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Benjamin Claude Brower

Rethinking Abolition in Algeria

Slavery and the “Indigenous Question”*

The case of abolition and the end of slavery in Algeria is an important and still poorly understood one. Although the pre-colonial Maghreb, the so-called “Barbary Coast”, was well known to Europeans and Americans for Christian slavery, the enslavement of Africans of color was an important institution throughout the region (Ennaji 1994; Hunwick & Powell 2002; Montana 2004; Tangi 1994; Temimi 1987; Valensi 1967)¹. For example, in the northern territories of Ottoman Algeria, the Mediterranean lands known as the Tell, elites owned slaves of color whom they exploited for domestic help and as concubines. In the arid lands of the Sahara to the south, slavery was an essential part of desert society. Indeed, slaves and the servile people of color known as Haratin were so important to Algero-Saharan societies—to dig and tend wells, excavate and maintain the underground channels of foggara, irrigate gardens, tend to flocks, and cultivate dates—that one might argue that it was forced labor, not distinctive indigenous technologies or specially adapted modes of production, that made settled society in the Sahara desert possible². Beyond labor, slaves constituted an important part of elites’ social and cultural capital throughout the Maghreb where the ownership and control of others’ bodies was a key marker of social status. French colonialism altered these relations. But in Algeria slavery maintained its importance well into the nineteenth century (Bader 1999; Cordell 1999). Although exact figures are lacking, French estimates in the

* The present article is based upon a paper read at a special joint panel organized by the Saharan Studies Association at the African Studies Association and Middle East Studies Association annual meetings, 19 November 2005, Washington D.C. My thanks to Martin Klein for his perspicuous comments and Ismael Montana for organizing the panel. I would also like to thank Dennis Cordell and my colleague Larry Yarak.

1. Yacine Daddi Addoun is currently working on a dissertation entitled “L’abolition de l’esclavage en Algérie: 1816-1871”, at York University, Toronto.
2. See special issue of *Méditerranée* 3/4, 2002, on the Sahara.

1840s numbered some 10,000 slaves in the parts of Algeria under their control, and it is likely there were thousands more (Emerit 1949: 38)³.

In many respects, the response of the French colonial administration to slavery and abolition in Algeria was typical of European practices throughout colonial Africa. Similar to other African countries under European rule, in Algeria slavery died a “slow death” (Lovejoy & Hogendorn 1993). Legally abolished in 1848, slavery in Algeria was kept alive by a variety of forces, including the resilience of pre-colonial institutions, clandestine practices adopted by slave traders and owners (especially their ability to exploit ambiguities in the personal status of slaves), and, finally, a singular lack of will on the part of the colonial administration to enforce the full letter of the law. French administrators accommodated slavery in many parts of the country, notably in remote areas of the Algerian interior, and not until 1906 was there a concerted effort to abolish slavery throughout the colony⁴. Put in the simplest of terms, French administrators subordinated the moral considerations imbedded in the abolition legislation to the practical issues of colonial rule. Guided by the colonial triad of order, authority, and economy, they either tolerated slavery in their efforts to make accommodation with local elites and avoid social unrest, or, alternatively, they punished those masters who proved hostile by threatening to emancipate their slaves. As a result, like elsewhere in Africa, slavery in Algeria was hardly “abolished” but withered slowly.

However, the history of abolition and the end of slavery in Algeria has several unique features that set it apart from the experience of the rest of Africa. These differences are linked in part to differing French plans for Algeria, which was to be a colony of settlement as well as the challenges the French faced establishing their hegemony in the first two decades of the occupation, a time of significant armed Algerian resistance. This essay examines some of these differences in a study of French plans in the 1840s to engage directly in the slave trade by purchasing thousands of slaves from Saharan merchants and bringing them to Algeria. Further-reaching than accommodating indigenous forms of slavery, this plan would have put slaves

3. These numbers, the result of an 1845 survey, are rough estimates. Algerians skillfully concealed wealth from the state's eyes, before and after 1830, and slaves incorporated into the household were almost impossible to cense. “Question de l'esclavage” signé Azessa de Montgravier, Capitaine d'artillerie, attaché aux Affaires Arabes de la Division d'Oran [n.a., n.d. ca. 1848.]. Centre des archives d'Outre mer [hereafter CAOM] 12 H 50.
4. This project began with an anonymous 1905 report denouncing the widespread existence of slavery in Algeria, including slave sales in French market places “400 kilomètres d'Alger”, slave owning by Aurélie Picard-Tijani at the zawiya of Kourdane, and the complicity of the French administration in returning and punishing fugitive slaves. “Note”, Cabinet, Gouverneur général de l'Algérie [Hereafter GGA] 2 juin 1905, CAOM 12 H 50. In the newly formed Territoires du Sud, this abolition effort was marked by the law of 15 juillet 1906, abolishing slave sales.

