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French ontological security and the Algerian War

Britt Leake

Travers Department of Political Science, University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley, CA, USA
Email: brittleake@berkeley.edu

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Abstract

A desire to preserve its ontological security was crucial in France's decision to leave Algeria. France neither militarily lost the Algerian War (1954–62), nor were the financial costs of war too burdensome to bear. Instead, the contradictions between two narrative strands of France's sense of self – liberal-democratic universalism and white European ethnonationalism – came unravelled, sparking a crisis of ontological security. These two narrative strands were rewoven together around the decision to leave Algeria, which saved France from facing a true reckoning about its sense of self and the dynamics of colonialism that had pushed France to create a racial hierarchy that contradicted French republican values. Algeria shows that ontological security can be preserved by using narrative strands to create the impression of stability amid profound changes. Additionally, in critical situations during periods of great global political change, shedding certain role-identities (such as being a colonial power) can help states recover ontological security. France's pivot away from its colonial empire under President Charles de Gaulle is an example of such a transition away from a specific role-identity that was narrated in such a way that it actually – and paradoxically – projected stability.

Keywords: Algeria; decolonisation; France; imperialism; ontological security

> *It is perfectly fine to have yellow, black, and brown French. They show that France is open to all races and has a universal mission. But they must remain a small minority. If not, France would no longer be France. After all, we are first and foremost a white European people of Greek and Latin culture and Christian religion.*[1]
>
> Charles de Gaulle

In November 1954, after the first attacks by the Front de libération nationale (National Liberation Front, FLN) during the Algerian War of Independence, the French political class rallied behind the defence of French Algeria. François Mitterrand, the interior minister and future president, declared, 'L'Algérie, c'est la France'.[2] Yet in September 1959, with the war becoming unpopular at home and increasing anti-French sentiment among Algerian Arabs, President Charles de Gaulle called for Algerian self-determination, declaring that 'the fate of Algerians belongs to Algerians, not as would be imposed upon them by knives and submachine guns, but as they will decide themselves, legitimately by universal suffrage. With them and for them, France will guarantee their freedom to choose.'[3] This was an abrupt shift in just five years, especially since Algeria was legally

[1] Alain Peyrefitte, *C'était de Gaulle* (Paris: Fayard, 1994), p. 52.
[2] Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954–1962* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2006), p. 43.
[3] Charles de Gaulle, 'Speech at the Palais de l'Élysée', Paris, 16 September 1959.

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an integral part of France, unlike France's other colonial possessions in Africa. De Gaulle's justification indicates that the answer partially involved French republican values: a liberal vision of human equality that emerged from the French Revolution. However, as the epigraph above also indicates, de Gaulle was also motivated by a desire to keep France racially and culturally European. Between those two ideas of France – liberal-universal and European-Catholic – is one of the reasons why France walked away from a land where it had developed substantial commercial and agricultural interests over the preceding century, with a population of over a million ethnically European French citizens, known as *pieds-noirs*.

The Algerian War was deeply traumatic for France – it divided French society and functionally marked the end of France's colonial empire, even though France militarily won the war.[4] Many accounts emphasise the war's economic cost,[5] an assumption challenged by other scholars claiming that the war was affordable.[6] Among non-material explanations, others have argued that the war's moral cost was crucial in France's departure.[7] I build on this last set of arguments by claiming that the Algerian War threatened France's ontological security – the stable mental state emerging from a perception of continuity in one's life built on routinised behaviours and narratives – which was crucial in France's decision to leave Algeria. Still, focusing on moral cost cannot explain why the Algerian War specifically was so destabilising for France. France's colonial wars (such as in Indochina) carried great moral costs, but the Algerian War destabilised France more than any other overseas conflict, becoming a critical situation that undermined France's ontological security. Algeria's exceptionalness is not a mere product of France's massive investment in Algeria over the preceding century, but what France's continued presence in Algeria during the age of decolonisation meant for France's understanding of itself and its place in the world.

If ontological security has something to tell us about Algeria, Algeria can also teach us about ontological security, especially during transformations as massive as decolonisation. I argue that ontological security can be maintained by repurposing narrative strands to project a sense of continuity and stability, even as behaviours and role-identities undergo substantial change. Moreover, preserving certain role-identities might undermine the self's narrative stability, thus undermining ontological security in critical situations where the self has to reorient itself to a changing world.

My analysis of ontological security in the Algerian War speaks to the broader International Relations (IR) constructivist literature. Specifically, I add to a new wave of constructivist literature that complicates themes from early constructivism by focusing not simply on the impact of things like 'identity', but on how identities are constructed and infused with meaning, a goal that requires centring historical social analysis.[8] But before turning to my argument and how it plays out in the case of Algeria, we must examine existing conceptions of ontological security and their limitations.

Ontological security: An overview

Ontological security was first developed in psychology in the 1960s by Ronald Laing and in sociology by Anthony Giddens, before entering IR scholarship in the 2000s. IR scholars have defined and used ontological security differently, resulting in a lack of conceptual clarity.

[4]Except some small island territories and French Guiana.

[5]John Hargreaves, *Decolonization in Africa* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 183; Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Vintage, 1987), p. 366.

[6]Gil Merom, 'A "grand design"? Charles de Gaulle and the end of the Algerian War', *Armed Forces and Society*, 25:2 (1999), pp. 267–87 (pp. 269–70); Samir Saul, *Intérêts économiques français et décolonisation de l'Afrique du Nord (1945–1962)* (Paris: Droz, 2016), p. 713; Daniel Lefeuvre, *Chère Algérie: La France et sa colonie (1930–1962)* (Paris: Flammarion, 2005), p. 484.

[7]Gil Merom, 'The social origins of the French capitulation in Algeria', *Armed Forces and Society*, 30:4 (2004), pp. 601–28 (p. 604); Raphaëlle Branche, *La torture et l'armée pendant la Guerre d'Algérie: 1954–1962* (Paris: Gallimard, 2016); Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

[8]For more on the distinction between 'old' and 'new' constructivisms, see David McCourt, *The New Constructivism in International Relations Theory* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022).

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Early IR scholarship depended disproportionately on Giddens – for whom the self and identity were essentially indistinguishable, unlike Laing – thus resulting in a literature that reduced ontological security to the security of one's identity.[9] While early IR works drew a sharp contrast between ontological security and physical security, recent IR works have challenged this body/mind distinction and the conflation of the self and identity, undermining our understanding of how identity stability/change can impact an actor's ontological security. Instead, as Nina Krickel-Choi observes, we should examine actors' security of 'self-in-the-body' – how our psychological and physical senses of security are intertwined and partially mutually constitutive.[10] Algeria had intertwined physical and psychological stakes for France, underlining the need to look past a Giddensian view of ontological security. Ontological security may still be a state of mental stability based on a perception of continuity in life supported by routinised behaviours and narratives. Still, those behaviours and narratives depend on feeling safe in one's body and environment. Territory constitutes the physical body of states. Thus, when parts of a state's territory – functionally limbs of the body – erupt in a way that upsets narrative and behavioural stability, physical security threats become ontological security threats.

In addition to disagreeing about what constitutes ontological security, scholars agree that the stability of a state's sense of self matters but disagree regarding *in what contexts* and *for whom* it matters. Brent Steele suggests that states might choose to avoid conflict that would be materially beneficial but irreconcilable with their autobiographical narratives.[11] In contrast, Jennifer Mitzen and Bahar Rumelili argue that states might become attached to conflict, leading them to continue conflicts with no material benefit.[12] (The case of Algeria comes closer to Steele's vision.) There is also divergence about whether ontological security is externally (internationally) or internally (domestically) derived.[13] Some scholars take a middle approach, examining discrepancies between international norms of state behaviour and domestic narratives that push states to break those international norms.[14] This distinction results from disagreements about the source of ontological insecurity, which is the opposite of ontological security.[15] Domestic perspectives emphasise shame that destabilises a country's sense of self, constraining foreign policy choices.[16] On the other hand, more internationally focused accounts underscore anxiety about change in relationships.[17] Additionally, there is the question of *whose* ontological security is at stake. Some suggest that leaders respond to their internal understandings of the nation.[18] In contrast, others suggest that political leaders selectively activate narratives to fit their goals, indicating that the general public's ontological security

[9]Catarina Kinnvall, 'Ontological insecurities and postcolonial imaginaries: The emotional appeal of populism', *Humanity & Society*, 42:4 (2018), pp. 523–43 (p. 530).

[10]Nina Krickel-Choi, 'The embodied state: Why and how physical security matters for ontological security', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 25:1 (2022), pp. 159–81; Nina Krickel-Choi, 'The concept of anxiety in Ontological Security Studies', *International Studies Review*, 22:3 (2022), p. viac013; Christopher Browning and Pertti Joenniemi, 'Ontological security, self-articulation and the securitization of identity', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 52:1 (2017), pp. 31–47.

