at greater length in “Constant’s Thought on Slavery and Empire,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Constant*, ed. Helena Rosenblatt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 115-45, and in *A Turn to Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

³¹ *Spirit*, p. 65.

Constant's work, shows the mark of his Scottish enlightenment education. But where Constant sometimes simplistically presented war and commerce as mutually exclusive modes of international interaction, eighteenth-century Scots such as Hume and Smith had been clear-eyed about the dangers of the common misalliance of modern commerce and war that Hume termed "the jealousy of trade."³² They fully recognized the complicity of commercial motives in recent wars such as the Seven Years' War. They sought, rather, to show that commerce *need* not provoke wars of expansion and rivalry and that commercial nations could benefit by adopting a politics of mutual encouragement rather than militarized competition.

Constant, with his penchant for making moral arguments in historical terms, often couched this dichotomy more deterministically, suggesting simply that commerce would "necessarily" replace war, that international commercial ties would make patriotism irrelevant and violence obsolete unless power-hungry men disrupted this natural course of events.³³ The essay thus seems to ignore commerce's role in sparking modern wars and imperial violence. But it also tells a more complicated story, for in insisting that the peaceful commercial spirit was a fragile achievement, and in detailing the ways in which modern governments co-opted their citizens for violent projects of expansion, Constant showed precisely that the spirit of conquest was far from obsolete. The essay suggests that modern self-interest may be seen to have moral value and moral purpose, but that this purpose is threatened by other tendencies of the age, and indeed by darker possibilities latent in self-interest itself. Much of the power of the essay comes from its

³² See Hume, "Of the Jealousy of Trade" (ca. 1759), in *Essays Moral, Political and Literary* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), pp 327-31; Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1976), IV.vii.c.85; and Istvan Hont, *Jealousy of Trade* (Harvard University Press, 2005), esp. pp 72-76.

³³ "The condition of modern nations thus prevents them from being bellicose by nature" (*Spirit*, 54).

persistent intimations that a moral direction to history can be perceived but that modern citizens must be prepared to struggle on its behalf.³⁴

Constant had little occasion in later years to discuss conquest, for during the crisis-ridden Bourbon restoration France was not in a position to regain most of the territories lost over the years to the British, or to expand into new ones. A staunch critic of French colonial policy regarding the slave trade, slaves, and free *gens de couleurs* in the colonies, he earned a reputation as one of the Chamber of Deputies' most eloquent abolitionists. In June 1830, six months before his death, Constant did denounce the Bourbon regime's effort to use the assault on Algiers to manipulate domestic politics, calling on the electors to "preserve the Charter from the repercussions [*contre-coup*] of Algiers" and to avoid succumbing to the regime's "illusions and seductions."³⁵ But Constant had also increasingly come to characterize Ottomans, and Muslims more generally, as alien and despotic. The Greek war of independence against the Ottoman empire had occasioned his most virulent depictions of Oriental despotism, in his 1825 pamphlet *Appel aux nations chrétiennes en faveur des Grecs*. And in the 1830 speech just quoted, he also offered a caricature of "barbaric" Algiers and a note of patriotic pandering: "Let us applaud the ruin of a den of pirates... instead of respecting the quality of sovereignty in a barbarian. May the city of Algiers be flung into its port! Honor to the French soldiers. But let us demand a strict accounting of the disproportionate sacrifices" that those soldiers suffered for an affair of royal vanity. These tensions in Constant's

³⁴ For a subtle discussion of the *Conquest* essay's paradoxes, see Stephen Holmes, "Liberal Uses of Bourbon Legitimism," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 43.2 (1982), pp 229-48, at p. 235.

³⁵ "Alger et les élections," *Le Temps*, 20 June 1830; reprinted in Constant, *Positions de Combat à la veille de juillet 1830: Articles publiés dans "Le Temps," 1829-1930*; ed. Ephraïm Harpaz (Paris: Champion-Slatkine, 1989), pp 190-92. Constant insisted that the episode was "an affair of honor" between the dey of Algiers and Charles X.

thought presage many French liberals' vacillations and misgivings toward, and their ultimate embrace of, a French Algeria.

3. Liberal Criticism of the Algerian conquest

When Charles X's dying regime sent a military expedition to the city of Algiers in May 1830, partly in a failed effort to bolster its allies' prospects in the June election by enflaming national pride, the liberal opposition opposed the expedition.³⁶ News of the troops' seizure of Algiers on 5 July reached Paris too late to influence the elections, which precipitated the Bourbons' downfall in the July Revolution. Just weeks later, the self-consciously liberal government of the July Monarchy inherited the new conquest along with the throne. Liberal deputies worried over this Bourbon provenance of the conquest for years afterward.³⁷ Still, soon after the liberals came into power they became preoccupied by the old anxiety about France's international standing, and many concluded that this could be secured (especially against British hegemony) only through colonial possessions. Despite the flourishing of anti-conquest texts immediately after Napoleon's fall, his exploits, especially in Egypt, were now remembered with nostalgia by those attempting to secure the new regime amid the polarizations of left-right politics. One of the July Monarchy's early symbolic gestures was its erection of an obelisk from the Luxor temple at the center of the Place de la Concorde, once home to the guillotine.

The colossal monument's unifying message of French glory and superiority over the

³⁶ See, e.g., Louis Blanc, *History of Ten Years* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1845), I. pp 80-85. Blanc, a leftist critic of the "bourgeois" July Monarchy, ridiculed the liberals' opposition to the Algiers expedition as mere "party rancor."

³⁷ See, e.g., the debate of 9 June 1836, in which Adolphe Thiers sought to explain his current support for a French Algeria in light of his earlier opposition to the Algiers expedition: "When the expedition was sent under the Restoration, I was among those who criticized it, and I think that was France's sentiment at that time. But when the expedition was successful and France's insult avenged, I was seized with joy." *Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860* (Paris, 1902), vol 105, pp 155-57.