at the service of European colonialism. In the confused period of the 1830s and 1840s, there were many discussions about making Algeria a slave-based colony, producing exotic crops on the Caribbean model. Beyond the fact that Algeria's Mediterranean climate was poorly suited to such projects, they foundered on the fact that French-organized slave sales were illegal under 1831 legislation restricting the slave trade. (Although the practice was rare, some French citizens and soldiers did purchase individual slaves for domestic labor and concubines up to the end of the nineteenth century)⁵. Nevertheless, starting in 1840, colonial officials individuals at the Ministry of War, the Prime Minister's office, and General Bugeaud, the soon-to-be named Governor General of Algeria approved plans to purchase thousands of captives from Saharan slave traders, captives who would be brought from parts of sub-Saharan Africa (mainly the Sokoto Califate, Borno, and the Niger Bend region) to Algeria. Here after nominal liberation, they would provide labor and military service as servile people indentured to the French state.

This plan to import slaves was not a simple expression of colonial *realpolitik*, a calculated attempt to use slavery in the interest of colonial order. Nor was it, strictly speaking, an *ad-hoc* response to the labor problem. Instead, this project addressed concerns more or less unique to Algeria and revolved around what became known as the "indigenous question", what policy to adopt towards Algerians and, ultimately, how to create a colony of settlement in a country that was already settled. Efforts to win Algerians over to the French cause or crush them on the battlefield, the two most favored solutions to the indigenous question, had led to failure by 1840. Galvanized by the Emir Abd el Kader and a host of lesser-known local figures, wide segments of Algerian society refused French rule and opted for armed resistance. This resistance derailed colonial efforts, even provoking calls to evacuate the colony. Facing this problem, some planners considered importing enslaved sub-Saharan people, "*nègres*" or "*noirs*" from across the desert, as a solution to the indigenous question. They hoped that these people, bought as slaves, would help build and police the colony. Moreover and most significantly, the authors of these proposals argued that Africans bought as slaves might displace and even *replace* the Arabic—and Berber—speaking populations of Algeria. Supposedly docile, hard working, and healthy, slaves of color would make successful "settlers" who, loyal to the French, would drive out the troublesome people of Algeria.

5. This was common among troops stationed in the Algerian Sahara who bought young women for domestic labor and as concubines. The last documented case of French slave ownership in Algeria is that of Alexandre Joly, an professor at the Madresa of Algiers, who returned from the Sahara in 1900 with Berika, a 10-year-old girl originally from Timbuktu, whom he purchased for 250 francs. Préfet d'Alger to Gouverneur Général, 9 juillet 1900 #4769, CAOM 4 H 16.

Colonial Abolition in Algeria

In April 1848, the Second Republic abolished slavery in all French colonies, including Algeria. The law marked the second time France had outlawed slavery in its territories, and unlike the 1794 attempt, this abolition was definitive (Dorigny 1995; Jennings 2000; Martin 1948; Schmidt 1994). However, in many parts of French-controlled Algeria, especially among the Algero-Saharan societies in the expanding southern territories, freedom came gradually or not at all (Nicolaisen & Nicolaisen 1997: 597). Many of the reasons are to be found in the negative reaction of colonial officials to the abolition law. For the most part, they were military men who prided themselves on their pragmatism and ability to find simple solutions to complex problems. When they learned of abolition, and early in the decade it was widely understood that abolition in all French colonies was pending, administrators scoffed at the idealism of abolitionists, people they called pejoratively “philanthropists”. They predicted great upheavals if the letter of the abolition law was enforced in Algeria. For example, when he was confronted with abolitionist plans as Algeria’s Governor General, Bugeaud found the whole project a waste of effort. He expressed his contempt when he learned of an 1844 call for abolition from the African Institute in Paris.

“Il serait impossible d’exiger d’un pareil gouvernement la surveillance vigilante qu’il faudrait pour empêcher l’arrivée des nègres par les caravanes du désert et leur vente sur les marchés de l’Algérie. Il faudrait pour obtenir cela plus que l’armée de fonctionnaires grands et petits que vous avez en France, et alors je vous le demande où irons-nous pour la dépense?”⁶.