[11]Brent Steele, 'Ontological security and the power of self-identity: British neutrality and the American Civil War', *Review of International Studies*, 31:3 (2005), pp. 519–40.

[12]Jennifer Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics: State identity and the security dilemma', *European Journal of International Relations*, 12:2 (2006), pp. 341–70, and Bahar Rumelili, *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security* (London: Routledge, 2015).

[13]Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics'.

[14]Jelena Subotić, 'Narrative, ontological security, and foreign policy change', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 12:4 (2015), pp. 610–27; Ayşe Zarakol, 'Ontological (in)security and state denial of historical crimes: Turkey and Japan', *International Relations*, 24:1 (2010), pp. 3–23.

[15]Jennifer Mitzen and Kyle Larson, 'Ontological security and foreign policy', in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). available at: {https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.458}.

[16]Steele, 'Ontological security and the power of self-identity' and Zarakol, 'Ontological (in)security and state denial of historical crimes'.

[17]Mitzen 'Ontological security in world politics', and Rumelili, *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security*.

[18]Steele, 'Ontological security and the power of self-identity'.

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is at stake.[19] These perspectives all have validity: France's ontological security crisis was domestically and internationally derived, and the crisis was defined both by political actors and citizens responding to their understandings of French history and identity, but also by the deft manipulation of narratives by de Gaulle to make change appear like continuity. Because of the multifaceted nature of France's ontological security crisis, I examine ontological security as a *collective* state of being belonging to a national self comprised of members of the national community – a point I elaborate on in the next section. (By 'ontological security crisis', I refer to a situation causing actors to experience ontological insecurity, which is functionally equivalent to what other scholars call 'critical situations'.)

The recent shift towards anxiety in IR Ontological Security Studies has placed it in greater conversation with its existentialist-phenomenological roots.[20] Scholars disagree about whether the anxiety underlying ontological insecurity is normal or extraordinary and, thus, whether ontological security is achievable.[21] Some argue that actors can never achieve ontological security.[22] Others correctly point out that making ontological insecurity a permanent state reduces its analytical utility and conceptual sharpness.[23] Another problem of conflating anxiety and ontological insecurity is that if ontological insecurity is the opposite of ontological security, anxiety has no apparent opposite because all individuals face some degree of anxiety at any given point. Nina Krickel-Choi helpfully argues that ontological security is a question of degree – anxiety is always present, but *existential* anxiety is the threshold for ontological insecurity.[24] Filip Ejdus echoes this view, arguing that 'critical situations' erode ontological security, 'remov[ing] the protective cocoon created by routines and move fundamental questions, previously taken for granted, into the realm of discursive consciousness' – even if actors flee from reckoning with those fundamental questions.[25] As the Algerian War demonstrates, decolonisation is an example of such a critical situation, confronting French society with questions it did not want to answer. Algeria also demonstrates that ontological security *is* achievable and is perceived by actors as such.

There is also a question of how states respond to this anxiety. Ontological insecurity can generate responses ranging from reinventing autobiographical narratives to massive behavioural changes or reinforcing self-destructive behaviours.[26] And if behaviours/identities are not immutable or equivalent to the self, actors should be able to pivot their behaviours/identities to re-establish ontological security – even in circumstances of existential anxiety.

This raises the question of how identity shifts help resolve ontological insecurity. Other scholars observe that identities can change when doing so contributes to the stability of the self,[27] providing the potential basis for renewal.[28] Moreover, the notion that states are trapped in an either/or situation where they either maintain existing behaviours/identities or collapse into chaos is simplistic. It also defies empirical observation, such as when the United States went from isolationism

[19] Amir Lupovici, 'Ontological dissonance, clashing identities, and Israel's unilateral steps towards the Palestinians', *Review of International Studies*, 38:4 (2012), pp. 809–33; Subotić, 'Narrative, ontological security, and foreign policy change'; Zachary Selden and Stuart Strome, 'Competing identities and security interests in the Indo-US relationship', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 13:2 (2016), pp. 439–59.

[20] Nina Krickel-Choi, 'The concept of anxiety in Ontological Security Studies', p. 7.

[21] Ibid., p. 11.

[22] Kinnvall, 'Ontological insecurities and postcolonial imaginaries', p. 530; Jakub Eberle, 'Narrative, desire, ontological security, transgression: Fantasy as a factor in international politics', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 22 (2019), pp. 243–68 (p. 243); Marco Vieira, '(Re-)imagining the "self" of ontological security: The case of Brazil's ambivalent postcolonial subjectivity', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 46:2 (2018), pp. 142–64 (p. 149).

[23] Filip Ejdus, 'Critical situations, fundamental questions and ontological insecurity in world politics', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 21:4 (2018), pp. 883–908 (p. 886).

[24] Krickel-Choi, 'The concept of anxiety in Ontological Security Studies', pp. 11–14.

[25] Ejdus, 'Critical situations, fundamental questions and ontological insecurity in world politics', p. 887.

[26] Krickel-Choi, 'The concept of anxiety in Ontological Security Studies', p. 9

[27] Ibid., Christopher Browning and Pertti Joenniemi, 'Ontological security, self-articulation and the securitization of identity', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 52:1 (2017), pp. 31–47 (p. 35).

[28] Browning and Joenniemi, 'Ontological security, self-articulation and the securitization of identity', p. 45.

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to interventionism in the 20th century without its sense of self crumbling. John Cash correctly argues that 'there are more options available, contained within the complexity of a hybrid cultural repertoire that states draw upon to organize their identities'.[29] Recent comparative politics scholarship on national identity shares this perspective.[30] As we will see, France's hybrid cultural repertoire provided the language needed to narrate its departure from Algeria.

Finally, we need to interrogate this hybridity of identities more thoroughly. Some early IR ontological security scholarship treated state identities as monolithic and not relationally defined.[31] However, Giddens believed that subjectivity emerges from intersubjectivity,[32] and some recent works emphasise the intersubjective formation of identities (i.e. multiple communities/individuals' identities are defined in relation to one another), particularly in post-colonial contexts.[33] State identities, far from monolithic, are characterised by two types of hybridity: different internal strands and intersubjective definition. My theoretical contribution is to apply ontological security to the act of decolonisation itself, where colonial powers must redefine their relationship to the peoples they ruled – and redefine themselves in the process.

Methodology: Evaluating France's ontological security crisis

My analysis of the end of French Algeria primarily mixes three kinds of primary sources – private discussions of Charles de Gaulle, public speeches and writings by de Gaulle and other prominent political figures (primarily on the French side but with some Algerian sources), and some public opinion polling data from the period – as well as the extensive secondary literature on the Algerian War. For primary sources, I focus on sources written during or just after the war (1954–62) to prioritise examining how actors lived and experienced the war as it was happening. I have also tried to mix various perspectives (the French right and left, Algerian revolutionaries, and ordinary citizens without firm ideological commitments) to provide an appraisal as multidimensional as possible of how the war looked from different perspectives. I particularly focus on influential politicians and prominent intellectuals (such as the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre) to show how France's exit from Algeria was narrated to the broader public. Additionally, I draw on some of de Gaulle's private conversations – the content of which was only revealed decades after the war – to see how de Gaulle was motivated by his values and principles amid his careful public efforts to project continuity and stability to an anxious public. Finally, by including the voices of Algerian revolutionaries, we can better understand how the intersubjective definition of identities in a colonial context impacted France's pursuit of ontological security, which involved a substantial degree of erasure.

It is important to note that while discussing France's ontological security, I treat France as a collective – but not unitary – actor. I focus on France's collective sense of self that resulted from a dialogue between different parts of French society and Algerians seeking independence. In this, I borrow from understandings of the construction of narratives and senses of self from scholarship on nationalism. National senses of self are 'dialectically engendered' between societies and within

[29]John Cash, 'Psychoanalysis, cultures of anarchy, and ontological insecurity', *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 306–21 (p. 319).

[30]Harris Mylonas and Maya Tudor, *Varieties of Nationalism: Communities, Narratives, Identities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), p. 38.

[31]Steele, 'Ontological security and the power of self-identity'.

[32]Kinnvall, 'Ontological insecurities and postcolonial imaginaries', p. 530.

[33]Kinnvall, 'Ontological insecurities and postcolonial imaginaries'; Vieira, '(Re-)imagining the "self" of ontological security'; Marco Vieira, 'The decolonial subject and the problem of non-Western authenticity', *Postcolonial Studies*, 22:2 (2019), pp. 150–67; Chris Rossdale, 'Enclosing critique: The limits of ontological security', *International Political Sociology*, 9:4 (2015), pp. 369–86.

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them.[34] Within societies, collective reactions to historical events paradoxically happen at the individual level. As Benedict Anderson observes, the simultaneous consumption of news in the modern world creates a 'mass ceremony … performed in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull'.[35] French society was collectively meditating on what Algeria meant for France as a whole, but this meditation was conducted by individuals – ordinary citizens, soldiers, public intellectuals, and politicians. I examine the contours and content of that meditation through the lens of what I call *narrative strands*. This approach allows me to examine ontological security – traditionally associated with individual actors or states seen as monolithic wholes – as belonging to a collective national self.