Orient helped to suppress the memory of the divisive politics of revolution and counter-revolution.³⁸ In placing the obelisk in that politically inflamed spot, these liberals were, oddly, echoing Napoleon's own decision to place another symbol of Eastern empire, a three-story high elephant, in the Place de la Bastille.³⁹ And as the obelisk might have suggested, for all the bitterness of the debates over Algeria in the early years of the July Monarchy, there was soon a convergence on the desirability of preserving the conquest in some form.

It is difficult to judge whether Constant might have maintained his resolute opposition to conquest as expressed in 1814 had he remained alive to witness the feverish expansion of French power in Algeria over the next two decades. His liberal heirs were split on the question. In the early years of the Algeria conquest, at least until the issuing in July 1834 of the royal ordinance that has been called the birth certificate of French Algeria,⁴⁰ there was a vocal contingent of *anticolonistes* in the Chamber of Deputies who expressed horror at the barbarity of the conquest and called for the abandonment of any colonial project in Algeria. Leftist deputies argued that the conquest compared badly even with the folly of the crusades and the expedition to Egypt. They argued that the French had inexcusably violated the terms of the city's treaty of surrender; and that far from bringing civilization to Algeria as they had pretended, the French had violated the fundamental

³⁸ See the superb account in Todd Porterfield, *The Allure of Empire: Art in the service of French Imperialism, 1798-1836* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp 13-41.

³⁹ See Simon Schama, *Citizens* (New York, 1989), 3-5.

⁴⁰ Ruedy, *Modern Algeria* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005 [1992]), p. 54; the ordinance created a military colony named "les possessions françaises dans le Nord de l'Afrique."

principles of civilization — good faith, justice, respect for others — while failing to recognize precisely those qualities in the Algerians.⁴¹

It was telling, however, and perhaps ultimately destructive for the *anticoloniste* cause, that even the strongest French critics of the colony framed their arguments largely in terms of French interests and political economy. As Xavier de Sade, one prominent liberal critic of the conquest, argued, “I see perfectly the advantages we could gain from several provinces on the Rhine...If someone can show us that we could gain the same fruits from our possession in Algiers, I will join the ranks of its most decided partisans.”⁴² His colleague André Dupin (aîné), a leader of the center-left “tiers parti” under the July Monarchy, ridiculed the idea, widespread on the left as well as the center and right, that to withdraw from Algeria would wound national pride. But he also argued that their only guide should be French interests: “If it is useful, we must keep Algiers, even if the Restoration did not intend to do so. If it is harmful, it must be abandoned.”⁴³

A more emphatically anti-colonial economic argument came from one of Dupin’s critics on economic questions, a liberal journalist named Henri Fonfrède. As early as 1836, Fonfrède was calling for the “*décolonisation*” of Algiers: surely one of the earliest

⁴¹ See the speeches of Xavier de Sade, Amédée Desjobert, and André Dupin in the *Archives Parlementaires*: de Sade, vol 82, p. 190 (3 April 1833); Dupin, vol 89, pp 490-91 (29 April 1834); Desjobert, vol 89, pp 509-12 (29 April 1834).

⁴² *Archives Parlementaires*, vol 82, p. 190.

⁴³ *Archives Parlementaires*, vol 89, p. 491. Dupin did, however, criticize French abuses in Algeria since the conquest, including massacres, theft of indigenous property, and violations of religious sites: “while we lacked loyalty, justice, and respect for the indigenes, these were not lacking in their behavior toward us...they have religion, equity, good faith; they know how to keep their word, and they don’t deserve to receive from us what I would call lessons in barbarism” (493). The following year, he rejected the idea that the French brought civilization to Algeria: “No... We send there people who wouldn’t dare show their faces in the metropole and who are legitimated when they are in foreign countries...speculators who follow the armies to see what they can seize...The rage for speculation has been pushed to the point of scandal in Algiers” (Chamber of Deputies, 20 May, 1835, quoted by Liauzu, p. 55).

uses of the word, either in French or English.⁴⁴ Fonfrède, the son of a Girondin deputy to the Convention who had been executed in 1793, was a leading free-trader from Bordeaux, a journalist with ties to Constant, and, under the Restoration, an associate of the liberal opposition group *Aide-toi, le ciel t'aidera*.⁴⁵ He opposed slavery and colonial monopolies, and he wrote a series of articles denouncing the occupation of the Algerian Regency in his newspaper, *Le Mémorial Bordelais*. But although he condemned the conquest of Algeria as “*un crime...de lèze-humanité,*” Fonfrède’s critique of the conquest also stressed its incompatibility with French interests: the conquest was a “parricide,” “*un crime de lèze-nation.*”⁴⁶

A rare exception to this primarily interest-based approach was the deputy Amédée Desjobert, who joined the Chamber in 1833 and was a sharp critic of French colonial policy in parliamentary debates as well as in a raft of publications, beginning with the powerful *La Question d’Alger* of 1837, which called for an independent, Arab-governed Algeria.⁴⁷ Echoing Constant’s argument that conquest corrupts democratic publics and destroys constitutional government at home, he argued that the July Monarchy had done with Algeria exactly as Napoleon had done with Egypt: forced a disastrous and unjust conquest on a corrupted and deluded public. He warned that in Algeria the French would quickly sacrifice, “in the form of a holocaust, the most important of our liberties!”⁴⁸

⁴⁴ J.-J. Hémardinquer, “Henri Fonfrède ou l’homme du Midi révolté (1827-38),” in *Annales du Midi* 88 (1976), pp 451-64.

⁴⁵ David Todd, *L’identité économique de la France: Libre-échange et protectionnisme, 1814-1851* (Paris, 2008), 125-6. I am grateful to David Todd for alerting me to Fonfrède’s critique of the conquest.

⁴⁶ Henri Fonfrède, *Oeuvres*, ed. C.-A. Campan (Bordeaux, 1844-47), volume 8, p. 170.

⁴⁷ Desjobert knew the *Miroir* (discussed below) and cited the book’s memorable image of the sale of bloodied jewelry at a market, after the massacre of the tribe of El Ouffia. *La Question d’Alger* (Paris, 1837), p. 219. I discuss Desjobert in *A Turn to Empire*, pp. 185-89.

