The Algerian Revolution and the Pitfalls of Decolonial Theory in the MENA Region*

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Abstract

Reflecting on the relationship between theory and history, this article looks at how a historical event – the Algerian revolution – has been taken up by decolonial theory. This essay offers an overview of the "decolonial turn", briefly describing the works of the Peruvian sociologist Anníbal Quijano, the Puerto Rican philosopher Nelson Maldonado-Torres and the Argentinian theorist Walter Mignolo. Focusing on the works of Mignolo, the essay than looks at his portrayal of the Algerian Revolution, not only in his reading of Bennabi, but also in terms of his comments on the ways in which this historical event managed to avoid the "trap" set by the "colonial matrix of power". This is analyzed in the context of Algerian intellectual history by exploring how Mostefa Lacheraf, Mohammed Sahli, and Ahmed Taleb Ibrahimi tackled a similar series of questions from the 1950s to the 1970s.

Keywords: Intellectual History - Algeria - Decolonization - Malek Bennabi - Cherif Sahli- Taleb Ibrahimi.

ملخص

يتناول هذا المقال العلاقة بين النظرية والتاريخ، حيث يستعرض كيف تم تناول حدث تاريخي - الثورة الجزائرية - في نظرية ما بعد الاستعمار. يقدم هذا المقال لمحة عامة عن "التحول ما بعد الاستعماري"، موضحًا بإيجاز أعمال عالم الاجتماع البيروفي أنيبال كويخانو،

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والفيلسوف البورتوريكي نيلسون مالدونادو-توريس، والمنظر الأرجنتيني والتر مينيولو. بعد ذلك، يركز المقال على أعمال مينيولو، حيث يستعرض تصويره للثورة الجزائرية، ليس فقط من خلال قراءته لبن نبي، ولكن أيضًا من خلال تعليقاته حول كيفية تمكن هذا الحدث التاريخي من تجنب "الفخ" الذي نصبه "المصفوفة الاستعمارية للسلطة". يتم تحليل ذلك في التاريخ الفكري الجزائري من خلال استكشاف كيف تناول مصطفى الأشرف، ومحمد شريف ساحلي، وأحمد طالب الإبراهيمي نفس السلسلة من الأسئلة من الخمسينيات إلى السبعينيات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التاريخ الفكري - الجزائر - التحرر من الاستعمار - مالك بن نبي - شريف ساحلي - أحمد طالب الابراهيمي.

Résumé

Cet article analyse la manière dont *la Révolution algérienne a été interprétée par la théorie « décoloniale » et soutient que l'application de ce cadre théorique, issu principalement de l'Amérique latine, au cas algérien tend à produire des simplifications historiques et politiques. En s'appuyant sur les écrits d'intellectuels algériens comme Mohamed Chérif Sahli, Mostefa Lacheraf et Ahmed Taleb Ibrahimi, l'article met en évidence le caractère hybride de la pensée anticoloniale algérienne, où les débats sur la langue, la culture et la construction de l'État relevaient davantage de choix politiques concrets et de dynamiques sociales que d'une quête de pureté épistémologique. Cet article insiste sur le fait que la modernité et le colonialisme sont profondément imbriqués, ce qui nécessite une analyse des décolonisations attentive à cette complexité et les circulations des savoirs.*

Mots-clés: Histoire des idées - Algérie - Décolonisation - Malek Bennabi - Cherif Sahli - Taleb Ibrahimi.

Perhaps no anti-colonial struggle has been more fruitful for theorizing the nature of decolonization than the Algerian Revolution. Indeed, since 2023 Israel's ongoing genocide of Palestinians has brought Algeria's revolution back to the forefront of these debates. Scholars have analyzed Algeria's war against France to reflect on colonial violence and national liberation: what mechanisms did French rule employ to confiscate indigenous lands? How did attempts to eliminate the Algerian political, cultural, and religious traditions influence nation-building once sovereignty was won? And what kinds of resistance did Algerians wield in the face of what some scholars have characterized as cultural and physical genocide?

This article reflects on how decolonial theory, a body of literature that first emerged in the study of Latin America, has tacked these questions. Scholars writing in the framework of decolonial theory have examined the 15th century European colonization of the Americas and the ensuing genocidal conquest of indigenous peoples. The strategies employed by Europeans in the Americas differed greatly from those that defined so-called new imperialism or "scramble for Africa" of the nineteenth century, which was foreshadowed by the French occupation of Ottoman Algeria. As decolonial theory has become increasingly widespread in the Anglophone academy, however, scholars have drawn on its analytical tools to study a wide set of geographical locations, including Algeria[1]. This essay investigates the political ramifications in incorporating Algeria into this theoretical framework. What are the political and epistemological consequences of studying Algeria using methodology outlined by the founding figures of decolonial studies? Moreover, how have decolonial scholars analyzed the Algerian Revolution and its intellectual touchstones?

An examination of how decolonial theory has been applied to Algeria draws our attention to the tension between history and theory[2]. Despite the fact that critical traditions are often rooted in a certain set of geographically and historically specific questions, the work of theory necessarily abstracts from these empirical moorings to provide a set of concepts that can help us understand other contexts. Thus, while Pierre Bourdieu drew on his time in Algeria to derive the concepts of a habitus and a field, his analysis has helped shed light on social processes in several geographical locations[3]. Similarly, the Subaltern Studies Group, which emerged in reaction to an elite school of nationalist historiography in India, garnered important methodological insights for historians working on diverse regions. Algerian history was undoubtedly foundational for a generation of thinkers who became the pillars of critical social theory in France (and, later, in the Anglophone world), including Frantz Fanon, Jacques Derrida, Pierre Bourdieu, and

[1] For an analysis of the decolonial turn seen from East Asia see (Serrano-Muñoz, 2021).

