

A Historical Sociology of Housing Instability in Algeria

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Abstract:

Housing precarity in Algeria constitutes a major urban and social challenge shaped by the interaction of colonial legacies, economic transformations, neoliberal policies, and contemporary demographic dynamics. This article analyzes the housing crisis from a historical and sociological perspective by tracing its colonial roots and examining the evolution of housing policies in the post-independence period, particularly during the era of structural adjustment programs. The study discusses current manifestations of the crisis, including housing shortages, the expansion of informal settlements, the emergence of a dual housing market, and the role of internal migration, forced displacement, and natural disasters in exacerbating housing instability. The article also highlights the social, economic, and health consequences of precarious housing conditions. It argues that addressing Algeria's housing crisis requires a comprehensive approach that goes beyond increasing housing supply to include reforms in urban governance, land policies, and social justice-oriented housing strategies to ensure the right to adequate housing

Keywords: Housing Precarity; Colonial Urban Legacy; Neoliberal Housing Policies; Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs); Informal Urban Settlements; Urban Social Inequality

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1. Introduction

Unstable housing represents a significant urban challenge in contemporary societies, particularly evident in countries that have experienced colonial histories and subsequently undergone structural adjustment policies. In these contexts, economic and institutional factors have intertwined with urban planning patterns, undermining opportunities for secure and sustainable housing.

Algeria serves as a pertinent case study for understanding the interplay between the impacts of French colonialism and the trends of neoliberal economic policies, alongside the demographic and social changes that have contributed to a multifaceted housing crisis. This crisis encompasses historical, institutional, and economic dimensions, as well as patterns of urban expansion and disparities in housing access among different social groups.

This article addresses the issue of unstable housing in Algeria by tracing its historical roots and examining its current causes. The analysis focuses on four interconnected themes: the impact of the colonial era and the resulting imbalances in urban structure, the repercussions of structural adjustment policies on the housing sector, the current affordable housing crisis as it manifests in terms of its production mechanisms and persistence, and finally, the role of migration and forms of forced displacement in exacerbating and broadening the scope of the crisis.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Before proceeding to analyze the Algerian case, it is necessary to first define the fundamental concepts upon which this study is based, as their clarity helps to define the scope of the research and interpret its results more accurately. The concept of precarious housing refers to a situation in which an individual or family lives without legal or material guarantees that ensure access to safe, adequate, and sustainable housing in the long term¹. This concept encompasses a wide range of situations, from complete homelessness to living in inadequate housing or in conditions at risk of eviction. This study draws on the urban political economy theory as formulated by Harvey (Harvey (1973), which argues that housing crises cannot be explained as spontaneous or natural outcomes, but rather as products of power relations and economic policies that contribute to the organization and direction of urban space. This analysis is based on the concept of settler colonialism, as a framework that explains how colonial practices are used to control land and resources, and the resulting reorganization of spatial organization and reshaping of social structures in colonized societies.².

3. The colonial legacy and distortions of the Algerian urban structure

3.1 French colonial policies and the restructuring of the urban space:

French colonization in Algeria between 1830 and 1962 had a decisive impact on reshaping the urban fabric and social structure, introducing sweeping changes to city planning, housing patterns, and relations between different social groups. Colonization was not merely a military act of forceful control, but rather a systematic settler-colonial project that sought to reshape both the land and its inhabitants by controlling land, resources, and settlement patterns to serve its long-term political and economic objectives. The French colonial administration aimed to seize the most fertile agricultural lands and establish modern European settlements, while Algerians were marginalized and relegated to overcrowded neighborhoods lacking basic services.³ These policies led to a clear urban duality, characterized by a stark contrast between modern European cities and marginalized, underserved neighborhoods. In Algiers, this disparity is particularly evident; the "European city" was developed according to modern urban planning standards, while the old Casbah and Arab quarters were left overcrowded and lacking basic services.⁴ This spatial segregation based on racial grounds led to the consolidation of patterns of inequality within cities, and its social and economic repercussions continued even in the post-independence era.