⁴⁸ *La Question d’Alger*, 43-4. On the corruption of public opinion, see pp 6-7 and later his declaration that “we have received the mandate of the people to guard its interests, and we will defend them against

Desjobert was probably alone among French politicians on the left in the thoroughgoing nature of his critique: for Desjobert, economics, democracy at home, morality, and principles of international justice all demanded France's withdrawal from Algeria.

At this moment of early colonial ferment and vocal, if circumscribed, criticism of the conquest, Constant's anticolonial legacy was, I would argue, most eloquently taken up by an Algerian businessman and legal scholar, Hamdan Khodja (ca. 1773-1842). Indeed, Hamdan Khodja's *Miroir*, published in Paris in October 1833, announced its liberal filiation with an epigraph by Constant.⁴⁹ The first Algerian contribution to French public deliberation about the "*question d'Alger*," the *Miroir* self-consciously inhabited both a liberal cosmopolitan and a Muslim perspective. Along with Desjobert, Hamdan Khodja was nearly alone in French debates in making a principled argument for a complete French withdrawal from Algeria — what he called a "liberal emancipation" of the country.⁵⁰ The *Miroir* sought to present to the French political imagination the idea of an independent Algeria that might take its place in a nineteenth-century Europe of emerging nationalities and engage with European states as a diplomatic equal.

The work indicates the critical possibilities of liberal discourse at a moment when liberalism was being marshaled in France and Britain in the service of empire. While sovereignty norms and membership in the international legal community were coming to

everything, against the people itself, whose most generous passions are being excited. In time, it will be able to distinguish its true friends from its interested flatterers" (15).

⁴⁹ His book's complete title was *Aperçu historique et statistique sur la Régence d'Alger, intitulé en Arabe le Miroir* (Paris: Goetschy fils, 1833) [*Historical and statistical survey of the Regency of Algiers, entitled The Mirror in Arabic*]. The circumstances of its composition are obscure, and it is possible that Hamdan Khodja had French collaborators, though their possible identity remains unknown. I discuss Hamdan Khodja further in "Liberalism and empire in a nineteenth-century Algerian mirror," *Modern Intellectual History* (forthcoming August 2009).

⁵⁰ *Miroir*, 1833, p. 325. A pamphlet by an Englishman, S. Bannister, was another document to propose an indigenous government for Algeria; see *Appel en faveur d'Alger et de l'Afrique du Nord par un Anglais* (Paris, 1833).

be regarded by European liberals as inseparable from a distinctively European civilization, the *Miroir* offers an alternative conception of a more expansive international order. “I see every free people interested in the Poles and in the reestablishment of their nationality...and when my eyes return to the country of Algiers, I see its wretched inhabitants placed under the yoke of despotism, extermination, and all the scourges of war, and all these horrors committed in the name of free France.”⁵¹ Conscious of Algerian vulnerability and the reach of French power, Hamdan Khodja sought to navigate within the imperial space within which the French political imagination was arguably coming to situate itself. But he also urged his French audience to conceive of itself and of Algeria in national and not imperial terms. While granting that the country had been placed, in the deferential language of his appeal to the king, under “Your Majesty’s guardianship [*tutelle*],” Hamdan Khodja proposed that the king “emancipate the Algerians [and] restore harmony between the two peoples,” for “Algerians, too, have rights that should permit them to enjoy liberty and all the advantages that European nations enjoy.”⁵²

We may consider *Miroir* as part of the global “liberal constitutionalist moment” proposed by C.A. Bayly as a context for the thought of the Bengali intellectual Rammohan Roy.⁵³ Like Rammohan, Hamdan Khodja repeatedly drew analogies between European events and ideas and those of his own locality and tradition. In doing so, he was both demonstrating European liberalism’s compatibility with Islam and situating Algeria within a liberal European narrative from which his French contemporaries sought to exclude it. The *Miroir*’s repeated invocations of Greece and Belgium as models for an

⁵¹ Here I cite the modern edition (which does not include the previously cited passage): Hamdan Khodja, *Le Miroir*, ed. Abdelkader Djeghloul (Arles: Sindbad/Actes Sud, 1985), p. 206.

⁵² Réclamations, pièce 10, *Miroir*, 1833, p. 426.

⁵³ C.A. Bayly, “Rammohan Roy and the Advent of Constitutional Liberalism in India, 1800-1830,” *Modern Intellectual History* 4, 1 (2007), pp 25-41 and his “Afterword” in the same issue, pp 163-9.

independent Algeria likewise suggest that what David Armitage has called “the contagion of sovereignty” was spreading to circles in the Maghreb around the time that it was spreading among South American and Indian intellectuals.⁵⁴ Such gestures, however, proved sadly futile in the France of the July Monarchy, as establishment liberals, finally in power, quickly abandoned the vision of peaceful and mutually beneficial global commerce that had animated the earlier critiques of Napoleon.

In arguing that Algerians shared the principles of the law of nations that bound together Europeans,⁵⁵ and in casting Algeria as a potential part of Europe, Hamdan Khodja might have stretched the bounds of plausibility for a French audience of which even the more pluralist members, such as Constant, were inclined to regard Muslims as fanatical barbarians. But he also, perhaps, perceived that the July Monarchy, if not anticolonialist, did understand itself as having rejected the Napoleonic policy of total hegemony and as being committed to principles of an international rule of law. The Doctrinaire leader Guizot, minister and ambassador under the July Monarchy, declared in his memoirs that the regime represented the antithesis of the “ambitious and bellicose fever,” the “*exploits gigantesques*” and the “*projets chimériques*,” of the Convention and Empire. “From its birth and throughout the course of its life the government of 1830 fought against this posthumous passion for adventures and conquests.” Even against the wishes of a population at times nostalgic for the glories of those earlier regimes, he wrote, it was “the fundamental character of the government of 1830 to have taken European public law for the rule of its foreign policy.” Yet Guizot was also an unswerving supporter both of colonization in Algeria and West Africa and of Bugeaud’s

⁵⁴ David Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); and see Bayly, “Rammohan Roy,” p. 33.