[2] This has been most clear in the debates on contextualism. One school of thought has recently argued for a "modest" contextualism. See (McMahon & Moyn, 2014).

[3] For just a few of these debates see (Kadri, 2022; Calhoun, 2006).

Jean-Paul Sartre (Said, 1983). While the insights gleaned from Algeria shaped French social theory in the 1960s and 1970s, however, in the intervening decades the field of postcolonial studies was shaped by literary scholars primarily interested in India and, to a lesser extent, the Middle East and Africa.

This essay will first offer an overview of the decolonial turn, briefly describing the works of the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano, the Puerto Rican philosopher Nelson Maldonado-Torres and the Argentinian theorist Walter Mignolo. Focusing on the works of Mignolo, the essay then looks at his portrayal of the Algerian Revolution and his reading of Algerian intellectual Malek Bennabi (1905-1973), who, he claims, managed to avoid the "trap" set by the "colonial matrix of power[4]". This characterization of Bennabi, as situated as completely outside the discourses of western modernity, requires a series of historical and intellectual simplifications that are a logical byproduct of positing a historical parallel between Latin America on the one hand, and the Middle East and North Africa on the other. This results not only from a lack of familiarity with Algerian history, but also from a series of methodological assumptions frequently found in decolonial theory: the insistence on 1492 as a moment of rupture, an understanding of the Arabic language (and Islam) as an uncomplicated vector of "authentic" knowledge, and a generalized suspicion of intellectuals who drew on European concepts in their quest for emancipation.

The last part of this article offers an analysis of the writings of three Algerian intellectuals - Mohamed Chérif Sahli (1906-1989), Mostefa Lacheraf (1917-2007), and Ahmed Taleb Ibrahimi (1932-2025). All of these figures sought to decolonize Algeria from French influence. In contrast to Mignolo's stipulations, however, they were less concerned with epistemological purity, and instead focused on political strategy. Rather than following Audrey Lourde's notion that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house", they used concepts found in contemporary French philosophy to undermine French colonial

[4] In Quijano's writing, the "colonial matrix of power" is based on control of the economy, authority, sex and knowledge (Quijano, 2000). Mignolo, however, emphasizes the racial and patriarchal foundation of knowledge (Mignolo, 2011, p. 8). Maldonado-Torres adds a fifth pillar, which is the ontological violence inherent in the "coloniality of being." (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). The modern creation of nature is a potential sixth pillar of this matrix. (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 153-176).

discourse[5]. While sharing a commitment to overturning French domination, they disagreed on the role of Islam and the Arabic language after independence. Lacheraf, for example, was attentive to the fact that French colonialism had fostered class structures and social hierarchies that would need to be addressed after 1962. Notably, the possibility of immediate Arabization was complicated by the fact that the educated elite, the group of individuals capable of training a new generation of scholars, tended to be Francophone. Questions of state-building were therefore debated alongside considerations for cultural decolonization. Reading the analysis of Algerian intellectuals alongside decolonial theory offers a useful corrective to romantic invocations of authenticity that privilege ideological purity the concrete struggles of state-building that followed independence.

Followed to their logical conclusions, the decolonial tendency to denounce forms of hybrid thought for being insufficiently decolonized is ripe for adoption by authoritarian regimes in the Global South, who have found nativism a useful means for quashing political dissent. This is not to question the emancipatory political hopes of decolonial theory. Rather, the goal is to reflect on what happens to one set of tools when they are applied out of context. As Edward Said noted in his 1983 essay on how theory "travels", the risk that critical insights can lose their "rebelliousness" as they become distant from their original iteration, should be taken seriously (Said, 1983). Instead, there are considerable epistemological and political stakes in embracing a vision of liberation that obscures the complicated ways that anti-colonialism, authoritarianism, and nativism are being articulated in the Global South.

Decolonial Theory: An Overview

A Google Ngram search reveals that the word "decolonial" enjoyed a precipitous uptake in the Anglophone academy after 2010. While it is common in French to speak of "*les études décoloniales*" (sometimes referred to as *la pensée décoloniale* or *le camp décolonial*), this generally refers to a more capacious discussion that centers on multiple intellectual traditions that offer a structural critique of colonization and its continued role in

[5] For a debate on this phrase from the perspective on anthropology see (Venkatesan & al., 2024).

fashioning racist discourses and institutions in Europe. In France, postcolonial studies and decolonial theory are routinely amalgamated and the differences between decolonial and postcolonial are often overlooked (a tendency also found in Arabic discussions in North Africa) (Amselle, 2024)[6]. In English, however, the decolonial turn has been articulated as a critique - or even rejection - of postcolonial studies (Mignolo, 2007).