3.2 Land confiscation and forced displacement:

Colonial policy was based on the *Senatus Consultum Act*. The *Senatus Consulte* of 1863 gave the French administration a legal basis for confiscating communal lands, reclassifying them as private property, and then transferring them to European settlers.⁵ These policies led to the displacement of thousands of Algerian families from their historically cultivated lands, forcing them to settle in marginalized areas or compelling them to work as agricultural laborers on the very lands they once owned. The systematic expropriation policies resulted in a large segment of marginalized groups severed from their land and livelihoods, contributing to structural conditions that paved the way for a subsequent housing crisis. Benouane and colleagues indicate that approximately 7.5 million hectares of agricultural land in Algeria were confiscated during the colonial period.⁶

3.3 Legacy of dual infrastructure:

After independence, Algeria inherited a heterogeneous urban infrastructure, revealing the effects of the divisions entrenched by colonial policies in the

organization of urban space. Sources indicate that investments in infrastructure and public services were primarily directed towards areas where Europeans had settled, while Algerian neighborhoods faced a clear lack of basic services such as water, electricity, and sanitation.⁷¹¹² This inherited inequality was among the problems faced by the Algerian government after independence, as it contributed to the continuation of unstable housing patterns.

4. Structural adjustment policies and the dismantling of the welfare state

4.1 From Socialism to Neoliberalism: The Economic Transformation of the 1980s:

After independence, Algeria adopted a socialist approach to development, granting the state a central role in housing policy. The state assumed responsibility for planning, financing, and implementation through the launch of extensive social housing programs aimed at meeting growing housing needs and regulating urban expansion. The oil price crisis of the mid-1980s led to a sharp decline in government revenues, prompting Algeria to seek support from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.⁸ In 1994, Algeria concluded an agreement with the International Monetary Fund that included a set of structural adjustment programs, which resulted in the government's commitment to reducing public spending, privatizing a number of public institutions, and liberalizing prices.⁹ These policies have clearly weakened the social housing sector, as budgets for the construction of public housing have declined sharply.

4.2 The impact of privatization on the housing sector:

Privatization policies have led to a fundamental shift in the state's approach to the housing sector, redefining its roles and the limits of its intervention in planning, financing, and implementation. This has impacted housing provision mechanisms and the responsibility for ensuring accessibility for different segments of the population. The government has gradually withdrawn from its role as the primary housing provider, adopting policies that encourage private sector participation in the housing market.¹⁰ However, the private sector focused on developing luxury housing for high-income groups, while the needs of low- and middle-income earners were not adequately addressed in construction and development policies. Majid observes that the pace of social housing construction declined from approximately 100,000 units annually in the 1970s to less than 40,000 units in the 1990s, at a time when demand was rapidly increasing due to population growth and accelerated urbanization.¹¹

4.3 Erosion of housing subsidies and rising costs:

One of the effects of structural adjustment policies was the reduction of government subsidies for construction materials, which led to increased construction costs. The liberalization of the real estate market also contributed to rising land prices, illustrating the impact of these policies on the price structure within the housing sector. This resulted in a sharp increase in construction and rental costs, making access to affordable housing extremely difficult for low- and middle-income groups in society.¹²(Safar-Zitoun, 2012). World Bank data indicates that the share of income allocated by Algerian households to housing rose from about 20% in the early 1980s to over 40% by the mid-1990s, which can be interpreted as an indicator of the worsening housing crisis.¹³.

5.The affordable housing crisis: contemporary dimensions

5.1 Housing shortage and demographic growth:

Official statistics indicate that Algeria suffers from a chronic housing deficit exceeding two million housing units, according to data from the Ministry of Housing.¹⁴. This deficit can be attributed to a number of factors, primarily rapid population growth and accelerated urbanization. Algeria's population growth rate is approximately 2%; an indicator used in demographic studies to estimate annual population changes and track trends over time. Population growth has averaged around 1% annually over the last two decades, resulting in an annual increase in housing demand of at least 200,000 units.¹⁵.Rapid urbanization, which has increased from about 40% in the 1970s to over 73% at present, has led to a concentration of housing demand within major cities, particularly in Algiers, Oran and Constantine.¹⁶This urban concentration has led to increased pressure on infrastructure and a decline in the absorptive capacity of available housing resources.

5.2 The spread of informal and unplanned housing:

The shortage of housing supply and the low affordability of formal housing have contributed to the widespread prevalence of informal and unplanned housing. Some estimates suggest that between 40% and 50% of the population of major Algerian cities live in informal settlements or in dwellings built without legal permits. These dwellings, in many cases, are characterized by weak adherence to minimum public health and safety requirements, and show a clear lack of basic services, including water and electricity supplies and sanitation systems. Their residents live in a situation

of legal insecurity, as they can be evicted at any time without the guarantee of fair and adequate compensation.