Bugeaud expressed his opposition to abolition in his standard rhetoric, a sardonic retort that masked its cunning with a logic of economy and cost, utility and will. Claiming the mantle of a realist, Bugeaud argued that it was too difficult to undertake abolition in Algeria, a country at war. Others adopted the same logic and added that the indemnities to be paid to masters (envisioned as part of an abolition decree concerned mainly with French slave owners in the Caribbean and Indian Ocean) would be burdensome, adding to the already high price of the Algerian occupation. In the Division of Oran alone, one officer calculated reparations at more than two and a half million francs⁷.

In sum, administrators in Algeria felt little enthusiasm for a measure far from their own interests and aspirations. Therefore they did what they had learned to do in such situations, they equivocated. Prominent voices

6. Bugeaud to M. le Duc de Montmorency, président de l’Institut d’Afrique, 4 octobre 1844, CAOM 2 EE 10.

7. A reparation price of 428 francs each was used by the analyst; the total population of slaves in the Division was estimated at 6,277. Montgravier, “Question de l’esclavage”, *op. cit.*

took a strong stance against slavery publicly, while in internal correspondence they counseled patience and explored ways around abolition. In several important cases, ranking officers directly ordered subordinates to turn a blind eye to slavery, and in others they told local administrators to keep the abolition decree secret and thereby keep slaves ignorant of their legal right to freedom⁸. Decades after abolition became law, however, many administrators recognized that it made a useful tool, especially along the Saharan frontier where France had many interests and aspirations but no practical way to enforce its will. Here military administrators used abolition as a tool of accommodation, a way to forge relationships with local elites. In these arrangements, French administrators granted Algero-Saharan slave masters and merchants permission to trade in slaves and keep those they owned, and in some cases, the French administration even returned fugitive slaves⁹. In exchange, slave owners and merchants provided liaison services and intelligence on far-off regions¹⁰. Conversely, in cases where slaveholders refused French overtures, French officials fully enforced the law. They extended protection and freedom to runaway slaves and sent word back to the still independent oases that France was an ally in the slaves' struggle for freedom¹¹. The goal was to intensify conflict between masters and slaves, as well as strike at the material interests of elites. Thus from 1848 to 1906, the military administration in Algeria applied the abolition law unevenly and instrumentally in an effort to make abolition serve as a tool of colonial power.

The Indigenous Question in Algeria

Thus far, the Algerian case closely resembles the history of European abolition efforts in the rest of colonial Africa (Botte 2000; Klein 1993, 1998; Miers & Klein 1999; Miers & Roberts 1988; Renault 1972; Roberts 1987). And like those African countries under colonial rule south of the Sahara, Algeria's slaves were caught in the classic double bind of colonial modernity, exemplified by what Ann Laura Stoler (2006: 140) recently called imperial "states of exception". The question of exceptions found its own expression in Algeria. From the moment they arrived in 1830, the French confronted what they came to know as the indigenous question, the problem

8. Captain Leselle, "Les noirs du Souf", Manuscript s.d. [1955] CAOM 20 X 1. For the blind eye order (literally "*fermer les yeux*") see the 1856 case of Colonel Naigeon, Commander of Tiaret, CAOM 1 H 27.
9. A noteworthy case that was decided by the Governor General himself was Jules Cambon's 1896 order to return runaway slaves from In Salah who had sought French protection. GGA to Division d'Alger, n.d. [ca. mai 1896], CAOM 22 H 54.
10. These arrangements are explained in Benjamin Claude BROWER (2009).
11. See the efforts of Colonel Dider, Commander of Ghardia, to welcome fugitive slaves from El Guérara in the 1890s, CAOM 22 H 38.