The decolonial turn crystallized in 1990s, with 1992 marking the 500-year commemoration of Christopher's Columbus landing in the present-day Bahamas. This was an inaugural moment for European colonization of the Americas, which managed to destroy the physical and epistemological worlds inhabited by indigenous people. The 1990s also saw an uptake in indigenous and Afro- descendant movements, which led decolonial theorists to focus on elimination and assimilation (Colin & Quiroz, 2023, p. 31). As the South African scholar Suren Pillay notes, this historical experience was "more about decimation than ruling." (Pillay, 2021, p. 402)[7] He writes "If the primary experience of Latin American decolonial theory is that of colonial assimilation, there is a limitation in drawing *only* on decoloniality as an approach to thinking the problem of coloniality from Africa." This approach is at odds with the framework employed by many post-colonial scholars, who seek to understand how certain strategies of incorporation and governance produced new identities and forms of thought. Scholars of Africa and India have charted how colonization sought not only to produce an assimilated elite, but also "enforced cultural difference"[8]. In this respect, decolonial thought is rooted in a repressive and even genocidal vision of power. This marks its distance from post-colonial studies, which, inspired by the work of Michel Foucault, often insists on the essentially productive nature of power.

The relationship between coloniality and modernity, and the long durée epistemological effects of colonization are at the heart of the decolonial critique. The Peruvian sociologist insists that colonialism

[6] For two works on decoloniality in Arabic see (Saʿīdī & Būzīd, 2024) (Maqaʿdī, 2025). I am also basing this observation based on attending a number of conferences (some of them specifically dedicated to decoloniality) in Tunisia and Algeria over the 2024-2025 academic year.

[7] This piece also provides an account of the arrival of the decolonial turn in South Africa.

[8] This is a point similar to that made by Jemima Pierre, who documents how African groups were rendered "native" through a colonial process that "flatten[ed] ethnocultural difference." (Pierre, 2013).

evolved over time so that eventually the "repression fell, above all, over the modes of knowing, of producing knowledge, of producing perspectives, images and systems of images, symbols, modes of signification, over the resources, patterns, and instruments of formalized and objectivized expression, intellectual or visual." (Quijano, 2000, p. 169). Quijano terms this process of domination "coloniality," which indicates the long shadow that remained long after the colonial rule was overturned. He also insists that European modernity and rationality, the cornerstones of the capitalist world system, were built on coloniality. This means that the two processes - the suppression of indigenous systems of knowledge, on the one hand, and the rise of European modernity - were inseparable. He writes, "the European paradigm of rational knowledge, was not only elaborated in the context of, but as part of, a power structure that involved the European colonial domination over the rest of the world." (Quijano, 2000, p. 174). In this respect, the ultimate goal of decolonization, as per decoloniality, is to establish "another rationality which may legitimately pretend to some universality." (Quijano, 2000, p. 172). The role of race is central for Quijano, who asserts that the invention of racial categories served as an alibi for coloniality.

Quijano's work thus helps us center the epistemological violence of colonialism (and its ontological consequences) while drawing our attention to the ways that colonization continues after independence. These critiques of European universality were not novel, but the insistence that modernity and colonization were two sides of the same coin, and the decision to consider colonization as a noun (rather than verb), helped change the terms of the debate. By embracing "coloniality" - a fixed set of attributes and state of being - rather than the vocabulary of "decolonising the mind" (the term coined by the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o) - a certain coherence emerges across five centuries of global history. Many of the main figures of post-colonial thought such as Gayatri Spivak, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Edward Said insisted on the essentially hybrid nature of the intellectual forms that emerged from colonization. While offering a strong critique of Eurocentricism, the prospect of a "return" to an authentic self or past seemed to be foreclosed by the multifarious ways that colonial knowledge had became embedded in local societies and patterns of thought (one can think of Rif'a Al-Tahtawi's trip to France, which was the basis for the elaboration of the discipline of Egyptology in Egypt, for

example). Spivak's notion of a "strategic essentialism," in which colonized actors make a claim to authenticity for politically expedient goals, is a much different project than the decolonial turn's quest for ontological recovery (Spivak & Gross, 1985)[9].

Similarly, for historians like Nicholas Dirks (2011), the modern structures of caste emerged through the interaction of indigenous beliefs and the modern colonial state. His research thus revealed how missionary activities, anthropology, ethnology, and native resistance helped fashion a ruling lexicon in which caste emerged as the overriding feature of Indian life. Another example is Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe*, which clearly stated that "provincializing Europe is not a project of rejecting or discarding European thought." He continued: "European thought is at once both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the experiences of political modernity in non-Western nations, and provincializing Europe becomes the task of exploring how this thought - which is now everybody's heritage and which affects us all - may be renewed from and for the margins" (Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 16). Lastly, Edward Said's watershed *Orientalism* was not interested in recovering the "authentic" reality of Middle Eastern societies; instead, his project was to see how he elucidated colonial power was indissociable from the knowledge produced on the so-called "Orient" (Said, 2003).

Walter Mignolo, who has been described as the "academic star" of decolonial theory[10], explicitly distances his project from that of Subaltern Studies, which he claims failed erase the traces of coloniality and inhibit our ability to conceive of truly emancipatory futures. He insists that the historical experience of decolonization did not necessarily lead to an epistemological break with Europe.

[9] For her comments on Mignolo's approach, which she terms "somewhat golden-ageist" see (Spivak & al.).