5.3 The dual housing market and the exacerbation of inequality:

Algeria has witnessed the development of what can be described as a dual housing market; on the one hand, there is a market for luxury and middle-class housing built by the private sector and primarily aimed at affluent groups, and on the other hand, an informal market that provides housing solutions that suit the needs of the poor and a segment of the lower middle class.¹⁷ This division contributes to the reproduction and entrenchment of social and spatial inequalities within Algerian society over time. A comparison of neighborhood patterns within the city reveals that affluent neighborhoods often enjoy access to modern services and facilities, while poor and informal settlements face varying degrees of neglect and marginalization, contributing to a city clearly divided along economic and social lines.¹⁸

5.4 Failure of government housing programs:

Despite the Algerian government's efforts to launch large-scale housing programs, including the million-unit housing program announced in 2008, the implementation of these programs has been marked by clear difficulties that have affected the pace and quality of completion.¹⁹ The most significant challenges facing this sector can be summarized as follows: complex administrative procedures, widespread corruption, limited land available for construction within major cities, and weak implementation capacities among relevant authorities and institutions. Furthermore, social housing is often built on the outskirts of cities, far from city centers and workplaces, leading to the formation of isolated residential areas primarily used for sleeping and lacking essential services and opportunities for economic activity, thus increasing the burdens on residents.²⁰

6. Migration and forced displacement: additional dimensions of the crisis

6.1 Internal migration from rural to urban areas:

Internal migration from rural areas to cities has exacerbated the housing crisis in Algeria, increasing pressure on housing supply and urban services amidst urban growth that outpaces the capacity to respond quickly. This migration was not merely a voluntary movement aimed primarily at improving income or accessing better job opportunities; in many cases, it was forced due to the deteriorating security and economic conditions in rural areas, particularly during the Black Decade.²¹ During this period, hundreds of thousands of rural residents migrated to major cities due to

violence and conflict, increasing demand for available housing and placing further strain on existing housing resources. Researchers estimate that the number of internally displaced persons during the 1990s exceeded one million, with the majority heading to the capital and major coastal cities.²².

6.2 Displacement due to natural disasters:

Algeria has witnessed a number of major natural disasters in recent decades, the most prominent of which was the 2003 Boumerdès earthquake, which destroyed more than 40,000 homes and displaced more than 200,000 people²³. and the country is witnessing also Recurring floods and landslides, particularly in mountainous and coastal areas, cause widespread damage to housing and often lead to displacement and the loss of stable living conditions. In many cases, the government's response to these disasters falls short of the actual need, forcing displaced people to live for extended periods in temporary shelters or move to informal settlements, thus increasing the number of people living in precarious housing.²⁴.

6.3 Forced Evictions and "Urban Regeneration" Programs":

As part of urban modernization policies and efforts to address informal housing, Algerian authorities have launched extensive eviction programs, particularly in neighborhoods officially classified as illegal or high-risk areas. Although these programs are sometimes presented under names such as urban renewal or resettlement, they are often implemented without sufficient consultation and decision-making with the affected residents, and without guaranteeing the provision of suitable and stable housing alternatives.²⁵. These policies have contributed to the displacement of thousands of families and the weakening of social structures within local communities, leading to new patterns of housing vulnerability and instability. Alternative housing is often provided in remote areas lacking basic services and with limited employment and income opportunities, further marginalizing the affected populations.²⁶.

6.4 For refugees and international migrants:

Although Algeria is not a primary destination for international migration, it has witnessed an increase in the number of refugees and migrants residing within its borders in recent years, particularly those from the Sahel region of Africa. These individuals often live in substandard housing conditions, such as informal settlements or makeshift shelters, with limited access to basic services.²⁷ The irregular status of some migrants and refugees makes them more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, and limits their access to legal protection and their right to adequate housing. This

exacerbates the precarious housing crisis in Algeria, adding a segment of the population living in precarious conditions outside the formal housing system.

7. The social and economic effects of unstable housing

7.1 Impact on public health:

Housing instability is clearly linked to a decline in overall health. The literature indicates that informal settlements and substandard housing are often associated with poor ventilation, high humidity, and severe overcrowding—factors that contribute to increased rates of respiratory illnesses and some infectious diseases.²⁸ Limited access to safe drinking water and sanitation services in these areas contributes to the increased prevalence of intestinal diseases and parasitic infections. A study on informal settlements in Algiers indicates that respiratory disease rates among children in these areas are approximately 40% higher than those recorded in formal neighborhoods, according to [report/statement].²⁹

7.2 Impact on education and academic achievement:

Children living in unstable housing conditions tend to face difficulties in school attendance, which is reflected in frequent absences and decreased concentration in the classroom. Their ability to complete assignments and benefit from educational support may also be affected by frequent changes in location and routine. Overcrowding in the home and the lack of a dedicated, quiet place to study at home, along with frequent relocation due to housing instability, are factors associated with declining academic performance and a higher likelihood of dropping out of school.³⁰

7.3 Social exclusion and marginalization:

Insecure housing exacerbates social exclusion and marginalization, limiting individuals' regular access to basic services and integration into social support networks, and weakening their opportunities for education, employment, and family stability. It is observed that residents of informal settlements often suffer from limited access to basic public services, in addition to facing social stigma and various forms of discrimination in the labor market and the wider community.³¹ This exclusion leads to the entrenchment of a cycle of poverty and marginalization that is difficult to undo, and whose effects are passed down through generations.