Narrative strands, decolonisation, and the appearance of continuity

At critical historical junctures, I argue that states can maintain ontological security by reweaving 'narrative strands' to project continuity despite drastic changes in state identities and behaviours. Moreover, preserving those narrative strands is essential to maintaining a consistent sense of self, and thus critical situations threatening their integrity – such as the Algerian War and phenomena like decolonisation more broadly – can force states to change their role-identities and behaviour drastically.

'Narrative strands' is the term I use to separate two different forms of identification: timeless characteristics (narrative strands) and (theoretically) temporary role-identities. The difference between them is intuitive – we inhabit changing role-identities over our lives (father, daughter, student, boss, friend) that come and go even as a stable sense of self continues. As the name suggests, *narrative strands* link these disparate parts together across time, articulating a coherent story. The stability of our sense of self thus comes from our ability to assign attributes (characteristics, passions) that describe our behaviour in each of these roles and distinguish us from others. Hence, narrative strands mentally link evolving identities, offering a consistent sense of self and a frame that stabilises our perception of reality.[36]

My idea of narrative strands derives from two insights in the comparative politics literature on the construction of national identity. First, historical events have no inherent meaning beyond those we ascribe to them, and many historically crucial events could have easily gone the other way. However, narratives of nationhood can absorb and give meaning to these accidents of historical contingency, transforming 'fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning'.[37] Specific role-identities are often accidents of fate, but national narratives stretching back into the mists of time provide psychological stability by making those accidents seem like destiny. This is achieved by ascribing to the nation 'timeless' characteristics (France as a beacon of progress, for instance) that link together various role-identities. But the function of narrative strands is not merely retrospective linkage: by tracing the logic and meaning of a country's history, they give meaning and context to choices the country faces in the present – such as whether France should stay in Algeria or leave – and provide a language in which policy changes can be narrated as continuity.[38] Additionally, scholarship on national identity emphasises the varying degrees to which countries have multiple national narratives that are in dialogue but cannot be subsumed into one another.[39]

[34]Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2016), p. xiv.

[35]Ibid., p. 33.

[36]Eberle, 'Narrative, desire, ontological security, transgression', p. 245.

[37]Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 11.

[38]This is adapted from Kymlicka's idea of culture as a context that makes choices in life meaningful. Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 83.

[39]See, for instance, Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (Gurgaon: Penguin Books, 2012); Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); Santos Juliá, *Historias de las dos Españas* (Madrid: Taurus, 2004).

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I use the term 'narrative strands' to emphasise the multiplicity of national narratives and how they serve a linking/framing function across time.

The inherent malleability of national senses of self and the multiplicity of interconnected narratives is relevant for ontological security because the self is not fixed but must orient itself in a world it does not control.[40] Potential disorientation is especially likely with a shift as drastic as decolonisation, which changed how peoples see themselves and relate to one another to a degree rarely seen in human history.

Decolonisation is an example of a critical situation because it disrupts established routines of behaviour, eliminates a major state role-identity, and challenges colonial powers to redefine their place in the world and, thus, their understanding of themselves. Giddens recognised that our sense of self is formed intersubjectively,[41] and some scholars warn that our autobiographical narratives can marginalise others and reinforce power dynamics based on an unfavourable comparison with others, making the aspiration to ontological security potentially problematic.[42] Other scholars observe that decolonisation is a particularly potent example of a process leading to erasure and deliberate forgetting in France and other former colonial powers – reinforcing dynamics of inequality even as colonised peoples gained freedom.[43] Decolonisation thus provides a powerful example of the complexities of maintaining/pursuing ontological security and the costs thereof.

The argument: Ontological security and France's exit from Algeria

Faced with a revolt that confronted French society with the violent reality of colonial domination in a way that ordinary French citizens had been able to avoid until then, France chose to withdraw in part to secure its ontological security. For over a century in France, there was a consensus in favour of French imperialism supported from the perspective of two narrative strands of French nationalism: France as a white and Catholic country and France as a missionary of universal human rights. This consensus allowed for a remarkable consistency in French colonial policy given the volatility of French domestic politics, which witnessed three different monarchies, four republics, and one fascist dictatorship during the 132 years of French Algeria.

This consensus shattered during the Algerian War of Independence, and the only way to reunite the ethnic and universal visions of French identity was to leave Algeria. France shed its role-identity as a colonial power while maintaining its ontological security by repurposing its liberal-universal and Catholic-European narrative strands in favour of decolonisation. Some in France, such as Sartre,[44] wanted to work towards the mutual recognition that Frantz Fanon, the Martinican Marxist psychiatrist and philosopher who joined the Algerian independence struggle, thought to be the true path towards universal liberation.[45] However, France as a whole did not want to engage in such introspection – it chose a path of erasure and forgetting, which allowed it to move on with minimal psychological cost.[46]

[40]Browning and Joenniemi, 'Ontological security, self-articulation and the securitization of identity', p. 40.

[41]Kinnvall, 'Ontological insecurities and postcolonial imaginaries', p. 530.

[42]Rossdale, 'Enclosing critique', pp. 369–73; Browning and Joenniemi, 'Ontological security, self-articulation and the securitization of identity', p. 32.

[43]Pierre Nora, 'Les avatars de l'identité française', *Le Débat*, 2 (2010), pp. 4–20; Gurminder Bhambra, 'Postcolonial Europe, or understanding Europe in the times of the postcolonial', in Chris Rumford (ed.), *The SAGE Handbook of European Studies* (London: Sage, 2009), pp. 69–86.

[44]Jean-Paul Sartre, introduction to Frantz Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre* (Paris: La Découverte, 2002), p. 31.

[45]Peter Hudis, *Frantz Fanon: Philosopher of the Barricades* (London: Pluto, 2015), pp. 52–3.

[46]Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization*, pp. 269–72; Jill Jarvis, *Decolonizing Memory: Algeria and the Politics of Testimony* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), p. 12; Benjamin Stora, *La gangrène et l'oubli: La mémoire de la Guerre d'Algérie* (Paris: La Découverte, 1991).

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A frayed colonial consensus

The connection between white supremacy and colonialism is self-explanatory. But, as Raoul Girardet observes, there was also 'a paradoxical but very real harmony' between French colonialism and French liberal universalism.[47] Nicolas Bancel and Pascal Blanchard also argue that colonialism 'fit perfectly' into French republican ideology, serving as a means to export French Enlightenment values.[48] Although it seems ironic today, the French Human Rights League organised a 'colonisation and human rights' conference in 1931.[49] Even French conservatives incorporated ideas about spreading Enlightenment values into their colonial visions.[50]

While very real, this overlap was not stable in the long term, meaning that colonialism favouring ontological security in the short term would undermine it in the long term. The liberal interpretation of colonialism was predicated on the empire's eventual end once France's civilising mission was over.[51] One French resident-general in Morocco compared France to the Roman Empire, which strove 'to allow peoples to flourish and to call the barbarians they administered to civilisation and a full life'. He saw it as inevitable 'that in the not-too-distant future, an evolved, civilised, and self-sustaining North Africa' would become independent.[52] Martin Evans notes that 'French rule in French Algeria [was not] ideologically unified. Ideas of the inherent inequality of races coexisted with others based upon paternalist notions of the protection of the indigenous people', followed by a reformism that sought to make Algerian Muslims full French citizens starting in the late 1920s.[53] Regardless of whether the ultimate destination would be French citizenship or independence, liberal colonialism inherently embraced the idea that once France's mission was completed, colonial subjects would become equal to ethnically European French, either as French citizens or citizens of their own countries.

Even in the interwar period, the ethnocultural and liberal-universal visions of French identity started pulling apart, creating cracks that split wide open in the 1950s. One liberal governor-general of Algeria, Maurice Viollette, was driven from office by *pieds-noirs* outraged at his plan to expand French citizenship to Algerian Muslim elites. Upon leaving Algeria, he warned his opponents, 'By your own fault, the natives of Algeria, undoubtedly, do not yet have a country [*patrie*]: they are searching for one. They are asking you to be part of the French nation. Give it to them quickly, or, failing that, they will make another nation.'[54] Viollette's fall was perhaps inevitable given that race was critical to how the French state institutionalised democracy and human rights, just as in the United States.[55] In practice, French universalism was not that universal.

However, the contradictions of colonial rule do not constitute an ontological security crisis by themselves. And indeed, none of France's other colonial wars of independence sparked crises of ontological insecurity. The Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) was largely hidden from public view before the age of mass communication, and French liberalism had yet to take hold on both the French left and right. Additionally, the Haitian Revolt happened concurrently with the French Revolution and its aftermath, and the First French Republic *helped* the slave revolt against the royalist landowners in Haiti. Other rebellions, such as in Indochina, also largely escaped public

[47] Raoul Girardet, *L'idée coloniale en France* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1972), p. 262. See also Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard, and Françoise Vergès, *La République coloniale: Essai sur une utopie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2003), p. 118.