[10] It is important to note that Mignolo is not representative of all those who identify themselves with decolonial theory. One should also mention the work of the work of Maldonado-Torres, Catherine Walsh, Arturo Escobar, Ramon Grosfoguel, Enrique Dussel and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui. Cusicanqui, a Bolivian scholar, has a more nuanced critique of post-colonial studies as the domain of elite Indians who often worked in the West and failed to communicate the political urgency that was felt by their colleagues who worked in India. She has also accused Mignolo along similar lines, for having "built a small empire within an empire, strategically appropriating the contributions of the subaltern studies school of India and various Latin American variants of critical reflection on colonization and decolonization." Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2012).

As a result, anti-colonial struggles often "left the logic of coloniality intact", necessitating the articulation of a decolonial theory that can address these "shortcoming[s]" (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, p. 124). This leads him to consider Said and Spivak to be complicit with the "Eurocentered project of post-modernity and a project of post-coloniality heavily dependent on post-structuralism" (Mignolo, 2017, p. 452). The "de-colonial shift" - a project of "de-linking" - is thus juxtaposed with the postcolonial tradition, which he labels as a "project of scholarly transformation within the academy"[11]. One does not have to embark on a rigorous study to note that the decolonial turn has also become an important form of intellectual currency in the western academy, particularly in the United States. Certainly, decolonial theorists were not the first to critique the Eurocentric assumptions of orthodox Marxism. Yet while many thinkers grappled with how anti-colonial figures appropriated Marxism or liberalism for anti-colonial ends, decolonial theory tends to disqualify these instances of intellectual hybridity as forms of political compromise[12]. To return to the question of academic fashions (tied to a neoliberal academic market), it is notable that while two decades ago it was in vogue to highlight the agency and capacities of resistance of colonized populations (Abu-Lughod 1990), the opposite is now true. While postcolonial theorists looked at the how the violence of colonialism shaped Europe and influenced forms of knowledge in the Global South, decolonial scholars, centering their analysis on 1492 as a moment of rupture, tend to highlight the twin processes of elimination and epistemicide.

In the wake of this intellectual destruction, Mignolo's writings emphasize the need to recover a system of thought that is external to the twin processes of colonialism and modernity. Rather than strategically drawing on Western vocabularies of liberation, or acknowledging that systems of thought were necessarily imbricated after centuries of (unequal) interaction, he seeks a vocabulary that can be recovered from intellectuals who were not situated (physically or epistemologically) in the West. When looking to the Middle East and North Africa in a quest for "indigenous concepts of social and economic organization" (Mignolo, 2017, p. 462), Mignolo is drawn to the Arabic language

[11] Cusicanqui, "A Reflection on the Practices and Discourses of Decolonization"

[12] For an argument regarding a similar tendency to see Arab liberals as a form of Western mimesis lacking authenticity see Hussein Omar (2017).

as well as "Islamic religion" as constitutive features of a zone that is "exterior" to Western modernity. He has also foregrounded the Algerian revolution in his more recent writings, which offers a new interpretation of the theoretical relevance of anti-colonial struggles in North Africa.

"Dwelling in Exteriority"? Malek Bennabi and the Nahda Reconsidered

As indicated above, achieving political sovereignty and direct control over national resources are not sufficient proof of decolonization for many decolonial thinkers. Genuine decolonization requires that individuals and movements remain vigilant against the traces of coloniality and modernity. This also brings a critical lens to bear on anti-colonial movements, including those that were supported by the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Even Patrice Lumumba is not spared by Mignolo, who accuses the Congolese revolutionary of failing to "sustain the decolonial project" due to his proximity to communism (Mignolo, 2012, p. 21). Historically speaking, intellectuals who successfully embodied the decolonial spirit are those who managed to retain a certain degree of purity in the face of western ideological currents. Research on how Algerian decolonization shaped leftist discourses (including post-structuralism) in France (Young, 2004), or studies of how Italian anarchism was wielded by Egyptian workers[13], muddies the pristine waters of intellectual purity, however. How many anarchist terms had to be translated into Arabic before this knowledge became an "indigenous" frame of reference for workers in North Africa? To return to Audrey Lourde, in the Middle East and North Africa it is far from clear which tools are the sole property of the colonial "master." Nor is it self-evident how much conceptual borrowing is permitted before colonized intellectuals compromise their position outside western modernity. The repeated injunctions for vocabularies that are properly authentic - with little concern for the historical circulation of knowledge - makes the decolonial turn an uneasy cousin of nativism.

Mignolo has argued that the Algerian FLN (National Liberation Front), much like the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, managed to embrace a "decolonial horizon" in seeking to

[13] Ilham Khuri-Makdisi studies anarchism and Islamic modernism as part of the same intellectual tradition in early 20th century Egypt.

"decolonize" Western epistemologies. He writes: "The Algerian uprising and final outcome were not inspired by Marxist-Leninism but by more than a century of French colonialism" (Mignolo, 2012). Algeria's long Ottoman history, as well as its Arab-Islamic origins, are understood to be the main cultural and ideological resources that helped the nationalist movement avoid the trap of "occidentalism" (Mignolo, 2012, p. 21). Invoking Sayyid Qutb and Malek Bennabi as early harbingers of decolonial thought, Mignolo proclaims that "the histories and subjectivities of Marxism and Muslims are strikingly dissimilar" (2011, p. 51). This description of Islam (and the Arabic language) mirrors Orientalist conceptions of absolute difference, or what Sadiq Jalal al-'Azm (2019) has called "orientalism in reverse". While assuming a zero-sum game between modernity and Islam, Mignolo fêtes Islam as an ideological formation that is outside of the colonial matrix. The stark dichotomy between Marxism and Islam runs counter to recent findings by scholars of modern Arab thought who have studied the attempts by intellectuals in the Middle East and North Africa to escape from the confines of colonial knowledge[14]. Many of these scholars have insisted on the necessity of studying Marxist and Islamic figures in the same analytical field and have questioned whether these labels help grasp the emancipatory futures that Arab intellectuals envisioned[15].