of what to do with Algeria's people. Pundits suggested a host of solutions over the course of the century, but three broad currents of opinion emerged. As summarized by Paul Azan (1903) in his intervention on the indigenous question, these were *l'assimilation*, *le refoulement*, and *l'extermination*.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the colonial project was characterized by improvisation and limited French designs. This was the period of the "restricted occupation", the 1834 plan adopted by Louis-Philippe, which limited French presence to Algeria's major Mediterranean ports and their immediate hinterland. During this period, most policy makers saw their relations with Algerians in simple terms as those between victors and vanquished. Therefore, although the 1830 capitulation suggested some sort of *modus vivendi* with Algerians based upon non-interference with cultural and social institutions such as religion, as well as respect for Algerian property rights, there was little serious French policymaking that sought to produce a field of social action based on consensual rather than coercive relationships. French *démarches* towards Algerians were limited to establishing clientele relationships with a handful of Algerian elites who might be useful agents of French rule. While much early policy consciously echoed Bonaparte's expedition to Egypt, the response to the indigenous question in Algeria reveals an ambivalent relation to the 1798 project. Unlike in Egypt, there were very few French policy makers who thought that Algerians would be "regenerated" and led back on the historical stage in Bonaparte's portentous understanding of the civilizing mission (Laurens 1989, 2004). Rather, most envisioned that Algerians would simply feel the full force of an imperial *civitas*, haughty, supercilious, and thoroughly Hobbsian. This would force them to concede French hegemony¹² in practice, this meant that a heavy military presence would assure order near Algeria's principal cities, and the most distant hinterlands would be turned over to allied local elites, feudal warlords as the French saw them (Levallois 2001: 203-254). This system would be backed by occasional acts of spectacular violence that would shock Algerians and inspire awe in French omnipotence and thereby guarantee peace. In classic military logic, planners in Algeria thought that victory on the field of battle would bring resignation and ensure calm. Their vision of lasting peace in Algeria was that of an armed camp (Bugeaud 1847).

This placed enormous strains on the French state. It required garrisoning a large and costly military force in Algeria and even under the restricted occupation, the colony's security costs vastly exceeded its revenues. Moreover, social peace remained elusive throughout the 1830s. In the end, this solution to the indigenous question was unsustainable. The November 1839 massacre of European settlers in the Mitidja Valley by the forces of the

12. Surprisingly enough, it was Bourbon commanders who most clearly expressed Bonaparte's librist language. See the Declaration of 10 May 1830 in DESPREZ (1831: 55-56).

Emir Abd el Kader provoked an outcry in Algiers and Paris and a readiness on the part of the government to make a major military commitment in Algeria (Schefer 1916)¹³. This escalation brought with it plans for an expanded community of French settlers. If great efforts were to be made to keep Algeria French, it was thought, these sacrifices could only be made good by transforming the land into a thriving model of European civilization represented by a settler colony, “*une colonie de peuplement*” (Buheiry 1989: 13-32; Sessions 2005: 129-136). This change of events fundamentally altered the terms of the indigenous question. Whereas under the restricted occupation, the indigenous question was limited to concerns of security and social peace, establishing a settler colony opened much larger issues about the control of Algeria’s land and labor.

It was at this point that arguments about “extermination” gained traction, arguments that in turn informed French attitudes about abolition and the possibility of using slaves to solve the indigenous question. French authors had been writing about the eventual need to exterminate or expel Algerians since the early years of the occupation. If France was to succeed in Algeria, wrote one author in 1838, there would have to be a “*massacre général*” (Pignel 1836: xi). Later, as French troops began the long and difficult job of “pacifying” the Algerian interior, destroying the social and economic fabric of rural society, local commanders wrote that the indigenous question would be solved only when they had “*exterminé*” Algerians, “*jusqu’aux derniers*”, as one officer put it in 1843 (Maspero 1993: 174). Others called for “*refoulement*”, or expelling Algerians from colonial territory. For some, this was a variation on extermination, whereby French troops would drive Algerians into the Sahara where it was understood they would perish (Bugeaud 1948: 69). While others imagined that Algerians could be forced to flee to neighboring Arab territories (Villacrose 1875: 144). Both options were informed by discourses originating in the emerging fields of scientific racism and evolutionary ethnography, which anticipated a demographic collapse of indigenous people subject to European colonization (Brantlinger 1995).

While resolving the security issue and opened lands to French settlers, these options opened a new problem, that of labor. If Algerians were eliminated who might build the colony’s infrastructure and work its fields?

13. In the spring of 1840 the Minister of War asked for a 20 millions francs supplement to pay for expanded military operations in Algeria and to increase troop strength to 100,000 men. On 5 November 1840, Louis-Philippe made a speech to parliament calling for a decisive engagement in Algeria. See comments of the Minister of War at the Chambre des députés, séance du 15 janvier, *Moniteur Universel*, 16 janvier 1840, no. 16, p. 107; and “Rapport du Ministre de la Guerre” presented to Chambre des députés, séance du 29 avril 1840, *Moniteur Universel*, 30 avril 1840, no. 121, pp. 874-877.