⁵⁵ “[O]ur law is founded only on the principles of the law of nations” (*Miroir* 91).

brutal methods of the 1840s; he boasted that “I did not merely seize but sought out occasions and means to extend in Africa the presence and the power of France.”⁵⁶ Although Guizot was well to the right, in domestic politics, of the other *Algéristes* discussed here, his embrace of extra-European conquest even as he celebrated the July Monarchy’s rejection of Napoleonic bellicosity was characteristic of liberal opinion, and thus of Hamdan Khodja’s intended audience. In the end, then, though the *Miroir* exposed some of the hypocrisies of the new liberal position on conquest, it had little hope of converting its French readers.

Some of the *anticolonistes*, and possibly Hamdan Khodja’s, criticisms did find their way into the official reports of the two commissions of enquiry convened by the king in 1833 to examine the conquest.⁵⁷ The commissions’ reports lamented the French military’s violation of the terms of the capitulation treaty, their disregard of property rights, the violation of mosques and holy sites, and other offenses against Muslim mores.⁵⁸ The first commission’s report included a scathing indictment of the methods of conquest:

We have sent to their deaths on simple suspicion and without trial people whose guilt was always doubtful and then despoiled their heirs. We massacred people carrying [our] safe conducts, slaughtered on suspicion entire populations subsequently found to be innocent; we have put on trial men considered saints by the country, men revered because they had enough courage to expose themselves to our fury so that they could intervene on behalf of their unfortunate compatriots; judges were found to condemn them and civilized men to execute them. We have thrown into prison chiefs of tribes for offering hospitality to our deserters; we

⁵⁶ Guizot, *Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire de mon temps, tome VII, 1832-1837 (La question d’Orient)*, ed. Clémence Muller (Paleo: Sources de l’histoire de France, 2004), pp 6-7, 11, 28.

⁵⁷ Hamdan Khodja was one of two Algerians to testify before the commission in Paris; his testimony was acerbic and unsparing. *Procès verbaux et rapports de la Commission d’Afrique, instituée par ordonnance du Roi du 12 décembre 1833* (Paris: L’imprimerie royale, 1834), pp 45-59 (*Séance du 23 janvier*).

⁵⁸ See *Procès verbaux et rapports de la Commission nommée par le Roi, le 7 juillet 1833, pour aller recueillir en Afrique tous les faits propres à éclairer le Gouvernement sur l’état du pays et sur les mesures que réclame son avenir* (Paris: 1834). Also see Yacono, “La Régence d’Alger d’après l’enquête des commissions de 1833-34,” *Revue de l’Occident Musulman et de la Méditerranée* 1 (1966), pp 229-244; and “Comment la France décida de rester en Alger,” *Atti del I Congresso internazionale di studi nord-africani* (Cagliari, 1965), pp 321-37.

have rewarded treason in the name of negotiation, and termed diplomatic action odious acts of entrapment.⁵⁹

But even those commissioners who recognized the “barbarity” of the conquest persisted in the belief that the colonial administration could be reformed. They also declared their hands tied by the commitment of French public opinion to possession of Algeria.⁶⁰ The *Commission d’Afrique* decided by a vote of seventeen to two that “to abandon our conquests would be to offend the nation in its legitimate pride [and] to sacrifice the advantages of commerce and political power.”⁶¹ The metropolitan authorities thus allowed themselves to voice considerable discomfort with the conquest without repudiating it.

4. Algeria and the Rise of Imperial Liberalism

Moreover, powerful segments of liberal and leftist opinion had thrown themselves behind the conquest. The liberal republican Alphonse de Lamartine, in a speech brimming with poetic invocations of the nation’s colonial mission, ridiculed the limited perspective of political economy, “a new science that often takes its axioms for facts, and its paradoxes for truths.” While he agreed that Algeria would likely be a financial loss for France, he pointed to England’s “system of universal existence, of colonial ubiquity” as the source of her dynamism and power and asked,

Have nations nothing more to do than add up columns of figures? And have we descended to such a degree of social materialism that arithmetic alone shall preside over the councils of the Chamber and the government and alone determine the resolutions of this noble nation? ... If gold has its weight, do not politics, national

⁵⁹ Report by the deputy de la Pinsonnière; *Procès-verbaux*, vol 1, pp 333-34. Translation from John Ruedy, *Modern Algeria*, p. 50.

⁶⁰ *Procès-Verbaux*, p. 140; see also one member’s protest against such “giving in to [public] opinion” (116).

⁶¹ *Procès-Verbaux*, p. 405; also see Yacono, “Comment la France.” The dissenters were Hippolyte Passy and Xavier de Sade.

honor, the disinterested protection of the weak, humanity — do they not also have theirs?⁶²

Already in 1834, some defenders of the colony were insisting that Algeria *was* France.⁶³ Lamartine, for one, pronounced the idea of giving up the colony a “fatal thought...an antinational, antisocial, antihuman thought.” Lamartine’s paean to national glory was echoed a few years later by another self-described liberal, Adolphe Thiers, president of the council and minister of foreign affairs, who excused the violence of the conquest as ordinary and inevitable: “I don’t say that there will never be misfortunes, never mistakes, never excesses. What government could have the presumption to maintain that in using the means of war in foreign countries, everything will always be done wisely and humanely? That is impossible; we don’t even accept such a condition for the defense of our borders. War is war.”⁶⁴

The republican *Dictionnaire Politique* of 1843, in its emphasis on France’s great historic mission to colonize, epitomized the dominant leftist position on the conquest.⁶⁵ The work’s article “Colonie,” written by the political economist Jean-Gustave Courcelle-Seneuil, argued that although “we recognize the abuses of [our colonial] regime and believe that it demands radical reforms,” the “need to colonize is no passing fantasy for a great and strong nation....Every people tends to develop itself not merely by a rapid growth in population, but by this instinctive sentiment of ambition and movement, which

⁶² *Archives Parlementaires*, vol 89, pp 676-7 (2 May 1834).

⁶³ See Desjobert’s rejection of such claims; *Archives Parlementaires*, vol 89, p. 510.