[48] Nicolas Bancel and Pascal Blanchard, 'Les origines républicaines de la fracture coloniale', in Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel, and Sandrine Lemaire (eds), *La fracture coloniale* (Paris: La Découverte, 2005), pp. 31–43 (p. 31).

[49] Girardet, *L'idée coloniale en France*, p. 263.

[50] Ibid., p. 377.

[51] Ibid., p. 262.

[52] François Mitterrand, *Présence française et abandon* (Paris: Librarie Plon, 1957), p. 228.

[53] Martin Evans, *Algeria: France's Undeclared War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. xiii.

[54] Michel Winock, 'La France et l'Algérie: 130 ans d'aveuglement', in *La Guerre d'Algérie (1954–1962)*, ed. Yves Michaud (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2004), pp. 9–28 (p. 14).

[55] Emmanuelle Saada, 'Une nationalité par degré : Civilité et citoyenneté en situation coloniale', in Patrick Weil and Stéphane Dufoix (eds), *L'esclavage, la colonisation, et après* (Paris: PUF, 2005), pp. 193–227.

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attention. Far away and with no French settler presence, Indochina felt more like a genuinely foreign war than Algeria. Additionally, French soldiers in Indochina were predominantly from other French colonies, rather than white ethnic French who could relay what they saw to family members back home. Heavy mediatisation and the presence of massive amounts of metropolitan French soldiers made Algeria a 'guerre d'opinion' in a way that does not apply to other French colonial conflicts. Unlike previous wars, French public opinion could not look away, which made Algeria more destabilising.[56] Unlike Indochina, France objectively won the Algerian War militarily but left of its own accord.[57] It did so partly because of Algeria's threat to French ontological security.

The start of France's ontological security crisis

When conflict broke out in 1954, the FLN represented a minuscule segment of Algerian society due to poverty, illiteracy, and demobilisation. Knowing a conventional war against France was impossible, the FLN adopted a strategy of terrorist attacks to goad the French military into lashing out with indiscriminate violence.[58] This violence united Algerian Arabs and forced France to face the brutality of colonial domination.[59] The FLN calculated that the French response would be middling: neither ethnically cleansing Algerians nor acting with such restraint that they would not ultimately alienate Algerians and domestic/international public opinion.[60] By goading France to overreact, the FLN gained the upper hand despite conventional political-military weakness.[61] As David Fromkin notes: 'Even though the FLN had written the script, the French, with suicidal logic, went ahead to play the role for which they had been cast.'[62]

The FLN – many of whose leading members once believed in the promise of a universal, liberal France only to confront the wall of institutionalised racism – was intent on making France reckon with its bad faith in Algeria. One high-ranking FLN official wrote that 'there were two Frances, and one of them had profoundly impacted me, allowing me to denounce the other one better'.[63] Bad faith – a key concept in existentialism developed by the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre – is 'pretending to oneself that one is not "in" what one is doing'.[64] The French conscience had enjoyed a period of stability after the Second World War precisely because it could separate itself from the reality of colonial domination. The FLN wanted to end that and, in so doing, shake France's sense of self.[65]

The situation was different for most *pieds-noirs*, who saw the reality of colonial domination daily. Colonialism ensnared coloniser and colonised alike in their attempts to define themselves.[66] The reality of colonial domination meant that *pieds-noirs* had substantially less attachment to French liberalism because their place in Algerian society depended on ruling over the native Muslim Arab-Berber majority, something incompatible with French liberal universalism. Frantz Fanon notes that the few Europeans in Algeria who sincerely argued for multicultural democracy and

[56]Branche, *La torture et l'armée pendant la Guerre d'Algérie*, p. 53.

[57]See, for instance, James McDougall, *A History of Algeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 222; Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*, pp. 230, 339, 546; Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 206–7; Martin Alexander and J. F. V. Keiger, 'France and the Algerian War: Strategy, operations and diplomacy', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 25:2 (2002), pp. 1–32 (p. 23).

[58]Raphaëlle Branche, 'FLN et OAS: Deux terrorismes en guerre d'Algérie', *Revue européenne d'histoire*, 14:3 (2007), paragraph 5.

[59]David Fromkin, 'The strategy of terrorism', *Foreign Affairs*, 53:4 (1975), pp. 683–98 (p. 694).

[60]Barbara Walter and Andrew Kydd, 'Strategies of terrorism', *International Security*, 31:1 (2006), pp. 49–80 (p. 70).

[61]Martha Crenshaw Hutchinson, 'The concept of revolutionary terrorism', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 16:3 (1972), pp. 383–96 (p. 387).

[62]Fromkin, 'The strategy of terrorism', p. 690.

[63]Mohammed Harbi, *Une vie debout: Mémoires politiques*, vol. 1 (Paris: La Découverte, 2001), p. 224.

[64]Ronald Laing, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 96.

[65]Benjamin Stora, *Les questions mémorielles portant sur la colonisation et la guerre d'Algérie* (Paris: Présidence de la République française, 2021), p. 26.

[66]Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983).

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equal citizenships were labelled as 'Arabs' by other *pieds-noirs* – a sign that the racial dynamics of colonialism ultimately forced everyone into dichotomous categories.[67] While Fanon acknowledged a sincere attachment to liberal democracy in metropolitan France, 'in Algeria, democracy [was] inherently treason' for the local European population.[68] While France's liberal-universal and European-Catholic narrative strands coexisted in Europe, the former largely disappeared in Algeria, leaving behind only European ethnonationalism. The two sides of the Mediterranean were on different wavelengths. Still, the situation was stable so long as metropolitan France was not forced to face its bad faith and complicity.

With the outbreak of war, metropolitan French public opinion crossed a threshold into the severe anxiety characteristic of ontological insecurity. Although metropolitan opinion had disregarded *pied-noir* excesses for over a century, suddenly, as Fanon noted, there was a 'revolt that happen[ed] in French public opinion after each revelation about torture in Algeria'.[69]

The French military, frustrated by an elusive enemy, tortured many Algerians with blowtorches, partial drowning, and electric shocks, among other techniques. French military forces also indiscriminately bombed villages suspected of housing or aiding FLN militants. French forces forced entire villages to move from the mountains to the plains where they could be easily monitored, disrupting the economic and social balance in those communities and sowing even more seeds of resentment.[70]

Although most *pieds-noirs* had no issue with extreme violence to maintain control, the same was not true of many soldiers from metropolitan France who came to help suppress the insurgency. The military also relied extensively on reservists who, unlike some of the elite paratroopers, balked at what they saw and were made to do in Algeria.

France's ontological security crisis began with these soldiers. A survey of over 500 regular soldiers who had served in Algeria showed that the soldiers were seven times as likely to sympathise with Arab Algerians than with European settlers.[71] Many arrived in Algeria with negative views about the Arab majority due to what they heard from French media and their officers. Still, after arrival, those views often turned into sympathy for exploited Algerian Muslims and antipathy towards the European population of Algeria, especially the wealthy *grands colons*.[72] Letters and testimony from the soldiers show widespread shame about French crimes. Raphaëlle Branche, France's leading expert on torture during the Algerian War, notes that this shame expresses an 'incapacity to give meaning' to their actions and that 'it was less about their relationship with others than with themselves'.[73] Shame, of course, is an emotional manifestation of the existential anxiety associated with ontological insecurity.[74]

Many soldiers faced long-lasting psychological destabilisation because of their experiences in Algeria,[75] with many feeling disorientation and shame that remained decades later.[76] However, the impact of these accounts went beyond the soldiers: they brought their attitudes back to France and conveyed what they had seen in letters, helping to shift public opinion against the war.[77] Many in France reacted with shame to reports emerging from Algeria that forced them to confront their

[67]Fanon, *Sociologie d'une révolution (L'an V de la révolution algérienne)* (Paris: François Maspero, 1972), p. 140.

[68]Ibid., p. 139.

[69]Ibid.

[70]Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*, p. 338.

[71]Michel de La Fournière, 'De jeunes militants dans le contingent: L'enquête des organisations de jeunesse de 1959–1960', in Jean-Pierre Rioux (ed.), *La Guerre d'Algérie et les Français* (Paris: Fayard, 1990), pp. 86–98 (p. 90).

[72]Ibid., p. 91.

[73]Branche, *La torture et l'armée pendant la Guerre d'Algérie*, p. 65.

[74]Catarina Kinnvall and Jennifer Mitzen, 'Anxiety, fear, and ontological security in world politics: Thinking with and beyond Giddens', *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 240–56 (p. 249).

[75]Branche, *La torture et l'armée pendant la Guerre d'Algérie*, p. 429.

[76]Bernard Sigg, *Le silence et la honte* (Paris: Messidor, 1989).