To argue that Marxism was merely a "European invention responding to European problems" (Mignolo, 2012, p. 34) effectively discredits a rich tradition of Arab Marxism that was forged through a reflection on the specific problems facing the region, including sectarianism and a lack of industrialization. Some of these intellectuals, such as Mahdi 'Amil, penned these reflections while living in Algeria in the 1960s. Pitting Islam against modernity implies that Arab (or Iranian) Marxists necessarily drank from the well of coloniality and thus can only be

[14] For more reflections on the division between supposedly secular and religion thought in the region see Omnia El Shakry (2021).

[15] This is a rich literature, but one obvious example are the recent works on Sayyid Qutb that analyze his commitments as parallel to those of Gamal Abd al-Nasser, viewing Nasser's repression of Islamists and Communists are primarily political rather than ideological. Di-Capua, Y. (2022). Revolutionary decolonization and the formation of the sacred: The case of Egypt. *Past & Present*, *256*(1), 239-281; Idris, M. (2022). The location of anticolonialism; or, Al-Afghānī, Qāsim Amīn, and Sayyid Quṭb at the peripheries. *Critical Times*, *5*(2), 337-369.

understood through a logic of colonial mimesis. It also silences the multiple attempts to articulate an Islamic socialism in multiple languages from the 1950s to the 1970s. Islamic thought - in all its variation - becomes a badge of authenticity rather than a political and epistemological reservoir that can be wielded strategically.

Many of these questions will be familiar to scholars of the MENA region who have studied the Nahda. From the mid-nineteenth to the beginning of the 20th century, intellectuals debated the possibilities of borrowing modern concepts from the west while remaining faithful to Islamic civilizational paradigms. Historians have highlighted that Islamic modernism did not emerge in a framework that was "outside" the totalizing categories of European thought and the power relations engendered by capitalism. Instead, these intellectuals were the direct product of new educational possibilities and the centralizing state that sought to wrestle power away from centers of Islamic learning that had themselves been transformed by western-style reforms in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries[16]. Rashid Rida, for example, advocated for Islamic authenticity in a way that might satisfy Mignolo's requirements. Yet he was deeply influenced by capitalist modernity, which in turn shaped the reform of Islamic law (Halevi, 2019). Moreover, Elizabeth Thompson has shown how Rida's own rejection of western liberalism was rooted in his deception following the 1920 Syrian-Arab Congress, where he had in fact embraced secular constitution (Thompson, 2015). In other words, it would be mistaken to read these thinkers as an uncomplicated recovery of an authentic self without also taking into account the changing balance in power between Europe and the Middle East (Sheehi, 2017).

The Algerian philosopher Malek Bennabi positioned himself in the legacy of the Nahda and is considered by Mignolo as an intellectual who successfully embodied decoloniality. Bennabi is perhaps best known for his theory of "colonizability," which argued that internal decay in Algerian society had allowed for the

[16] Much of the research has focused on how colonial reforms shaped Al-Azhar in Egypt, and Zaytuna in Tunisia. Gregory Starret, *Putting Islam to Work: Education, Politics, and Religious Transformation in Egypt* (University of California Press, 1998); Timothy Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt* (University of California, 1988); Weideman, J. (2023). "Tunisian Islam," women's rights, and the limits of French empire in twentieth-century North Africa. *The American Historical Review*, *128*(1), 64-88.

French conquest. He upheld the "Almohad man" as a figure that had been dynamic and imaginative before falling into a state of lethargy in the fourteenth century. The invocation of the deeper structures of Algerian history, which pre-dated the Ottoman empire made this model attractive for Mignolo. The Argentinian semiologist writes that Bennabi "brought the discussion [of the Algerian war] back home to Algeria, rather than letting it remain in Paris." This means that Bennabi's frame of thought is "not fashioned from Western philosophical thinking" (Mignolo, 2011, p. 98). By this, Mignolo specifically means the "density of layers from Islamization before the Ottomans ruled the area."

In Mignolo's reading, the Algerian's positioning outside of Western thought allows Bennabi to reverse the Cartesian formula "I think, therefore I am" and instead occupy the "intersection of the geo-and body-political imperial classification" that embraces the program of "I am where I do and think" (Mignolo, 2011, p. 99). The fact that Bennabi "dwell[s]" in the "Arabic language and Muslim philosophy" explains how he "does and thinks" from North Africa. Mignolo remains curiously silent on the many years that Bennabi spent in France and the fact that he wrote his first books in French (Mignolo, 2011, p. 100).