There was far more to do than could be accomplished by French laborers, even if they would one-day settle the colony and make it prosperous. At this point, French colonial officials looked to the polices of the Ottoman Regencies, whose leaders, like the French, had had to deal with unrest in Algeria's rural hinterland. In particular, the Ottoman *sürgün*, state-directed forced migration, appealed to French planners. Widely used in the eastern Mediterranean, a variation deployed in Ottoman territories of the Maghreb was the resettlement of client groups, in particular Africans of color, among recalcitrant populations in the northern Mediterranean lands. Many French planners found this policy particularly intriguing (Aucapitaine 1859). In it they saw the chance to cut once and for all the Gordian knot of the indigenous question. It was a simple matter to combine the logic of the Ottoman *sürgün* with the discourses of extermination and expulsion. Might not the ultimate solution to the problem, they asked, be found the day when they had an Algeria without Algerians?

African Slaves, Algerian Colonists: Eugène Subtil

Bugeaud's contemptuous 1844 response to abolition cited above, "*l'armée de fonctionnaires grands et petits*" that he would need to undertake abolition in Algeria, is ironic given his previous thinking about slavery. Only four years earlier, when he was positioning himself for the Governor General position, Bugeaud had not seen slavery in terms of pragmatic accommodation with the *status quo* as his 1844 comment implies. Indeed, in 1840 Bugeaud had worked on projects to find ways to *increase* the traffic in African slaves to Algeria.

These plans began in the winter of 1839 when an obscure individual named Eugène Mathieu Subtil undertook a two-month voyage to the Fezzan, an important Saharan crossroads linking the Chad basin with the Mediterranean at Tripoli. The Fezzan had been in political turmoil since 1835 when the Ottomans seized Tripoli from Qaramanli rulers and then began to wrest control of trans-Saharan trade from autonomous Saharan groups (Cordell 1985). This struggle opened opportunities for European powers, and Subtil, who came from that shady class of informal agents—adventurers and opportunists—that played such an important part in shaping colonial policy in Africa and the Middle East, saw advantages for himself and for France.

While in the desert, Subtil met with local leaders who were leading Saharan populations against the Ottomans. In particular, he established close relations with Abd al-Jalil, leader of the powerful Arabic speaking confederation, the Awlad Sulayman. Abd al-Jalil extended an offer of alliance to Subtil, whom he took to be a representative of the French government. In return for arms and assistance, Abd al-Jalil promised to open Saharan trade routes to French commerce, catapulting French merchants into the commercial centers of Borno ahead of their British rivals. Moreover,

he pledged to divert trade westward from Tripoli and Tunis to French-controlled Algerian markets. Finally, the Awlad Sulayman were a formidable military force and could support French operations as far away as Egypt. In all, they represented a valuable ally at a time when problems loomed with Britain, the Ottoman Empire, and Egypt¹⁴. Therefore, Subtil embraced the offer. As soon as he returned to Paris in late December 1839/early January 1840, he made the rounds of government offices to pitch the deal. Subtil was received with discretion, but officials warmly welcomed his project behind closed doors. For his part, General Bugeaud, then engaged in an ambitious project to replace Marshal Valée as Governor General of Algeria (Bois 1997; Sullivan 1983), found the offer particularly appealing¹⁵. Trade was stagnant in eastern Algeria, and Bugeaud counted on revived Saharan commerce to boost the economic life of its capital, Constantine, which was still struggling after the 1837 sack by French troops¹⁶. The War Ministry was equally enthusiastic. At this time of great international tensions, when the “Eastern Question” became the “Eastern Crisis”, France could use armed allies like the Awlad Sulayman. The War Ministry was especially happy to work with informal agents like Subtil who gave them a safe margin of deniability and secrecy. “L’homme entreprenant et courageux qui seul, sans protection, a pu pénétrer un pays inconnu et aborder un chef dont le nom même était ignoré, mérite d’être encouragé par le Gouvernement de son pays auquel ses efforts peuvent un jour profiter”, wrote one analyst at the War Ministry¹⁷. Such glowing support earned Subtil the *Légion d’honneur* (awarded November 1840), and his plans went forward easily. He began preparations for a return trip to close the deal with Abd al-Jalil in the winter of 1840-1841.

One point to be resolved, however, was what goods Saharan traders might offer. While French merchants would be happy to sell their manufactured goods in central Africa, what could they expect back in exchange? Some of the locally produced cotton textiles were of interest, but apart from Saharan dates, Subtil could not identify anything of great value to French buyers. Here his plan took a curious twist. Subtil suggested that slaves could be imported to Algeria where they might be used for labor and military service. Citing Muhammad Ali’s efforts to raise an army of slaves in Egypt, Subtil argued that African slaves would make excellent soldiers and workers in Algeria. Although clearly contrary to the French state’s public

14. Subtil described him as a French Abd el Kader. Eugène Subtil, “Mémoire sur l’utilité d’établir des relations entre Abd el Gelil, chef du Fezzan, et la France”, s.d. [ca. 1840], CAOM 1 E 184.