[77]Bernard Droz, 'Le cas très singulier de la guerre d'Algérie', *Vingtième siècle: Revue d'histoire*, 5:1 (1985), pp. 81–90 (p. 82); Raphaëlle Branche and Sylvie Thénault, 'Le secret sur la torture pendant la guerre d'Algérie', *Matériaux pour l'histoire de*

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bad faith: France's sense of self did not match the French state's actions in Algeria.[78] Many soldiers joined the ranks of anti-war activists precisely because they wanted their actions to match their sense of self.[79]

Knowing that revelations would force French society to face its bad faith, the government tried unsuccessfully to cover up what was happening in Algeria. Government seizures of newspapers occurred 265 times in metropolitan France and 586 times in Algeria during the war to prevent the revelation of French misconduct.[80] Many of the accounts profoundly impacted the public, including Simone de Beauvoir's vivid account of the torture inflicted on the female Algerian militant Djamila Boupacha.[81]

One representative example was Henri Alleg's book *La Question*. Alleg, a communist imprisoned and tortured by the French military in Algeria, published a book about his experiences by smuggling chapters from his cell to his lawyers. The French government allowed the book's publication only to seize thousands of copies shortly thereafter, but not before the book and news of its contents had spread throughout France.[82] The apparent 'suicides' of FLN leader Larbi Ben M'hidi and the pro-FLN lawyer Ali Boumendjel, who had many friends in Paris legal circles, shocked the conscience of France and created an enormous media backlash against the French military in Algeria.[83]

In a country still traumatised by the horrors of Nazi occupation, the fact that the French state committed many of the same crimes was a disorienting experience.[84] Jean-Paul Sartre wrote that:

> We looked at the German soldiers walking inoffensively in the streets and we sometimes told ourselves, 'These are nevertheless men who resemble us. How could they do what they do?' And we were proud because we did not understand. Today, we know that there is nothing to understand: everything was done by letting go gradually and imperceptibly, and then, when we raised our heads, we saw in the mirror an unknown, loathsome face: our own.[85]

This view was not restricted to leftist intellectuals like Sartre: some soldiers in Algeria compared themselves to the SS in letters sent back home.[86] An article appeared as early as 1955 in the political magazine *France Observateur* entitled 'Your Gestapo in Algeria.'[87] The Nazi comparisons were particularly responsible for undermining support for the war on the left, whose sense of self was based on unwavering opposition to fascism.[88]

However, rather than genuinely introspecting and grappling with the dynamics of colonial domination and how those dynamics were baked into the history of French republicanism, France pursued a path that would allow itself to maintain its ontological security. French public

notre tempsi, 58 (2000), pp. 57–63 (p. 59); Claude Juin, *Des soldats tortionnaires. Guerre d'Algérie: Des jeunes gens ordinaires confrontés à l'intolérable* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2012), pp. 199–221; Merom (2004), p. 608.

[78]Jarvis, *Decolonizing Memory*, p. 65.

[79]Branche, *La torture et l'armée pendant la Guerre d'Algérie*, pp. 92–3.

[80]Martin Harrison, 'Government and press in France during the Algerian War', *The American Political Science Review*, 58:2 (1964), pp. 273–85 (p. 278).

[81]Simone de Beauvoir, 'Pour Djamila Boupacha', *Le Monde* (2 June 1960).

[82]Roland Rappaport, '"La Question" d'Henri Alleg, histoire d'un manuscrit', *Le Monde* (24 July 2013).

[83]Merom (2004 *La République coloniale: Essai sur une utopie*), p. 610.

[84]Sylvie Thénault, 'Interner en République: Le cas de la France en guerre d'Algérie', *Amnis: Revue d'études des sociétés contemporaines Europe-Amérique*, 3 (2003), paragraph 5.

[85]Jean-Paul Sartre, *Situations, V: Colonialisme et néo-colonialisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), pp. 72–3.

[86]Branche, *La torture et l'armée pendant la Guerre d'Algérie*, p. 93.

[87]Jean-François Sirinelli, 'Les intellectuels dans la mêlée', in Jean-Pierre Rioux (ed.), *La Guerre d'Algérie et les Français* (Paris: Fayard, 1990), pp. 116–30 (p. 118).

[88]Marc Sadoun, 'Les socialistes entre principes, pouvoir et mémoire', in Jean-Pierre Rioux (ed.), *La Guerre d'Algérie et les Français* (Paris: Fayard, 1990), pp. 225–34 (p. 229).

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opinion thought the France of universal rights could not be responsible for the atrocities, but rather a rogue branch – the military – that the government could not control.[89] Along with *La Question*, another bombshell book published about military excesses in Algeria was *La Gangrène* (1959), a collection of testimony from Algerians tortured by the military. The book explicitly framed the violence inflicted on Algerians by the French military as an aftereffect of a Nazi 'pox' – an infection introduced into the body that needed to be flushed out. Such a portrayal allowed Algeria to become a 'gangrenous limb that, though rotted through, can still be amputated to heal the national body from a threatening infection'.[90] The danger of this approach – and perhaps pursuing ontological security – is that it impeded 'contemplating alternate genealogies of French state violence. Torture becomes visible as criminal precisely because it is a defect that can be imagined as alien to the French Republic.'[91] France needed to feel secure about itself, and that need became the start of a practice of erasure that continues today.[92]

This is where the binary choice between physical and ontological security, already challenged by recent works,[93] shows its weakness. Algeria – legally as much a part of the French Republic as Bordeaux or Marseille – had become gangrenous. The only way the self-in-the-body could survive was to amputate France's Algerian limb.

The diagnosis of gangrene, however, was not entirely wrong. Fanon had foreseen that the war would make untenable France's internal contradictions (racist imperialism existing alongside strong democratic reflexes). He also foresaw that *pied-noir* and military hardliners would try to bring Algeria to France.[94] While some *pieds-noirs* who hated Arabs suddenly embraced integration, Alistair Horne writes that 'the *pieds-noirs* were never strictly honest, even to themselves, as to what they really wanted … it was not *Algérie française* … [but] a pied-noir Algeria, ranging between South Africa at its best and its worst, but under the umbrella of French protection'.[95] The provisional president of Algeria during the war, Ferhat Abbas – who in his youth had believed in French democracy and the cause of Franco-Algerian integration – concurs with this judgement by citing a rare example of the honesty that Horne largely found missing among *pieds-noirs*. In his book *La Nuit coloniale* (*The Colonial Night*), he cites one *pied-noir*'s letter to the French newspaper *L'Express* asking, 'Do I believe in democracy? **** your democracy! Your democracy makes me sick! You don't see where this leads? Eight million dirty and illiterate rats that mock France … Just wait for our arrival from Algeria, which will happen soon if you continue ****ing with us … and you'll see what we'll do to your democracy.'[96]

This threat was no idle bluster. The first *pied-noir*/military threat to French democracy came in 1958 when part of the French military seized power in Algeria and invaded Corsica in a revolt against the French government, which the putschists saw as insufficiently committed to the war effort. In exchange for not invading mainland France, the putschists demanded the return to power of Charles de Gaulle, the leader of the Free French forces in the Second World War. Fearing civil war, President René Coty appointed de Gaulle as prime minister. De Gaulle then drafted a new constitution, expanding executive powers and inaugurating the Fifth Republic, and became president. De Gaulle brought firm leadership to France, but not the kind the partisans of French Algeria envisioned.

[89] Thénault, 'Interner en République', paragraph 3.
[90] Jarvis, *Decolonizing Memory*, p. 73.
[91] Ibid., p. 74.
[92] Stora, *La gangrène et l'oubli*.
[93] Krickel-Choi, The embodied state'; Browning and Joenniemi, 'Ontological security, self-articulation and the securitization of identity'.
[94] Fanon, *Sociologie d'une révolution*, p. 139.
[95] Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*, p. 545.
[96] Ferhat Abbas, *La Nuit coloniale* (Paris: Juillard, 1962), p. 37.