⁶⁴ *Archives Parlementaires*, vol 105, p. 155 (9 June 1836). Thiers rejected the claim of some critics that there was no liberty in parliamentary debates over the question, that they had become “par trop impérial.” Declaring that “we make no pretension to return to the imperial system,” he nonetheless denounced the “furor of denigration against everything that is greater, more useful, more patriotic.” The speech betrays his anxiety that the regime was perceived as both too Bourbon and too Napoleonic.

⁶⁵ Claude Liauzu has argued that the generation born after 1789 conceived France’s colonial vocation in light of “the myth of revolutionary war in which it saw a fight between two principles rather than two countries or European peoples”; *Histoire de l’anticolonialisme en France* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2005), p. 48.

is the most noble and eminent of the human soul. . . . Colonization is the most praiseworthy and glorious form of conquest; it is the most direct means of propagating civilization.”⁶⁶

The *Dictionnaire*'s article on Algeria criticized the early years of the enterprise as a period of violence and vacillation, characterized the war as one of high costs that benefited only speculators rather than the national interest, and declared that the administration was “too often beneath what the Turks had been.” But it regarded the preservation of Algeria as a “question of honor and national interest” and expressed satisfaction that, despite all the mistakes of the early years, public opinion was firmly in favor of the conquest.⁶⁷

Concerns about the violence of the conquest were thus shared by critics and supporters of the colony. Defenders of the conquest, in appropriating these worries and pledging themselves to reform, disarmed such arguments as a basis for anticolonialism. The legislator Gaëtan de La Rochefoucauld was among the most eloquent in denouncing the notorious 1832 massacre of the tribe of El Ouffia and the French failure to punish such excesses. But he used this critique to argue for his own plan of colonization, which would begin with legal pluralism and gradually work toward civilizing and converting the Algerians: “Would it not be the greatest and most glorious event for France, this mission she gives a young prince to bring about the revolution that is unfolding at this moment in Africa?” he asked. “France has, in Algiers, not a few military posts to occupy nor a few commercial relations to extend, but a whole continent to enlighten.”⁶⁸ The narrow insistence by most critics that France's interests should determine the question left them

⁶⁶ [Jean-Gustave] Courcelle-Seneuil, “Colonie,” in *Dictionnaire politique* (Paris: Pagnerre, 1843), intro. by Garnier-Pagès, pp 233-5 at p. 234. Courcelle-Seneuil (1813-1892) was a translator of Smith's *Wealth of Nations* and Mill's *Principles of Political Economy*.

⁶⁷ [J.J.O.] Pellion, “Alger, Algérie,” in *Dictionnaire politique*, pp 46-48.

⁶⁸ Gaëtan de La Rochefoucauld, speech of 29 April 1834; Archives Parlementaires, vol 89, p. 488.

in a rhetorically weak position vis-à-vis such proposals. Their opponents, the liberal and republican supporters of a French Algeria, could acknowledge and disable criticisms of conquest's brutality while casting critics as cramped economists oblivious to the claims of public opinion, national honor, and France's international status, especially vis-à-vis England. Their arguments in these early years would be repeated and given particular force by Tocqueville, who, throughout the 1840s, as the French were extending and consolidating the conquest, was the Chamber's most visible Algeria expert and supporter of the conquest.⁶⁹

5. Tocqueville and Algeria

Tocqueville's political career began after the brief period of vigorous debate over the conquest; he entered the Chamber of Deputies in 1839 as an avid proponent of a French Algeria, as well as a critic of what he regarded as the incompetence of the French authorities in pursuing it and of what he saw as the apathy of the French political classes toward such an important undertaking. Tocqueville was convinced for most of his political career that his colleagues undervalued French colonies and their political worth for France. He devoted such energy to the question of colonization because he felt he had grasped the historic importance of conquest as few Frenchmen in his day had done.

The question of Africa will be set decidedly on the path toward a good and great solution only when...ministers fall or rise because of it. Then, the first minds of the country will be at its service, then the attention, the effort, the activity of men of state will turn that way. That moment has not altogether arrived, but it is very

⁶⁹ Tocqueville's "Letters on Algeria" of 1837 strongly resemble La Rochefoucauld's position described above; his later invocation of national honor and arguments that a country like France could not retreat from Algeria without signaling its decline to the world echo the Lamartine speech just quoted. See *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. J.P. Mayer (Paris: Gallimard, 1958-98), III.1 and *Writings on Slavery and Empire*, ed. Jennifer Pitts (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), pp 5-26 and 59.

near. The sentiment of the chamber and of the government is already that Algeria is today our greatest affair.⁷⁰

Much of the recent literature on Tocqueville and Algeria has dwelled on the question of how his liberalism can be reconciled with his support for empire, and perhaps more pointedly with his clear-eyed support for the violent domination of native Algerians, even as he acknowledged that colonial rule more often barbarized than civilized its subjects.⁷¹ I would suggest that the question should also be regarded as a broader question about the character of French liberalism at this formative moment. Tocqueville, though unique among his contemporaries in the philosophical and sociological richness of his liberalism, was strikingly in line with them in his judgments about conquest and colonization.⁷²

Tocqueville consistently sought to represent a middle ground between the indiscriminate violence of Governor-General Bugeaud and those like his friend Claude de Corcelle, who, though not an *anticoloniste*, was earnestly concerned to prevent brutality toward the native Algerians. (In contrast, he was rather dismissive of the “polemics” of “Desjobert and company,” who rejected the conquest altogether.⁷³) His letters to Corcelle offer his most explicit, and most troubled, reflections on French relations with the Arabs in Algeria. From Algiers in 1846, he wrote:

Not having you along, I tried at least to make up for your absence by asking a lot of questions to do with that great side of the African affair that occupies you so much,

⁷⁰ Letter to General de Lamoricière, 5 April 1846; in Tocqueville, *Lettres choisies*, Françoise Mélonio and Laurence Gellec, eds. (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), p. 564.