Yet more alarming is the way that Mignolo's account reduces Islam and Arabic to a single location of dwelling that offers the promise of an uncontaminated or indigenous set of knowledges. This rendering effectively ignores how religion and language were hotly debated by Algerian intellectuals after independence. This was not because they denied the desirability need for Arabization, but rather due to their differing understandings of internal divisions, class dynamics, and the pragmatic concerns of state-building. If figures across the region voiced their opposition to post-colonial governments in Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria and Morocco in the language of Islam, this was not because the newly born authoritarian failed to speak of Islam. Instead, oppositional movements made it clear they disagreed with the official interpretations of religion, including authoritarian practices adopted in the name of Islam. Rather than a simple fault-line between "the West" and "Islam," then, or between "compromised" and "authentic" knowledge, the debates undertaken by intellectuals must be understood in terms of the competitions for power that marked Algeria after independence.

Algerian Visions of Decolonizing Knowledge: Sahli, Lacheraf, and Ibrahimi

Despite an earlier tendency to study the Algerian Revolution merely as a military (and diplomatic) operation focused on expulsing the French, some analysts have started interrogating how conceptual reflections informed the anti-colonial struggle. The Algerian philosopher Hammana Boukhari insisteds on the primacy of ideas in the revolution. He asserteds that the revolution was "first and foremost in the domain of nationalist and humanist thought that penetrated colonial thought, before it was armed violence against the symbols of the [colonial order]" Hamaana, 2012). Algerians have long wrestled with the epistemological legacy of colonialism and the prospects for recovering an authentic set of intellectual models. Excavating these models can help shed light on the shortcomings of the decolonial paradigm and instigate a contemporary reflection on what it means to theorize decolonization based on Algeria's historical trajectory.

Mohamed Chérif Sahli's groundbreaking book *Décoloniser l'Histoire* was published by Maspero, in 1965. Sahli studied in Paris and published several works prior to the outbreak of the revolution, including his 1947 *Le Message de Yugurtha*, which emphasized the spirit of liberty and resistance of the Berber (Amazigh) King of Numidia against Rome. President of the Association of Muslim Students in France in the 1930s, he wrote for the Association of Ulama's journal *Jeune Musulman*, along with French leftist publications like *Le Temps Modernes*[17]. While his biographical trajectory resembled that of Malik Bennabi, Sahli argued passionately against Bennabi's notion of "colonizability." On the pages of *L'Action Algérienne* he argued that this was a "false and dangerous" notion. While rejecting the notion that Algerians had been "colonizable," he makes a parallel with the doctor in Molière who declares that opium makes one sleepy only because that individual already had certain "*vertues dormitives*". In so doing, he underscores how an external agent introduced changes that were later blamed on the disposition of the patient. Sahli did not deny that France created the conditions for "colonizability," but rather insisted that the term could not be applied to internal

[17] The Association of Algerian Muslim Ulama was an influential religious, cultural, and nationalist movement that was established in 1931 and championed an Arab-Islamic identity for Algeria during the French colonial period.

qualities or mindsets, which amounted to a kind of historical fatalism. Instead, Sahli insisted that it was the French campaigns to crush the Algerian people, seize their resources, strip them of their liberties and institutions, and subject them to a *régime concentrationnaire* that created the *material* (and not *cultural* or *psychological)* conditions for colonization to be successful.

Sahli's 1965 monograph directly attacked the racial and geographical determinism that had been propagated by French scholars. He lamented the tendency to apply European theories of history or society to Algeria, but did not shy away from invoking certain French theorists (such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty) in making his critique. Much like Bennabi, his understanding of nationalism was indebted to the works of late 19th century European writings including those by Ernest Renan. He marshalled these references to argue that a national formation in Algeria did, in fact, exist in 1830. In so doing, he sought to counter those who denied the existence of a national formation in Algeria (Burke III, 1998). His call, however, was not to reject a blanket French modernity or European thought, or to seek an exterior epistemological space, but rather to "revise the intellectual toolkit, enrich [and] expand [it]" Sahli, 1965, p. 128).

Mostefa Lacheraf also insisted on the need to "decolonize" history in his work. He had supported the PPA (Algerian People's Party) and Messali Hadj (rival nationalist formations to the FLN during the revolution) and wrote for French journals (including *Les Temps Modernes*) during his time in France. He later rallied to the FLN and was kidnapped by the French in 1956, along with several important nationalists (including Ahmed Ben Bella), spending the next five years in prison. The essays presented in *L'Algérie: Nation et Société*, which was also published by Maspero in 1965, had previously appeared in various journals over the course of the 1950s and early 1960s. While he cites Sahli work, one of Lacheraf's main concerns is the role of the peasantry in the fight for liberation. He did not claim that the rural world was idyllic prior to the arrival of the French, however, paying particular attention to the share cropping system (*khammès*) under the Ottoman empire. This form of exploitation, he argued, nevertheless became even more violent under the French.

As scholars have noted, Lacheraf was influenced by some of the central Marxist debates of the 1950s, including the issues of "stagism" and the role of religion. (Remaoun, 2004) Indeed, the

question of whether certain societies could enjoy a direct passage to socialism without going through the intermediary stage of capitalism was of great interest for many living in the Middle East and North Africa, where colonialism had systematically blocked industrialization. Engels had answered in the affirmative but noted that certain traditions must exist in order to sustain communal structures of property and ownership. Rather than seeking to "depart" from Marxist debates or seeking a pre-colonial set of indigenous traditions that could serve as a model for Algerian society after independence, Lacheraf grappled with the profound ways that the French conquest had transformed Algerian society.