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French society and de Gaulle negotiate the crisis of ontological insecurity

By 1958, the FLN had succeeded in forcing France to look at the violent consequences of colonial domination, even if it could not force French public opinion to draw the correct conclusions about how that situation emerged in the first place. Still, it had made the role-identity of France as a colonial power untenable. Raymond Aron, the right-wing philosopher and editorialist for *Le Figaro*, France's leading right-wing newspaper, wrote that 'a country cannot be half-free, half-slave. If Algeria is integrated in a totalitarian way, the metropole will not continue to enjoy a democratic regime. The *pieds-noirs*, colonels, and ultras will have to go all the way. France itself will be governed by the methods used to hold French Algeria together.'[97] At least on this one issue, the Black anti-colonial Marxist Fanon and a leading figure of white French conservatism agreed. Alain Savary, a future first secretary of the Parti socialiste (PS), also concurred.[98]

The status quo would thus have to end. But what would replace it? This is where France's two narrative strands (liberal-universal and European-Catholic) appear to push towards massive changes. Without Algeria, France would be mostly just another continental European country, albeit one with a global cultural influence and a nuclear programme. However, with Algeria, France would no longer be a fundamentally Catholic and European country. Still, de Gaulle effectively distinguished between France's various identities (such as being a colonial power) and its immutable, stable self, telling the public that France needed 'an immense renewal. The question is how to accomplish this without France ceasing to be France' – providing the appearance of stability despite a drastic shift.[99]

In public, the white blood cells of French republicanism mobilised against racial inequality and colonial violence, favouring integrating Algerian Muslims as full French citizens. In April 1956, a declaration appeared in *Le Monde* saying that French military victory would have no meaning unless France rebuilt Algeria based on actual political equality. 'Who else, if not the country of human rights', the statement asked, 'can pave a humane path towards the future?'[100] The signatories were a curious group – two former governors-general of Algeria, a Catholic archbishop, a Second World War general who had initially worked for the Nazi collaborationist Vichy regime before defecting to the Allies, and the president of a major labour union, among others – demonstrating that the Algeria question partly transcended the traditional left–right cleavage in French politics.[101]

Except for right-wing extremists in the military and reactionary members of the *pied-noir* community, France's political class broadly agreed that the solution to Algeria must be liberal and democratic. Marc Lauriol, a conservative *pied-noir* member of the National Assembly from Algiers, claimed that 'any valid long-term solution must satisfy a major imperative: offering Muslims a way to express their adherence to the presence and policies of France. This demand is essentially liberal.'[102] Ludovic Tron, a socialist senator, similarly emphasised that France's road to salvation would involve restoring republican values. He wrote that 'for many people, France is betraying its history and undermining its image [in Algeria]. Yet, one of its saving graces, its greatest strength perhaps, is this image of itself … Today, those people do not understand why [France] refuses what is asked of it in the name of the maxims that are its *raison d'être*.'[103] Michel Debré, de Gaulle's first prime minister (1958–62), echoed these comments, arguing that 'French legitimacy in Algeria … is fundamentally established in view of eternal values because [France] alone is inspired by the will of human fraternity'.[104] (Prime Minister Debré also fretted about the Algeria War's impact on its Western allies,

[97] Raymond Aron, *L'Algérie et la République* (Paris: Plon, 1958), pp. 38–9.

[98] Alain Savary, *Nationalisme algérien et grandeur française* (Paris: Plon, 1960), pp. 163–4.

[99] De Gaulle, 'Speech to the French people', Paris, 5 February 1962.

[100] Jules Saliège, Émile Roche, Albert Bayet, et al., 'Un appel "pour le salut et le renouveau de l'Algérie française"', *Le Monde* (21 April 1956).

[101] Sirinelli, 'Les intellectuels dans la mêlée', p. 119.

[102] Marc Lauriol, 'Algérie et régime politique', *Le Monde* (12 April 1960).

[103] Ludovic Tron, 'Réflexions sur le problème algérien', *Le Monde* (1 September 1959).

[104] *Journal Officiel de la République Française: Débats parlementaires (Assemblée nationale, 1ère législature)*, 4 (Paris: Direction de l'information légale et administrative, 1959), p. 28. Michel Debré, speech on 15 January 1959.

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who embraced decolonisation.)[105] In public, De Gaulle agreed, declaring that in Algeria, there were only full French citizens (*Français à part entière*).[106] From the perspective of ontological security, the striking thing about these statements is that they all paradoxically present a massive break with precedent (racialised citizenship laws and colonialism) as *continuity* with France's past.

Still, under his initial public endorsement of equality and integration, de Gaulle doubted that Muslim Algerians preferred integration to independence.[107] More importantly, regardless of what Muslim Algerians wanted, *he* did not favour integration. He wondered in private, 'If all the Arabs and Berbers of Algeria were considered French, how could we stop them from coming to live in metropolitan France? My village would no longer be Colombey-Les-Deux-Églises [Colombey-The-Two-Churches] but Colombey-Les-Deux-Mosquées [Colombey-The-Two-Mosques]'.[108] Even François Mitterrand, who later became the first socialist president of the Fifth Republic, asked, 'What Frenchman would accept a parliament a fourth of whose members, or even a third, are Muslim?'[109] Aron wrote that 'integration is neither a desirable nor realistic objective. All foreign observers wonder by what blend of ignorance, vanity, [and] mythologising so many French have given their heart to an enterprise even more unreasonable than grandiose.'[110]

Beyond desirability, there was also the question of feasibility. Noting that Algerian Arabs and *pieds-noirs* were divided by culture, language, and religion, de Gaulle rhetorically asked, 'You think that they have the feeling of a common country capable of overcoming racial, class, and religious divisions? You think that they really have the will to live together?'[111] Moreover, 'keeping the Algerian departments in France would cost us not only a grave moral prejudice in the world but also a ruinous effort … If Algeria remained French, we would have to ensure the same standard of living for the French and Algerians, which is beyond our reach.'[112] (In 1953, the average individual income in Algeria was 22.5% of the average in metropolitan France.)[113] 'Equality is nice', he said, but 'since we cannot offer them equality, it is best to give them liberty.'[114]

These comments, made in private, were widely echoed in public across the political spectrum. Alain Savary, a future first secretary of the PS, made the same argument about true Franco-Algerian equality causing unacceptable damage to France's standard of living. French public opinion did not have much sympathy for *pied-noir* oppression, but neither did it have much desire to lift Algerian Arabs out of poverty at the expense of their own standard of living.[115] Many conservatives concurred.[116]

In the interim, however, de Gaulle's government launched the Constantine Plan, an ambitious economic development project to raise wages in Algeria, build housing for one million people, expand educational access for Algerian Muslims, and institute a massive land redistribution programme. Muslims were also given greater opportunities to join the civil service and the military. The French government specifically framed the initiative as an attempt to live up to the country's motto of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*.[117] But far from being a genuine attempt to integrate Algerian Muslims into the French nation, de Gaulle envisioned the Constantine Plan (along with his reforms giving Algerian Muslims equal civil and political rights) as a way of preparing Algeria for independence and allowing France to exit with its head held high. These efforts were meant to give Algeria

[105] Michel Debré, *Gouverner: Mémoires, 1958–1962* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1988), p. 207.
[106] De Gaulle, 'Speech at the Forum d'Alger', Algiers, 4 June 1958.
[107] Stora, *De Gaulle*, 65–6.
[108] Peyrefitte, *C'était de Gaulle*, p. 71.
[109] Stora, *De Gaulle*, 72.
[110] Aron, *L'Algérie et la République*, p. 39.
[111] Peyrefitte *C'était de Gaulle*, p. 56.
[112] Ibid., p. 57.
[113] Saul, *Intérêts économiques français et décolonisation de l'Afrique du Nord*, p. 70.
[114] Peyreffite, *C'était de Gaulle*, p. 55.
[115] Savary, *Nationalisme algérien et grandeur française*, p. 109.
[116] Aron, *L'Algérie et la République*, p. 39.
[117] Evans (2012), p. 241.

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a chance at a prosperous, democratic future – just not in France.[118] France's liberal-universal and European-Catholic narrative strands were coming together in service of massive policy changes.

French public opinion polling shows that the evolution of these two narrative strands was pushing ordinary French voters towards Algerian independence, not just elites and intellectuals. In 1958, most French voters supported granting equal rights to Algerian Muslims (52 per cent versus 21 per cent), but a plurality thought that Algeria would ultimately have to become independent rather than remain in France (41 per cent versus 36 per cent).[119] Looking at how these results overlapped, only 26 per cent were in favour of both equal political rights for Algerian Muslims and for Algeria remaining in France, versus 41 per cent in favour of Algerian independence, with (44 per cent of those in favour of independence) or without (56 per cent) equal rights for Muslims in the interim. Another 10 per cent of voters favoured apartheid (against independence and equal rights for Muslims), while another 21 per cent were undecided on the question of independence.[120] These results – which are from a year before de Gaulle publicly embraced Algerian self-determination – point out that while there was not a consensus about how best to resolve the Algerian question, there could be no consensus around full equality and Franco-Algerian unity (26 per cent in favour, and only 20 per cent firmly in favour) or around the status quo of maintaining French Algeria without political equality (10 per cent in favour, and only 5 per cent firmly in favour). The only remaining path was decolonisation, which would – as de Gaulle and his advisors were aware – reaffirm the principle of equality, save France money, and put France in line with a world that had moved away from colonialism towards universal self-determination. The question was how to redefine French identity away from being a colonial power in a way that still projected narrative stability and continuity.