⁷¹ This is true of my discussion in *A Turn to Empire*; Also see Melvin Richter, “Tocqueville on Algeria,” *Review of Politics* 25 (1963), pp 362-98; Tzvetan Todorov, “Tocqueville et la doctrine coloniale,” in *De la colonie en Algérie*, ed. Tzvetan Todorov (Brussels: Editions Complexe, 1988), pp 9-34; Cheryl Welch, “Colonial Violence and the Rhetoric of Evasion: Tocqueville on Algeria,” *Political Theory* 31 (2003), pp 235-64; Jean-Louis Benoît, *Tocqueville: un destin paradoxal* (Paris: Bayard, 2005), 264-79; Margaret Kohn, “Empire’s Law: Alexis de Tocqueville on Colonialism and the State of Exception,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 41.2 (June 2008), pp 255-278.

⁷² Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison stresses this continuity between Tocqueville’s views and those of his contemporaries: see *Coloniser, Exterminer* (Paris: Fayard, 2005), “Introduction.”

⁷³ Letter to Beaumont, 9 August 1840, OC 18, pp 420-421.

the maintenance of the indigenous race in the face of our own. I brought back this general notion, that, for the rest, I already had: that it is not only cruel, but absurd and impracticable, to try to force back or exterminate the natives; but through what means could the two races really be brought into contact? I confess with sorrow that my mind is troubled and hesitates Whatever happens, we can be sure that our proximity will create a social revolution among the Arabs, with painful effects.”⁷⁴

Though unsettled by Corcelle’s worries, he also seized with some bravado the ground of realism: “From the moment that we committed that great *violence* of conquest, I think that we should not recoil from the small acts of violence [*violences de detail*] that are absolutely necessary to consolidate it.”⁷⁵ And “[t]he quarrel is no longer between governments, but between races....in order for us to colonize to any extent, we must necessarily use not only violent measures, but visibly iniquitous ones.”⁷⁶

Although Tocqueville was both more nuanced in his analysis of the conquest’s importance for France and more thoughtful about the costs of colonial violence than many of his contemporaries, he shared the widespread sense of imperial rivalry with Britain, the liberal-republican preoccupation with France’s international standing as a great nation, and the willingness to carry out the conquest through the use of violence that would be considered unconscionable within Europe. And although his views, over two decades, about possible relations with native Algerians were more complex than those of many of his contemporaries, on this question he moved, with Guizot and others, rather

⁷⁴ Letter to Corcelle, 1 December 1846, OC 15. p. 224. He also described the famine and “extreme misery” among the Arabs and added that “the hatred which reigns between the two races...is painful to see.”

⁷⁵ Letter to Lamoricière of 5 April 1846, in *Lettres choisies*, p. 565.

⁷⁶ From the unpublished “Travail sur l’Algérie” of 1841, in OC 3.i p. 242; *Empire and Slavery*, p. 83. Also see the now infamous passage from the same essay: “I have often heard men in France whom I respect, but with whom I do not agree, find it wrong that we burn harvests, that we empty silos, and finally that we seize unarmed men, women, and children. These, in my view, are unfortunate necessities, but ones to which any people who want to wage war on the Arabs are obliged to submit”; OC 3.i pp 226-7; *Empire and Slavery*, p. 70.

quickly from early aspirations for mutual accommodation to a fairly implacable commitment to mere domination.⁷⁷

In a brief but suggestive sketch, Tocqueville described what came to be called the Eastern question as central to the spirit of the age: it was characteristic of him, as indeed of much of nineteenth-century European thought, to attempt to capture the movement of history and the essence of the moment.⁷⁸ The ‘movement of the European race into Asia’ is the ‘movement of the century,’ Tocqueville wrote.⁷⁹ Tocqueville’s first speech before the Chamber, in 1839, was a passionate engagement in the Eastern question, in which Tocqueville took a resolutely, even belligerently, anti-British position. In his second major speech, on 30 November 1840, Tocqueville drew on the thoughts of his previous speech to suggest that, if France continued to lag behind in European colonial expansion, the country would not simply decline in importance but would become a sort of anachronism:

What is happening in Egypt and Syria is only part of an immense picture, only the beginning of an immense scene. Do you know what is happening in the Orient? An entire world is being transformed; from the banks of the Indus to the Black sea, in all that immense space, societies are crumbling, religions are being weakened, nationalities are disappearing, all the [old] lights are going out, the old Asiatic world is vanishing, and in its place the European world is rising. Europe in our times does not attack Asia only through a corner, as did Europe in the time of the crusades: She attacks ... from all sides, puncturing, enveloping, subduing.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ For Guizot’s shift, see his own claim that his early views were too “utopian”: “experience has taught me... [that] I believed too much in the possibility of governing, with justice and peace, relations between French and Arabs, Christians and Muslims, settlers and natives.” *Mémoires*, tome vii, p. 125.

⁷⁸ As J.S. Mill observed in his own essay “The Spirit of the Age,” “The idea of comparing one’s own age with former ages, or with our notion of those which are yet to come... never before was itself the dominant idea of any age”; Mill, *Collected Works*, ed. by J.M. Robson and R.F. McRae (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963-) XXII. p. 228.

⁷⁹ OC 3.ii p. 279.

⁸⁰ OC 3.ii p. 290 (translation from Drescher, *Tocqueville and England*, 156). Also see George Frederickson, *Race and Racism in Comparative Perspective*, p. 113.

While it seems that the English liberals with whom Tocqueville corresponded believed much the same thing, they rarely stated so explicitly that to be a modern nation was to colonize. As the dominant colonial and maritime power, the British could carry out their intentions without agonizing, as French liberals so often did (to Desjobert's chagrin), about their national reputation or possible decline.