15. Subtil to M. le Ministère Soult, Président du Conseil undated [ca. prior to January-February 1840], CAOM 1 E 184.

16. Undated, un-addressed note signed by Subtil, CAOM 1 E 184.

17. Anonymous analysis of Subtil’s project: dated 6 novembre 1840, letterhead Ministre de la Guerre, Direction des affaires d’Algérie, 1^{er} bureau, CAOM 1 E 184.

commitment to end the African slave trade, the War Ministry agreed. “Si la caravane amène des Nègres esclaves du Soudan, jeunes, solides et en état de porter les armes, ces noirs seront rachetés par l’administration, pour être affranchis”¹⁸. The price for the slaves must not exceed 200 francs a head, the report continued, and they should include few women and children, and none over thirty-five years of age. The scale of the project was important. The War Ministry was ready to purchase 4,500 men and 500 women and children on the first order and confirmed that if this succeeded, they were ready for more. “Si les noirs livrés et rachetés paraissent susceptibles d’un bon service militaire, on pourra convenir d’une livraison prochaine et plus considérable”¹⁹. A group of 5,000 slaves was in itself a huge order for all parties involved. It should be remembered that French vessels annually carried just over twice as many people to slavery in the Americas in the eighteenth century, and 5,000 slaves was nearly double the entire amount crossing the Libyan desert during the mid-nineteenth century (Lovejoy 1983: 48; Austen 1992: 227). Subtil was undaunted, however. At 200 francs a head, he wrote, Abd al-Jalil will furnish “autant de missions que nous lui en demanderons”²⁰.

The plan was good news to many. “[A]u bout de deux ou trois ans”, Subtil promised, “on aurait une troupe armée, bien instruite [...]”²¹. Bugeaud himself was particularly enthusiastic. His bid for the Governor General’s position had been made on the promise of fresh solutions to the intractable problems in Algeria. In addition to a robust military effort, these included developing new forms of settlements. Bugeaud proposed military colonization. Inspired by the Roman model, he envisioned a system of militarized agricultural colonies at the backbone of French Algeria (Bugeaud 1847). A system of self-sufficient military outposts would not only make Algeria economically productive, but, more importantly, it would finally bring order to the troubled colony by establishing a permanent military grid across the interior. Military colonization would, however, drastically increase labor needs: agricultural and construction work would be added to soldiers’ security and police duties. The army in Algeria, over 70,000 men strong in 1840, was already stretched thin. Anticipating this problem, Bugeaud entreated parliament in 1840, “Cherchez donc des colons partout; prenez-les, coûte que coûte, prenez-les dans les villes, dans les campagnes, chez vos voisins, car il vous en faudra 150,000 dans peu d’années” (Bugeaud 1948: 78). The tone of this comment makes it clear that Bugeaud did not count on fulfilling his labor needs through a patriotic *levée en masse*. And over the entire project loomed the basic question whether the special social

18. Unsigned, undated, un-addressed report on Ministre de Guerre letterhead, CAOM 1 E 184.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Note undated, un-addressed, signed Subtil, CAOM 1 E 184.

21. *Ibid.*

and political demands of military colonization could be met by French civilians. Could such people, descendants of the 1789 generation, many of whom had taken to the streets in 1830 to topple the Bourbons, be expected to submit to the sort of authoritarian regime demanded by military colonies?

Thus, behind the indigenous question in Algeria loomed another, France's "social question". Bugeaud had great contempt for the poor of the cities and saw them as unsuitable candidates for the work of colonization. "On ne saurait espérer cela de cette partie des populations d'Europe qui fuient en Afrique la misère qui les accablent [*sic*] dans leur pays. Si ces hommes sont pauvres, c'est ordinairement parce qu'ils sont paresseux ou vicieux" (Bugeaud 1838: 17). He was more at ease with rural people and shared a conservative vision of a French peasantry, stalwart and apolitical. But Bugeaud had living memory of the Great Fear and later in 1848 would himself narrowly escaped the wrath of French peasants at La Durantie, his estate in the Dordogne (Corbin 1992: 9). As early as 1837, Bugeaud expressed such doubts in French colonists when he wrote that Algeria needed, "une population guerrière, habituée aux travaux des champs, organisée à peu près comme le sont les tribus arabes, cultivant et défendant le sol" (Bugeaud 1982: 194). French civilians could hardly be expected to do this. But African slaves fit the profile. And the five thousand ordered by the Ministry of War promised a good first start on Bugeaud's needs. Moreover, the project was inexpensive. Each slave cost only 200 francs. "Cette légère prime", Subtil assured, "serait bien vite regagnée par l'État grâce au service de ces nègres comme cultivateurs"²².