Unstable identity, stable self: De Gaulle leads France out of Algeria

De Gaulle recognised that his task was to extract France from its Algerian quagmire. Even during the early period of his presidency, when he publicly embraced granting Algerians equal rights, he privately wondered:

> How did we let this European immigration grow uncontrolled in the middle of a radically different population in a hostile country? You only need to spend a little time in Algeria to realise that the Arabs are unassimilable and under all regimes, the administration has routinely hindered the natives to the benefit of the colonists … The majority of *pieds-noirs* never had any other policy other than treating the Muslims like servants and drowning them in the mass of France so that they don't have power … That is what we need to get out of, because it never should have existed. And today, in any case, it cannot continue to exist.[121]

In de Gaulle's comments, we see both narrative strands – liberal-universal (France should never have exploited and oppressed Algerians) and European-Christian (we cannot have too many Arabs in France) – intertwined in favour of a drastic change in state identity. Moreover, de Gaulle privately conceded that 'the Algerian nation has been born in blood. Nothing will stop it from existing today. The Muslim masses from Senegal to Indonesia want a sovereign Algeria. No force today can stifle a people that fights for its independence.'[122]

Here, we see de Gaulle confront the key challenge to maintaining a stable sense of self: we must orient ourselves in a changing world we do not control.[123] The first dominoes of post–Second World

[118] Peyrefitte, *C'était de Gaulle*, p. 51–2.
[119] *Sondages: Revue française de l'opinion publique*, 20:4 (1958), p. 20.
[120] Ibid., p. 21.
[121] Peyrefitte, *C'était de Gaulle*, pp. 73–4.
[122] Ibid., p. 86.
[123] Browning and Joenniemi, 'Ontological security, self-articulation and the securitization of identity', p. 40.

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War decolonisation in the late 1940s (India, Indonesia) had become a cascade. De Gaulle publicly acknowledged this challenge in a 1959 speech promoting global racial equality, claiming that 'France needs to be an example, leading the movement of progress … France needs to adapt to its era [*il faut que la France épouse son temps*]'.[124] De Gaulle was not alone in realising that France faced a critical situation and needed to reorient itself. Reacting to de Gaulle's speech, the editor of *Le Monde* wrote that France's 'error today, common to a certain number of other nations, is to not understand … that, except by turning to terror, it is impossible to maintain a people under tutelage when others nearby regain their freedom'.[125] Aron concurred, writing that 'decadent nations are those that refuse to adapt to a changing world. Gravediggers of the nation are those who, under the pretext of preventing decadence, orient patriotism towards a dead end.'[126] This is an observation with direct implications for ontological security: blind adherence to routines and pre-existing identities in the name of stability can undermine – rather than reinforce – ontological security.

Reorienting France meant ending France's identity as a major colonial power. However, as Savary pointed out, the massive change that the end of French Algeria implied did not mean France would cease to be France. He observed that 'France has gained a large global audience thanks in part to its revolutionary attempt to ensure equal individual political writes and also in part to its recognition and defence of the right of peoples to self-determination'.[127] (De Gaulle and Prime Minister Debré also fretted about the impact of keeping Algeria on France's image abroad, particularly among Western allies who fully embraced decolonisation.)[128] Algerian independence would renew those credentials, making an unexpected volte-face – there was broad support across the political spectrum for preserving French Algeria in 1954 – seem like a natural development in the life of the French nation.

In a speech endorsing Algerian self-determination, de Gaulle framed the end of France's status as a colonial power as one of a series of significant changes that France has gone through in its history: 'France has gone through periods that required her to evolve throughout her life.' Note that de Gaulle compares France to an individual here, possessing a life cycle with different phases marked by different role-identities. Still, these phases are connected by a continuous narrative logic. Referring to successive periods of social and political disruptions throughout French history that pushed the country in the direction of progress, de Gaulle underlined that in 1962, 'the appearance of new states [and] the ideological rivalries of empires impose upon us, within ourselves and in our relations with others, an immense renewal. The question is how to accomplish this without France ceasing to be France. I repeat, this transformation entails inevitable tumult in rescuing the ship.'[129] Here, we see de Gaulle's fullest understanding of France's ontological security challenge: how to drastically redefine France's place in the world without sacrificing France's stable sense of self. De Gaulle privately worried to his colleagues that, beyond the threat of civil war, 'France will lose itself' were he to fail.[130]

Preserving French greatness – its *grandeur* – was President de Gaulle's overarching foreign policy objective.[131] Fortunately for French ontological security, de Gaulle's *grandeur* did not depend on France adopting a particular role-identity and was highly adaptable to a changing environment.[132] Ultimately, de Gaulle's decision to embrace Algerian self-determination came down to

[124]'Nous allons à des négociations qui peuvent être décisives', *Le Monde* (11 May 1959).

[125]Hubert Beuve-Méry, 'Il faut que la France épouse son temps', *Le Monde* (27 August 1959).

[126]Aron, *L'Algérie et la République*, p. 85.

[127]Savary, *Nationalisme algérien et grandeur française*, pp. 162–3.

[128]Peyrefitte, *C'était de Gaulle*, p. 58–9; Debré, *Gouverner*, p. 207.

[129]De Gaulle, 'Speech to the French people', Paris, 5 February 1962.

[130]Stora, *La gangrène et l'oubli*, p. 82.

[131]See Maurice Vaïsse, *La Grandeur: Politique étrangère du général de Gaulle (1958–1969)* (Paris: Fayard, 2014); Philip Cerny, *The Politics of Grandeur: Ideological Aspects of de Gaulle's Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Daniel Mahoney, *De Gaulle: Statesmanship, Grandeur and Modern Democracy* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

[132]Stanley Hoffmann and Inge Hoffmann, 'The will to grandeur: De Gaulle as political artist', *Daedelus*, 97:3 (1968), pp. 829–87 (p. 845).

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his belief that French *grandeur* could depend on other forms of French exceptionalism – nuclear weapons, for instance – rather than its colonial empire.[133] France's sense of self, its sense of *grandeur* and playing a vital role in the world, could shed old role-identities and adopt new ones to meet the challenges of a changing world. Alain Peyrefitte, a close collaborator of de Gaulle, observed that de Gaulle's reversal on Algeria embodied his talent for dressing up cold political calculations as *grandeur*.[134] In this case, de Gaulle justified this massive reversal as a continuation of France's liberal-democratic narrative strand, saying that 'the fate of Algerians belongs to the Algerians, not as would be imposed upon them by knives and submachine guns, but as they will decide themselves, legitimately by universal suffrage. With them and for them, France will guarantee their freedom to choose.'[135]

The overwhelming approval of the Évian Accords, the treaty between de Gaulle's government and the FLN to end the war and grant Algerian independence, and public polling demonstrate that de Gaulle was in line with French public opinion. In 1961, 78 per cent of French voters thought Algeria was the country's most pressing issue.[136] By a 66 per cent versus 11 percent margin, respondents believed that France was responsible for helping Algeria's social and economic development. Still, an even larger majority (69 per cent versus 3 per cent) thought Algeria would become independent. These results echo de Gaulle's reformist agenda to prepare Algeria for independence rather than long-term integration.[137] In the months before the Évian Accords referendum, an overwhelming majority (80 per cent versus 10 per cent) of French voters indicated satisfaction with the agreement.[138] Still, voters were far more likely to say that the deal benefited Algeria (57 per cent versus 6 per cent) than France (32 per cent versus 28 per cent).[139] The only unquestionably positive aspect of the accord was that voters said the agreement would benefit France's global image (75 per cent versus 5 per cent).[140] The 70 per cent margin on that question mirrors the margin in favour of the agreement, suggesting that de Gaulle was not alone in seeing the end of French Algeria as a moral victory for France, even if it meant giving up the 'jewel of the empire'.[141] But French public opinion's satisfaction with the accords was one of 'cowardly relief', according to Benjamin Stora: 'Shame and guilt transformed into their opposite: necessity and self-absolution.'[142]

New identity, same self

Once de Gaulle publicly endorsed the end of French Algeria, many *pieds-noirs* and figures within the military tried to derail the process. During a *pied-noir* uprising against him in early 1960, de Gaulle called for a 'solution that is French' in Algeria – an extremely ambiguous statement but one that is telling: it did not define a specific kind of solution – independence, apartheid, or integration – that would cause France to take on a particular role-identity, but simply called for France to be true to its sense of self. He also declared that 'the unity, prestige, and fate of France would be compromised all at the same time' were he to fail to resolve the Algerian crisis, an acknowledgement of how destabilising the Algerian War was for France's internal cohesion (unity), how others saw it (prestige), and its understanding of the meaning and direction of its historical trajectory (fate).

Four days later, with the insurgents still on the streets, de Gaulle delivered a nearly 20-minute address on national television, declaring that 'self-determination is the only policy that is worthy

[133] Lefeuvre, *Chère Algérie*, p. 484.
[134] Peyrefitte, *C'était de Gaulle*, p. 55.
[135] De Gaulle, 'Speech at the Palais de l'Élysée', Paris, 16 September 1959.
[136] *Sondages: Revue française de l'opinion publique*, 23:1 (1961), p. 8.
[137] Ibid., p. 24.
[138] *Sondages: Revue française de l'opinion publique*, 25:2 (1963), p. 36.
[139] Ibid., p. 33.
[140] Ibid., p. 36.
[141] Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard, and Françoise Vergès, *La République coloniale: Essai sur une utopie*, p. 139.
[142] Stora, *La gangrène et l'oubli*, pp. 115–17.