The combination of admiration and envy Tocqueville felt for Britain made him a perceptive analyst of the contradictions of the British imperial ideology of civilizing empire. Whereas a belief in progress and in the civilizing mission was an article of faith among the British liberals and philosophic radicals who dominated Indian policy-making after 1828, Tocqueville remained suspicious both of the rigid dichotomy between civilized and barbarous peoples employed by thinkers like James and J.S. Mill and of Europeans' confidence that their rule benefited and improved their non-European subjects.⁸¹ Tocqueville regarded the British not only as hypocritical, but as self-deceiving, seduced by their myth that British rule was for their subjects' benefit despite much evidence to the contrary. "[W]hat I cannot get over," he wrote, "is their perpetual attempts to prove that they act in the interest of a principle, or for the good of the natives, or even for the advantage of the sovereigns they subjugate; it is their frank indignation toward those who resist them; these are the procedures with which they almost always surround violence."⁸² Because Tocqueville appreciated the complexity and the political character of Algerian society as Mill never did that of India, and because he never

⁸¹ On the civilizing idea in Mill, see J.M. Robson, "Civilization and Culture as Moral Concepts" in *The Cambridge Companion to Mill*, ed. John Skorupski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Pitts, *A Turn to Empire*, chapter 5; and Alan Ryan, "Bureaucracy, Democracy, Liberty: Some Unanswered Questions in Mill's Politics," in *J.S. Mill's Political Thought*, Nadia Urbinati and Alex Zakaras, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp 147-65.

⁸² OC 3.i p. 505.

succumbed altogether to the illusion that Europe's civilizing mission provided a clear moral justification for despotic rule, Tocqueville's ambivalence about empire ran far deeper than Mill's.

[I have cut several pages on Tocqueville to avoid excessive length.]

In contrast to Constant's searing criticism of the military spirit, Tocqueville, despite some qualms, accepted the need for a dramatic increase of French troops for the sake of empire. Viewing a strong military presence in Algeria as a necessary condition of the settlement colony he sought (and often more sympathetic to the military than to the colonists, whom he often saw as greedy and self-absorbed), he devoted tremendous thought to the problem of civil-military relations in colonial society.⁸³ Tocqueville admired what he considered the military's displays of civic virtue in an otherwise apathetic nation.⁸⁴ Tocqueville thus repudiated both Constant's claim, a modern liberal version of the classical republican fear that empire destroys liberty, that a strong military and the culture to which it gives rise are fundamentally incompatible with democratic liberty.

6) Nation and Empire

Frederick Cooper has argued that nineteenth-century Britain and France should be understood not, as they often are, as nation-states engaged in colonial conquest, but rather as empire-states in which the "space of empire" was a significant political framework in

⁸³ See especially the 1847 Reports (OC 3.i p. 314 ff; *Empire and Slavery*, p. 133).

⁸⁴ In admiration of the French soldiers fighting in the Crimean War, he wrote to a friend, "Are you not astonished with me, Madame, upon seeing spring from a nation that appears so devoid of public virtues, an army that demonstrates itself to be so full of virtue? So much egoism here, so much self-sacrifice there"; Letter to Mme de Swetchine, OC 15.ii.p. 263.

its own right.⁸⁵ Both political leaders and those contesting expansion conceived of their political space as imperial, he argues, noting that even those who argued that colonies should be expressions of national power did so in the context of centuries-old imperial rivalries, and that criticisms of empire on the grounds of national independence were not the only, or even the most important, ones.

This dual perspective of nation and empire, and a perception of the tensions between these political forms, is evident in debates and political texts at the time of the Algeria conquest, with regard to both France's status as a nation and the disputed "nationality" of the Algerians. The very notion of France as *la grande nation* in Napoleonic propaganda had united the idea of the French nation with that of imperial expansion within and outside Europe: "*la grande nation* is summoned to astonish and console the world," as Napoleon put it in a speech to the army in Italy in 1797.⁸⁶ Something of this idea was preserved in the thought of self-professed liberals during the Algeria conquest, as Lamartine's yearning for "colonial ubiquity" as the nation's proper destiny suggests.⁸⁷

As for the Algerians' nationality, many conceded that there was an "Arab nationality" in the loose sense of cultural or ethnic association, but it was widely denied that Algeria enjoyed the sort of affective or political coherence that might underpin existence as a

⁸⁵ Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, pp. 154-55.

⁸⁶ Henry Laurens, "Bonaparte, l'Orient et la Grande Nation," in *Annales de la Révolution française*, no. 273 (July-September 1988), pp 289-301 at p. 297. Laurens argues that Napoleon adopted the expression from several Ottoman correspondents. Also see Jacques Godechot, *La Grande Nation, l'expansion révolutionnaire de la France dans le monde de 1789 à 1799* (Paris, 1983).

⁸⁷ Also see the discussion in the article "Nation" by Elias Regnault (a lawyer and, after 1848, minister of finance), in the *Dictionnaire Politique*. The article argues both that nations require "material" and "moral unity" and a degree of homogeneity, and that smaller nations will likely be incorporated into "superior" nations, asking "Is there not something ridiculous in calling Belgium a nation?" It concludes that as humanity develops there will be a tendency toward ever greater concentrations, until "all humanity is but one single Nation" (625).

nation in a more strictly political sense.⁸⁸ It was one of the founding myths of the conquest that the French, having defeated the Ottoman dey, filled a political vacuum in Algeria, where a dizzying variety of races and tribes roamed the countryside or jostled together in cities without forming a coherent social or political body.⁸⁹ The Turks and their descendants were described as invaders who had never sunk roots in the country; urban elites, Muslim and Jewish alike, as no more true Algerians than the Turks; and the Berber and Arab tribes as groups irremediably hostile to one another who (falsely) did not even share the same religion.

That the “nationality” of Algeria was thought to be compatible with French rule is indicated by Thiers’s 1836 speech, cited earlier. Thiers claimed not to “contest the [Arabs’] right to conserve their nationality” and promised that the government had no intention of “destroying the Arab nationality,” as some deputies had charged. In his insistence on the term, Thiers was declaring himself in support of something further than simply the protection of individual Arab lives against the imputation of an exterminationist project. What this might be he left conveniently ambiguous, but by “nationality” he certainly did not mean political independence.⁹⁰ In contrast, when Amédée Desjobert argued that France should recognize “Arab nationality” in Algeria, he undoubtedly meant Algerian political independence. The Arabs and Kabyles formed, he

⁸⁸ For such a distinction between the looser and stricter senses of the term, see Regnault, “Nation.”

⁸⁹ See Patricia M.E. Lorcin, “Introduction,” *Algeria & France, 1800-2000: identity, memory, nostalgia* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press 2006), p. xxiv; Jean-François Guilhaume, *Les mythes fondateurs de l’Algérie française* (Paris: Harmattan, 1992); and Lahouari Addi, “Colonial Mythologies: Algeria in the French Imagination,” in *Franco-Arab Encounters* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1996), pp 93-105.