As hopeful as planners were, this first project came to naught. Subtil disappeared after returning to Libya in 1841, and when he resurfaced three years later, Abd al-Jalil was dead, ending plans for a Saharan alliance. Still Subtil persisted. In 1844, he sent the Ministry of War a revised project. Like in 1840, unfree labor was central to his schemes, but he recast the terms of servitude significantly from the earlier proposal. Rather than encouraging the French state to purchase slaves outright, Subtil now argued that the slave trade *per se* no longer existed. British efforts had brought it to an end, he insisted. Now the people who crossed the Sahara were not captives bound for slavery, but people fleeing wars in their homelands. As he wrote to Minister of War,

"Il arrive souvent à la suite de ces guerres que des familles persécutées, que des tribus entières qui ne sont pas assez fortes pour résister à leurs ennemis émigrent sous la protection des grandes caravanes, et viennent dans les États barbaresques qui leur offrent plus de garanties de sécurité et de liberté pour fonder des petites colonies"²³.

22. Note undated, un-addressed, signed Subtil, CAOM 1 E 184.

23. Subtil, "Mémoire sur la marche des grandes caravanes de l'Afrique centrale et sur les moyens à employer pour les faire arriver à Constantine, avec un supplément sur la colonisation de l'Algérie par les nègres libres de l'Afrique centrale", 15 juin 1844, Service historique de l'Armée de Terre (hereafter SHAT) 1 H 229.

People who had been slaves in 1840 thus became refugees. They lived in settlements outside of Tripoli, and they had founded some twenty villages in the Libyan desert, Subtil assured. The same situation existed south of Tunis, where Subtil noted, “on trouve plusieurs villages fondés par des tribus nègres, venant du Soudan”. These villages were an important economic resource for Ottoman authorities. “Les Pachas ont toujours favorisé l’établissement, sur leur territoire, de ces peuplades tranquilles et laborieuses”, Subtil wrote. “Ils leur ont accordé des terres qu’ils cultivent avec beaucoup de soin et dont ils payent exactement la dîme.” These new settlers farmed, did domestic work, and labored on special *corvées* for the state. Although “*longues et pénibles*” such work was performed consistently with a “docilité et une résignation qui contrastent singulièrement avec le caractère turbulent et insoumis des tribus arabes”²⁴.

This was an especially important point, and it was here that Subtil tapped into the fears and anxieties surrounding the indigenous question to advance his project. “Ce qui est arrivé à Tripoli arriverait en Algérie si nous étions en rapport avec les grandes caravanes de l’Afrique centrale”, Subtil promised. These “settlers” could be placed in fortified villages to guard the frontiers with Morocco, Tunisia, and the Sahara where they would form “gardiens intrépides, intéressés à défendre l’entrée contre nos ennemis”. “Il est très probable qu’en reconnaissant la douceur et l’équité de notre domination”, Subtil continued, “qu’en trouvant chez nous des garanties pour leur vie et leurs propriétés, des familles nègres viendraient s’établir dans nos possessions et fonder des villages qui s’agrandiraient bientôt par de nombreux émigrants.” One day, Subtil promised, “Nous aurions des alliés fidèles et dévoués, des gardiens intrépides et courageux, car ces hommes doux et pacifiques dans leurs relations, défendant leur territoire avec une opiniâtreté héroïque lorsque ils sont attaqués”. Such words resonated strongly at this time. Bugeaud’s struggle against Abd el Kader and other resistance movements was in its third year, and despite notable victories such as the 1843 capture of the Emir’s *smala*, the conflict in Algeria had taken Sisyphean overtones. Algerians, it seemed, might never renounce armed struggle. On the other hand, there were the people south of the Sahara, “*le nègre libre*”, who, Subtil wrote, “est naturellement bon, fidèle, dévoué et reconnaissant envers son bienfaiteur”²⁵. They were, in short, everything the “Arabs” were not. “Si donc nous voulons contenir ces populations fanatiques [‘les Arabes’]” he warned, “nous devons agir continuellement sur elles, leur faire sentir à chaque instant notre force et notre autorité, car la crainte d’un châtement immédiat peut seule les maintenir dans le respect et l’obéissance [...]”²⁶.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*