While playing down the role of religion in galvanizing Algerian resistance to colonialism, Lacheraf nevertheless espoused a nuanced and complicated analysis of Arabization after independence. Though he clearly understood that French had been imposed through colonial domination, he found it "naive" to think that Arabic could simply be introduced as the primary language of thought and communication after 132 of colonial rule and given the extremely high literacy rates in Algeria. The French regime, he argued, had made Arabic the realm of the sacred, and noted that the true "mother tongue" for Algerians was *darija* (Algerian Arabic) rather than *fusha* (Modern Standard Arabic). The question of language was also linked to class and the aspirations of the *petite bourgeoise* who were empowered through independence. For Lacheraf, neither Arabic nor Islam could offer a return to a pure outside of colonial modernity, even if they both would need to be incorporated strategically into Algerian national culture.

Lacheraf's tenure as Minister of Education (1977-1979) saw a pause in Arabization, which provoked the anger of some colleagues, including Ahmed Taleb Ibrahimi. Yet their disagreement was not over the desirability of Arabic, or the deep epistemic violence of French colonialism, but rather centered on the policies that would allow Arabization to succeed. Lacheraf's discussion of Arabization was linked to the history of class formation and education in Algeria, where the *petit bourgeois* nationalist class had often been trained at the *madrasas*, the main vehicle for Arabic education in Algeria that was designed to produce indigenous elites. As the sociologist Aissa Kadri notes, Lacheraf himself should be understood as a product of this system in which bilingual intellectuals tended to enjoy a dominant class position. This explains why some university instructors demanded

the use of Algerian Arabic (*darija*) rather than Modern Standard Arabic in classrooms during the late 1960s (Grandguillaume, 2013).

Even if class analysis cannot capture the full spectrum of epistemic destruction wrought by colonial rule, Mignolo's work obscures how questions of cultural decolonization - including questions of language - were rooted in the social hierarchies that structured Algerian society long after independence. Put differently, the debates on Arabization help elucidate how "Mignolo's focus on the epistemic dimensions of decolonization often serves instead to distort or flatten the worthwhile inheritances of anticolonial material practices and analyses" (Temin, 2024).

Lacheraf's stance on Arabization was certainly not representative of all Algerian intellectuals. Indeed, he was especially at odds with Ahmed Talib Ibrahimi, who met both Lacheraf and Sahli while in France in 1952. The son of the well-known Islamic scholar Bashir Ibrahimi, who had been one of the leaders of the Algerian Association of Ulama, Ahmed Talib Ibrahimi spent much of the Revolution in French prisons, only to be released and then imprisoned again by Algerian President Ben Bella. After Boumediene's 1965 coup, he occupied several Ministerial posts, including Minister of Information and Culture. In this capacity, Ibrahimi played a key role in the creation of the Arabic-language journal *Al-Thaqafa*, which published its first issue in 1971. Authors writing for the journal often tackled the question of how to decolonize Algerian culture. In the pages of *Al-Thaqafa*, Ibrahimi (1972) insisted that colonization had not managed to completely replace Algerian culture. It was no coincidence that Ibn Khaldun was born in North Africa, he argued, referencing a kind of "Cartesianism before Descartes" in which Algerian civilization had a sensitivity to beauty that was rooted in Islam and Arabic[18]. He saw the workers and the peasants as bastions of resistance to French colonization, since they avoided the indoctrination that was imparted through colonial education. Yet crucially, in calling for an invigorated national culture after independence, he categorically

[18] For another early attempt to decolonize the social sciences by invoking Ibn Khaloun see Abd Allāh Shurayyiṭ, *Al-Fikr al-Akhlāqī ʿinda Ibn Khaldūn* (al-Sharikah al-Waṭanīyah lil-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī', 1975). Sociology in particular has been the subject of a number of reflections on Eurocentricism and authenticity. For example, see Murād Zaʿīmī and Faḍīl Dalīū, *ʿIlm Al-Ijtimāʿa Min al-Taghrīb Ilā al-Taʾṣīl* (Dār al-Maʿrifa, 1998).

embraced modernity writing, "there is no use in denying modern knowledge, since our heritage (*turath*) is rooted in science and knowledge" (Ibrahimi, 1972). Thus, unlike the epistemological ground of decolonial theory, which rejects the philosophical tradition that was based on Descartes, intellectuals like Ibrahimi leaned on Descartes theory of aesthetics to argue for a resolutely modern sensibility that could take inspiration from Algerian culture, a project that was - for him - rooted in Arabic and Islam. In the eyes of Ibrahimi, the project of restoring Algerian culture would necessarily be rooted in the Arabic language and Islamic religion.

As James McDougall (2006) has argued, even if modernity was "inherently colonial", it would be a mistake to cast Islam as antithetical to modernity. Rather, the process of colonization changed how people understood the relationship between Islam and politics. He writes that:

> "… [I]n the cultural as well as in the economic sphere, and in Algeria as throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and elsewhere, the development of nationalism and contemporary forms of Islam cannot be understood as integrally oppositional resistance to the imposition of 'modern, Western civilisation'. On the contrary, contemporary cultures of nationalism and Islam are themselves the products of the profound, global transformations effected in the imperial interrelationships of societies and cultures throughout the modern world". (McDougall, 2006, p. 6-7)

In this rendering of the intellectual possibilities available to colonized peoples, all options – including nationalism and Islam - were infiltrated by European paradigms to some extent. This does not mean that there was no possibility of resistance, of course. Instead, the strategies and tools adopted to dismantle the colonial system emerged out of the epistemological violence that in turn shaped myriad ideological entanglements and responses.