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of France, it is the only way forward … it is clear that the progress, unity, and prestige of the French people are at stake and that the future [of France] is obstructed as long as the Algerian problem is not resolved'.[143] De Gaulle was even more explicit about how psychologically disorienting not resolving the Algerian question would be, leaving France adrift, 'a poor broken toy on an ocean of adventures'.[144] The image of an object being pushed around on the surface of the ocean without moving in any particular direction of its own volition testifies to the importance in ontological security of a sense of direction – narrative strands – linking various events together and narratively framing the self's journey through life as it and the world around it both evolve.

In April 1961, with the backing of much of the *pied-noir* community, four generals launched an unsuccessful coup in Algiers to invade metropolitan France and overthrow de Gaulle. (The French military became exceedingly bitter about de Gaulle's decision to allow for Algerian self-determination because it knew it was defeating the FLN on the ground.[145]) De Gaulle made another appearance on national television to condemn the coup attempts and plead for the support of his fellow compatriots. Trying to emphasise everything at stake, he implored his listeners to 'look where France risks going compared with what it was in the process of rebecoming'.[146]

The use of 'rebecoming' (*redevenir*) is telling here because de Gaulle cannot be referring to France's role-identity as a significant colonial power, which he was actively trying to end. Instead, he means returning to France's path in life as a country that promotes freedom, democracy, and human rights. For him, following that path was the only option worthy of France. This was not the only instance in which de Gaulle pursued 'internal moral unity and worthiness' to provide domestic stability during his presidency.[147] France shed an important identity, but it did so in a way that could be narrated as a logical evolution that allowed France to remain itself even as the world around it changed.

But if France's ontological security was preserved by the activation of a liberal-democratic narrative by de Gaulle and other public figures, it was also maintained by not disturbing France's other narrative strand: an understanding of France as a fundamentally European, Catholic country was shared by *pieds-noirs* as well as people in metropolitan French on both the right and left. As Todd Shepard correctly notes, 'France chose to forget that Algeria was France and to stop pretending that ("Muslim") Algerians could be French, this promise [of colour-blind egalitarianism] seemed less and less a concrete possibility … and more and more an abstract principle with limits marked by ethnic or racial difference'.[148] This is fundamentally correct: the fact that France was now willing to give Algeria its independence did not mean that it wanted to engage in the kind of intersubjective recognition that would have forced it to reckon with its darker side. Shedding its role-identity as a colonial power *enhanced* French ontological security, 'allow[ing] the French to avoid facing the challenges that Algerian nationalism and the Algerian Revolution posed to classic conceptions of French values and history, at least temporarily … [France] chose to purge [its] past and present of signs that empire mattered, rather than either reinventing or repudiating the universal in defining' the French nation.[149]

Of course, Shepard is wrong to argue that the arguments in favour of integration by many *pieds-noirs* were made in good faith. Shepard claims that, 'summoned by proponents of keeping Algeria French to implement the republican rhetoric that for 131 years had explained French domination of Algeria, most French people, politicians, and intellectuals refused to respond'.[150] In reality, the

[143] De Gaulle, 'Speech to the French people', Paris, 29 January 1960.
[144] Ibid.
[145] Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*, p. 546.
[146] De Gaulle, 'Speech to the French people', Paris, 23 April 1961.
[147] Cerny, *The Politics of Grandeur*, p. 6.
[148] Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization*, p. 262.
[149] Ibid., p. 272.
[150] Ibid., p. 99.

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idea of a greater France that would include previously colonised peoples, popular with parts of the French left, failed to gather momentum on either side of the Mediterranean.[151]

De Gaulle also thought that many *pieds-noirs*' new-found support for equal citizenship for Algerian Muslims was made in bad faith. Arabs would be a minority overall (under 20 per cent) in a combined France–Algeria, which would solve the dilemma of preserving white rule while adhering to the principle of equal citizenship. De Gaulle observed that given different birth rates, that demographic balance would not last, and Muslims would eventually control the French state.[152] (De Gaulle was not wrong: Muslims would be well over 40 per cent of France's population today if Algeria were still a part of France.) This is one of the reasons that he thought proponents of integrating Muslims were 'short-sighted' while he was looking after the long-term interests of France.[153] As we have seen, this demographic concern about too many Muslims in France was also a consideration on the French left. If France was universal for de Gaulle, as the epigraph demonstrates, it was also white, European, and Christian. France did not want to reconfigure its sense of self enough to imagine what a genuinely multicultural France of equal citizens would look like, and sacrificing Algeria was thus the easy way out.

Conclusion

Algeria can teach us about how ontological security works in periods of massive transformation – the wave of decolonisation of the mid-20th century was an enormous sea change in power relations between peoples around the world, and coloniser and colonised were both forced to redefine themselves as they entered a new and uncertain era. Part of facing the critical situation created by decolonisation was shedding role-identities that no longer matched the world that countries now lived in. However, as we have seen, trading old identities for new ones does not necessarily mean a collapse of ontological security. Instead, those identity changes can be narrated as a logical progression in a natural life cycle. Like individuals, states do not have to have the same stable role-identities throughout their lives. Still, they can achieve ontological security if they can present what are, in fact, changes resulting from historical contingency as part of the inexorable march of history. Indeed, in some cases changing role-identities can help maintain ontological security because it allows deeper assumptions about the self – narrative strands that give us a frame to see ourselves as stable despite constant change – to go unchallenged. As some critics of ontological security have pointed out, leaving these narratives untouched while pursuing ontological security involves some degree of erasure and forgetting.

As we have seen, the Algerian War created a critical situation for France, pushing it over an existential anxiety threshold and triggering an ontological security crisis. It did so because it pulled France's narrative strands apart and made it impossible for metropolitan France to ignore its complicity in preserving a society built on racial inequality and colonial domination, shattering France's colonial consensus. Realising the danger of the situation, France's political class, led by President de Gaulle, narrated France's exit from Algeria in a way that projected continuity amid change, thus preserving France's ontological security. Saving French ontological security, however, was a process of erasure that allowed France to continue to ignore how its vision of itself was belied by its actions in its relationships with other countries and peoples.

France's crisis of ontological security emerged from the untenable contradiction between two of France's core narrative strands – one of a liberal democratic power with a global mission to spread liberty, and another of a white, European, and Catholic society that will never see outsiders as equal. In fairness, this dilemma is not unique to France – the United States, another country with simultaneous liberal-democratic and ethnonationalist tendencies, faced a similar moment. Despite

[151] Ian Lustick, *Unsettled States, Disputed Lands: Britain and Ireland, France and Algeria, Israel and the West Bank-Gaza* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), p. 82.

[152] Peyreffite, *C'était de Gaulle*, p. 56.

[153] Ibid., p. 189.

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a powerful movement advocating annexing all of Mexico at the end of the Mexican–American War, American lawmakers only annexed Mexico's sparsely populated north to avoid having to make Mexicans American citizens (which would threaten white, anglophone power in the United States) or subjects (which would add another crisis around the idea of political equality in a country already wrestling with the question of slavery).[154] Here, too, walking away from colonialism was the psychologically easier path.

But just as the United States refused a reckoning at the end of the Mexican–American War, postponing it until the start of the American Civil War, France chose the more straightforward solution of sawing off a limb that had become gangrenous without asking where the infection came from in the first place. Étienne Balibar observes correctly that while 'the France of today was made (and is still made) in Algeria, with it and against it', the French posture in 1962 and the decades since then has been to ignore how Algeria and France have mutually constituted one another – a process of deliberate historical amnesia and erasure designed to avoid the psychologically destabilising effects of seriously interrogating France's sense of self.[155]

Of course, Ernst Renan once observed that 'the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things'. In a changing world where colonialism was no longer acceptable, maintaining France's ontological security involved a large amount of forgetting and ignoring. Choosing between racist apartheid and true multiculturalism by keeping Algeria in France would have required a reckoning about how France sees itself that would have been so destructive and divisive that losing Algeria was the much less painful option. Today, one only needs to look at the recent surge in support for the far right in France and years of controversy over how to handle France's Muslim minority – a debate in which French liberal secularism and xenophobia are not just present but also intertwined – to realise that amputating Algeria did not cure the underlying contradictions within France's sense of self. Leaving Algeria restored French ontological security, but it might have only done so temporarily.

Video Abstract. To view the online video abstract, please visit: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210525000208

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Britt Leake is a PhD candidate in political science at the University of California, Berkeley. He is currently writing a dissertation that examines why and when multicultural democracies succeed or fail. In addition to multicultural democracy, his broader research interests include the impact of religious identity on the development of modern languages, narratives of religious and ethnolinguistic identity, Islamic political theory, and the contemporary politics of the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia.

[154] Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2018), p. 250.
[155] Étienne Balibar, 'Algérie, France: une ou deux nations?', *Lignes*, 30 (1997), pp. 5–22 (p. 8).

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