⁹⁰ Thiers, debate of 9 June 1836, *Archives Parlementaires*, vol 105, pp 159-60. He also argued that Algerians did not form a unified “national ensemble”; rather, there were a variety of populations — Turks, Koulouglis, Arabs in the towns, conflicting Arab tribes in the countryside — whose divisions could be manipulated by the French to entrench their power. As one whose newspaper was called *Le National*, Thiers was perhaps especially sensitive to the term’s possible uses.

argued, a single nationality “which must be aided along the paths of civilization. But it must walk them on its own; its steps will be more sure.”⁹¹ Desjobert considered Abd-el-Kader the “representative of Arab nationality” and maintained that the French had the moral duty to recognize him as the leader of the Algerian people and to abandon any plans for colonization.⁹² France, Desjobert argued, should declare that it would not recognize European colonists and that any Europeans who remained in Algeria did so at their own risk and as subjects of the indigenous government.⁹³ Like Hamdan Khodja, Desjobert called on the French to extend the same political standards to Algerians that they applied in Europe, pointing out the inconsistency of criticizing conquests in Europe while oppressing their own “Muslim Poland.”⁹⁴

In this context, Tocqueville’s reflections a few years later on the political landscape in Algeria appear at once astute and cynical. Unlike those French analysts who simply dismissed Algerians’ capacity for a national political life, Tocqueville clearly viewed the national consolidation of Algeria as an imminent possibility; he saw it as an event delayed not by the Algerians’ barbarism or political immaturity, but just by the superior military power of the Ottoman empire. He argued that the French, in their confusion and despite their heavy-handedness, had presented indigenous leaders with a chance for

⁹¹ Desjobert, *La Question d’Alger*, p. 324.

⁹² Abd-el-Kader (Abd al-Qadir) was a religious leader or marabout and France’s chief military opponent in Algeria at this time. Desjobert’s remarks about Abd-el-Kader suggest, nonetheless, a belief in the superiority of European civilization: he writes that Abd-el-Kader “was the progressive man of his times.... His organizational genius began by centralizing Arab society, as much as it could be; he wanted to send all of the young people of good families to France to be educated in our civilization, just as the Turks and Egyptians do”; Desjobert, *L’Algérie en 1846*, p. 114. See similar remarks in *La Question d’Alger*, p. 324 ff.

⁹³ Desjobert, *La Question d’Alger*, p. 306 ff. The advantages for France in his system would be, he claimed, continued suppression of piracy; peaceful possession of two or three coastal points that could be useful during a maritime war; greatly reduced expenses; the prospect of advantageous commerce in Africa; and “the glory for France, in propagating civilization, of doing something honorable for herself” (327-28).

⁹⁴ Desjobert, *L’Algérie en 1846*, p. 91. In another of many echoes of the *Miroir*, Desjobert charged French oppression with having ravaged Algeria’s potential futures: acknowledging that what he called “le système arabe” would be difficult to accomplish, Desjobert wrote, “we have nearly covered the Regency with impossibilities”; *La Question d’Alger*, p. 307.

resurgence. Knowing nothing of the political organization developing among the local tribes, the French were unwittingly driving all the tribes into the arms of a single capable leader, Abd el-Kader, and thus encouraging an Arab national unity that would make it impossible to subject the Arabs to French rule.⁹⁵ Now, “after 300 years [the Arab population] is reawakening and acting under a national leader.”⁹⁶ He was deeply impressed by the speed with which Abd el-Kader had emerged out of the anarchy and, within a few years of the Turkish defeat, established his national movement as the primary political and military force in western Algeria.⁹⁷ The French, Tocqueville argued, should permit this renewed self-government in order to control it and put it to their own use. He argued that the French had to cultivate leaders such as Abd el-Kader, since they could not possibly govern the country directly (the tribes disappeared into the desert whenever the French tried to control them), but they also had to encourage the rise of a number of rivals, for the national organization of Algerians under a single “national” leader would likely destroy French hopes of dominance.

Any worries, on the other hand, that the coherence or vitality of the French nation might be threatened by an imperial project — that conquest was alien to the modern nation and anathema to modern citizens, as Constant had argued — were outweighed by the conviction that the conquest was crucial for France’s international standing, that the French nation was an imperial polity. That neither Tocqueville nor almost any other of his liberal or republican contemporaries could contemplate the emancipation, “abandonment,” or political independence of Algeria attests to the great distance liberal

⁹⁵ “Second letter,” OC 3.i p. 148, *Empire and Slavery*, p. 22. He argued that no one had an “incontestable right” to rule after 300 years of Ottoman dominance, so that the task of the French was to get the Algerians used to, and dependent on, French power.

⁹⁶ OC 3.i 145, *Empire and Slavery*, p. 19

⁹⁷ “Second letter,” OC 3.i pp 143-4, *Empire and Slavery*, pp 17-18.

thinking had traversed from the resolute criticism of Europe's imperial expansion articulated by their forbears, who wrote as members of liberal or proto-liberal oppositions to authoritarian regimes, under both the *ancien régime* and the Restoration. Deaf to the rare but eloquent protests from the metropole (Desjobert) and the colonies (Hamdan Khodja), as well as to the voices of their past, after 1834 French liberals and republicans with few exceptions committed themselves to a conception of national dignity that demanded an imperial politics. The distinctive stress that French republicanism has always laid on national unity and a national mission, which contributed to the mid-nineteenth-century colonial enthusiasm I have described, arguably continues to bedevil debates over the postcolonial present.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ For self-declared republicans' claims that colonial guilt and multiculturalism threaten national unity, see Henri Peña-Ruiz, "Culture, cultures et laïcité," in *Hommes et Migrations*, No. 1259 (Jan-Feb 2006), p 7, cited by Emile Chabal, "Une république postcoloniale?" p. 14. Also see Daniel Lefeuvre, *Pour en finir avec la repentance coloniale* (Paris, 2006).