Conclusion: Decolonization and Decoloniality in the Present

Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2021) correctly observes that the debate on the differences between postcolonial and decolonial studies has been largely confined to the academic institutions of the

Global North, leading him to posit that the line of questioning is "somewhat otiose". Given that anti-colonial writing has a long and varied history (Barak, 2013, p. 4), one might wonder why the decolonial variant became increasingly popular in the United States. Moreover, what might this tell us about the current contemporary moment? Central to this discussion is the ways that national university systems enjoy unequal influence in broader theoretical debates; far from being diffused evenly, knowledge production relies on infrastructures such as journals, university systems, visas, and translations. Moreover, the politics of language deserves our attention; what does it mean to do "decolonial work" without drawing on non-European languages or local debates on decolonization?

There is also a distinction to be made between thought produced *in* the Global South versus theorizing *about* the Global South. As Fadi Bardawil highlights, the project of "speaking back through the West" by centering binaries such as West/non-West cannot capture the full spectrum of political engagements after the Arab revolutions and is guilty of "reinscribing… the West as the main subject and agent of history" (Bardawil, 2020, XVI). This is not an argument about identity politics or who gets to speak "for" a certain nationality. Instead, it draws our attention to the fact that scholars based in the United States or Europe often have a different set of concerns from colleagues who work in contexts where western hegemony must be conjugated with local political challenges. This means that just as specific political conjectures prompt us to refashion our toolbox for critique, a theoretical framework that is read as revolutionary in one context can serve reactionary goals in a different geographical and political context.

Undoubtedly the impulse or desire to find a space that is radically outside the West is increasingly appealing, especially as we are witnessing the complete evisceration of universalizing discourses or models of humanity as the Israeli genocide of Palestine continues. Decolonial theory has also been appealing for some intellectuals in formerly colonized countries who assert a golden era of pre-colonial epistemology to take one example, decolonial theory has been used to propagate a conservative and authoritarian project in India, where advocating a "return" to Hindu civilization is a stance shared by partisans of *Hindutva*. This has been widely debated in the case of J. Sai Deepak's *India that is Bharat* (Sen, 2023). In this rendition of Indian history, it is not only

the British, but also the Muslim invaders, that must be "decolonized"[19]. Mignolo indeed initially endorsed this book (though he later retract thated his support)[20]. Under BJP rule especially, India has relied on soft power to white-wash its treatment of minorities and colonial activities in Kashmir.

Mignolo has also compared the decolonizing potential of the Sharjah Biennale to the 1955 Bandung Conference. This is particularly striking an given the numerous scholars who have critiqued this event as a form of art-washing and exercise in soft power[21]. While it seems entirely possible that such international meetings allow for discussions that break with the Eurocentrism of American and European academia (not to mention lessening visa and travel constraints for those coming from Africa, Asia, and thes Middle East), it is striking that Mignolo claims that this this event reveal the "limits of abstract universals" (Mignolo, 2013). Rather than a politics that can both appreciate the counter-hegemonic possibilities offered by these spaces *all the while* acknowledging their complicated relationship with the West and local iterations of authoritarian nativism (or treatment of ethnic or sexual minorities), the decolonial turns seduces us with the promise of absolute exteriority.

The desire to recover an authentic past, untarnished by the structures of modernity and colonialism, can be read as a political desire or, to use Lauren Berlant's phrase, "cruel optimism" (Gail Berlant, 2011). An attachment to the Global South as a place of authenticity that provides ontological resistance to modernity helps sustain a certain progressive anti-colonial politics (especially for those situated institutionally in the Global North). At the same time, however, this historical and political simplification undermines the work necessary to promote a form of

[19] There are also parallels here with those who consider the Arab conquest of North Africa in the seventh century, or the Ottoman conquest of the 16th century, as comparable to the French occupation. In this rendering, Arabs and Ottomans can be considered colonizers in a model similar to the French. The first reading foregrounds the adoption of a US-inspired notion of indigeneity, while the second can easily lapse into a romantic notion of Arab nationalism.

[20] Kalpana Wilson, Giti Chandra and Lata Narayanaswamy, "Contested development imaginaries: Hindutva and the co-optation of 'decolonisation,'" *EADI Debating Development Research*, 4 August 2023, available online at: https://urls.fr/Fsw3Gf

[21] Elle Yap, "Artwashing: How States Sweep the Dirt Under the Canvas," *BluPrint*, 7 April 2024, available online at https://urls.fr/hE3c3S

epistemological and institutional politics that centers the concerns, histories, and languages of formerly colonized countries. As Berlant makes clear, it is not the object (i.e. an epistemology that promises to disrupt Eurocentric narratives through a position that is external to the West), but rather our attachment to this fantasy that is dangerous, especially when we are faced with the injurious nature of embracing this project at any cost. Reading Algerian accounts of decolonization alongside decolonial accounts of Algerian history exposes the inextricable nature of modernity and warns us that sometimes the things we desire - even for laudable and necessary reasons - can be an obstacle to writing the histories and futures of decolonizing knowledge.

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