7.4 Economic cost:

The housing crisis carries a high economic cost at the national level, reflected in increased public spending on emergency and social services, decreased job security

and productivity, and higher health and educational burdens associated with the lack of safe housing. These factors contribute to reduced workforce productivity due to health problems and mobility difficulties, and impose a heavy financial burden on the government to cover the costs of public health and emergency social services. It also represents a waste of human resources and the country's development potential³².

8. Policies and Responses: Challenges and Opportunities

8.1 Reform attempts and ongoing challenges:

Recent years have seen limited efforts to reform housing policies in Algeria, aiming to address some of the imbalances related to planning, financing, and distribution of housing. However, there remains a need to evaluate the results of these measures in the medium and long term. In 2008, the government launched a program to build one million housing units, based on diversifying housing options to include social housing, subsidized promotional housing, and rural housing.³³ New financing mechanisms were also introduced to facilitate access to housing loans for middle-income earners. However, these programs faced significant implementation challenges, including delays, concerns about the quality of deliverables, and limited infrastructure at newly established sites. This suggests that housing allocation was not always based on clear criteria or transparent procedures, leading to widespread criticism³⁴.

8.2 The need for a comprehensive and integrated approach:

Addressing the housing crisis in Algeria requires a comprehensive approach that goes beyond simply increasing the number of housing units. It must also include improving urban planning mechanisms, regulating resource allocation, revising access policies, providing rental subsidies for the most vulnerable groups, and developing housing-related infrastructure and services to ensure medium- and long-term stability. A sound strategy should incorporate the following elements: First, reforming land policies is essential to ensure the availability of sufficient and suitable land to support affordable housing. This land should be directed towards key urban areas where employment opportunities and services are concentrated, thereby curbing unregulated expansion and improving the efficiency of resource allocation within the city. Second, developing innovative financing mechanisms that enable low- and middle-income individuals to access housing on more favorable terms. Third, efforts should be directed towards developing infrastructure and services within existing neighborhoods, including informal settlements, rather than focusing solely on eviction policies. Fourth, community participation should be strengthened as a fundamental element in the planning and implementation phases of housing projects. This involves engaging

residents and local stakeholders in identifying needs, reviewing alternatives, and monitoring progress, thereby enhancing the project's alignment with the social context. And the service needs of the area. Finally, it requires addressing the structural causes of poverty and unemployment that make access to affordable housing unavailable to large segments of society³⁵

8.3 International experiences and lessons learned:

Algeria can draw on successful international experiences in addressing housing crises, by studying policies that have proven effective and adapting them to the local context. The mixed social housing model implemented in some European countries can be utilized, as it combines social and private housing within the same complexes, thus reducing the spatial concentration of poverty and supporting social cohesion.³⁶ Experiences with slum upgrading programs in Latin America show that improving infrastructure and stabilizing residents' legal status, rather than evicting them, raises housing quality and reduces instability³⁷.

9. Conclusion

The housing crisis in Algeria is a complex phenomenon, stemming from the colonial legacy and exacerbated by neoliberal policies and contemporary demographic and social transformations. French colonialism left behind a distorted and fragmented urban fabric, the effects of which persisted for decades after independence. Structural adjustment policies in the 1990s contributed to reducing the state's social role and its withdrawal from providing housing, creating a gap that the private sector has not been able to adequately fill.

Population growth, urbanization, internal migration, and forced displacement have increased the demand for housing, in light of limited resources and inadequate policies. This has led to the expansion of informal housing and the emergence of a dual housing market that deepens inequality, with millions of Algerians remaining in inadequate and unstable housing.

Solving this crisis requires more than just building new housing. It demands a thorough review of housing and urban planning policies, along with reforms in land management and financing, increased investment in infrastructure and services, and, most importantly, a political commitment that recognizes adequate housing as a fundamental human right. Algeria can only achieve stable and dignified housing for all through a comprehensive approach that addresses the historical roots of the crisis and its current causes.

10. Footnotes and bibliography

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