# Tocqueville and Colonialism in Algeria

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This short essay does not intend to engage in a posthumous trial against the thinker Alexis de Tocqueville, but will be about some historical truths concerning his work in the United States and in Algeria. To tell the truth, Gramsci said, is revolutionary.

Colonialism is the enterprise of dominating other people; it is barbarism. Jean-Paul Sartre pointed out that colonialism was also a political system. This political system needs thinkers and technicians, and Tocqueville, along with many others, contributed to the development of colonial theory.

Colonial France deployed armies across the whole of Africa and Asia, but the keystone of those colonial adventures was Algeria. The French presence in Algeria from 1830 to 1962 was a domination based on a genocide and an ethnocide policy. "If a state provokes another one by way of war," we learn from the American president George Washington, "it is because he has something to take from that state."

Tocqueville was a technician of colonization. His famous book *Democracy in America* (1835-1840) made him a specialist of colonial doctrine, and he influenced numerous writers who tried to recreate this universe in the colonies of Africa and Asia. The United States of America actually became a "laboratory" for the French and the English in their colonial expansion and Tocqueville was an instrument in this plan. He was indisputably a guide for those other nineteenth century authors who traveled during that period to exotic and faraway lands. The publication of their books, many of them real bestsellers, provided publicity for colonial expansion.

Likewise, a number of French writers, generals and politicians visited the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. At the beginning of the Republic, the Americans were attracted to French culture at the same time that they were rejecting everything English. Many French books were



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translated into English for use by the Americans, and the first programs at the American military school of West Point were heavily influenced by the French. Tocqueville's writings were quickly translated and his books widely distributed while English authors of that time were ignored.

We could say that there are two Tocquevilles. One is in the line of Montesquieu, and wrote on the theory of power in the American democracy. The other is the real doctrinaire of colonial theories, a technician of colonization, and a racist. Tocqueville in his writings reminds us over and over that the Algerian population was composed of Moors, Arabs, Kabyles and other indigenous peoples. He insisted on the diversity of races, opposing the Arab to the Kabyles, and on a geographical level, the North of Algeria to the South. He claimed that the fact that they had submitted to Turkish rule for three hundred years made them unable to govern themselves. He forgot that Algerians are Muslims and had been so for fourteen hundred years. Having this religion in common with the Turks, Islam was a great factor in creating stability and a favorable collaboration between the two peoples. But Tocqueville sought to justify his own country's colonization by wrongly depicting the flexibility of the population as an impotence.

When Tocqueville first arrived in Algeria, the war of conquest was far from won. Between 1830 and 1843, the French lost tens of thousands of men either through illness or war with the local population. In fact, France's commanding officers were advocating limited occupation at that time. When Tocqueville arrived in 1841, he gave a new impulse to France's war of conquest. He devised a new strategy that would give the French the possibility of a much wider range of occupation. Tocqueville wanted all the arable lands for the French and therefore advocated pushing the native population further and further away from these areas.

He accepted that the Algerian war was a savage one. He knew that the French were not the civilized element in this war. Thus, against the fierce resistance of Emir Abd al-Qadir, he advocated domination through military force. He wrote that soldiers should be "adapted" to Algeria, counseling that "before you send a regiment to Algeria inspect it with the most rigorous means. All meek and feeble men must be left in the depot." When he first arrived in Algeria, he did not advocate the massacre of Algerians on the American model of colonial expansion, but would arrive at that policy later. For him, war had to be total. The result of this wide-ranging attack was that the population was indeed massacred. It took a century for the Algerian population to regain its earlier number.

Tocqueville cooperated with the military commander Marshall Bugeaud on the ground. He used to say: "there is no country in the world that looks



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less like Europe than Algeria does. Everything there is different, including the waging of war. The way to live, to fight, to survive there is appropriate to those conditions. Nothing in our education has prepared us for this war." Thus, everything had to be changed: the type of arms used, the clothing, the way of life of the French army. He understood that to beat the mobility of the Abd al-Qadir Units in their resistance operations, which proved able to rapidly move from place to place without warning, the French had to come up with a parallel response. Thus he would recommend the organization of small units of French troops, garrisoned between the lands occupied by the Algeria tribes, ready to strike any moment on many sides. He urged getting rid of the heavy materiel, and organizing resources in small units that were light and mobile. The strategy was based on the principles of rapidity, precision, mobility, and deception.

Paradoxically, Tocqueville's advocacy of the relocation of the Algerian population beyond the high plateau, and their replacement with an imported European population to settle on Algeria's most arable and fertile lands, proved to be part of their undoing. For the displaced Algerians, marginalized from centers of colonial activity, were therefore actually beyond French control. So, having postponed the independence of Algeria for more than a hundred years, this policy would actually help the Algerians prevail in the end. A century later, the Algerians would apply Tocqueville's ideas on how to organize themselves in their war of independence.



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