Freed Slaves, Disappearing Arabs: Eugène Bodichon

Subtil's second plan to solve Algeria's labor problem with a workforce of African "refugees" went nowhere, and on 29 June 1844 the project was officially rejected²⁷. Whereas in 1840 the government approved of the plan to open Algeria to slave caravans, four years later abolition was clearly on the horizon and colonial officials like the Saharan specialist Ernest Carette, who reviewed Subtil's project, were not duped by the real status of most people traveling north across the Sahara²⁸. Nevertheless, colonial planners still faced the same problems, labor and security, as they had all along. And Subtil's words underscoring the "devotion" of African slaves of color in contrast to Algeria's "belicose" populations packed a powerful charge well into the mid-1840s. Nearly fifteen years in the making, the French colony in Algeria had seen little peace and cost enormous sums. Between 1831-1840, France had spent a total of 341, 221, 125 francs in Algeria²⁹, and by 1845 the military was spending nearly 8 million francs annually for military fortifications and buildings alone (Ministère de la Guerre 1846: 49). Added to this was the fact that by 1845 it took nearly 100,000 soldiers garrisoned in Algeria to keep the peace, and nearly 74,000 of them had lost their lives since 1830 (Kateb 2001: 38). Therefore when Subtil's project finally came to light in 1846, published in the *Revue de l'Orient*, it struck a cord among readers interested by the thought of settling the most difficult and insecure parts of the Algerian interior with the sort of loyal and hard-working "colonists" that Subtil described (Subtil 1846a, 1846b).

Dr. Eugène Bodichon, for one, was inspired by Subtil's vision of a traffic of docile people crossing the desert to Algeria, and it allowed him to articulate a particularly violent resolution to the indigenous question. Born near Nantes in 1810, Bodichon studied medicine in Paris during the politically turbulent years following the Revolution of 1830. He was attracted to republican circles and was friends with the socialist leader Louis Blanc. Shortly after finishing his studies, Bodichon moved to Algiers and set up a medical practice. Here, he earned a reputation as a philanthropist by caring for the poor free of charge. Bodichon was also a committed republican and a champion of progress. Later, he expressed his political convictions with his 1857 marriage to the famous British feminist Barbara Leigh Smith, and the couple experimented with a sort of independent marriage, with Mme Bodichon spending half the year in Britain pursuing her own social projects (Bodichon 1972)³⁰. An advocate of democracy and women's rights

27. Margin note signed [illegible], 29 juin 1844.

28. Capitaine E. Carette, "Rapport sur deux mémoires de M. Subtil relatifs au commerce de l'Afrique centrale", Paris, 13 septembre 1846, SHAT 1 H 229.

29. *Moniteur Universel*, 30 avril 1840, no. 121.

30. For the role of Algeria on the feminist thinking of Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon see CHERRY (2002).

in an era dominated by political and social conservatism, Bodichon was one of the most important and influential members of Algiers' narrow circle of progressives.

He was, however, no friend of the Algerians. Bodichon frequently offered his thoughts on the indigenous question and colonial matters in the local press. His first publications sketched favorable portraits of Algerians and an optimistic vision of Franco-Algerian relations. On an 1838 mission led by the influential *savant* Adrien Berbrugger, Bodichon met Abd el Kader and was struck by the Emir's intelligence and foresight, and he predicted that French and Algerians would have a prosperous future together. However, when hostilities recommenced in 1839 Bodichon turned definitively against the Emir and all Algerians. His antipathy for Algerians even caused this staunch republican to cross political fences, and he rallied to the harsh rhetoric of people like General Bugeaud, defending the conservative general's belief that force alone could bring peace. If the Algerian colony was to survive, Bodichon wrote, extreme solutions to the indigenous question would have to be found.

Bodichon's thought radicalized rapidly in the following decade. In the 1840s, he began a prolific period of writing, producing a series of articles that delved into nascent theories of scientific racism and arguments anticipating the die off of "primitive races" (Bodichon 1847). Known to researchers today as the theory of "auto-genocide", these discourses envisioned the eventual die off or "disappearance" of indigenous people (Brantlinger 1995). Pushed to the margins by European global expansion, they would suffer a demographic catastrophe. While he was attracted by the way these theories resolved the indigenous question, they left Bodichon with the prospect of an empty wasteland in Algeria. Compounding the problem was the fact that the same ideas that slated indigenous peoples for destruction also posited that Europeans were inadaptably to the "African" climate of Algeria (Boudin 1853). Bodichon himself concurred based on his medical experience and opened an important collection of essays with the observation that "La mort vient vite en Algérie" for European settlers (Bodichon 1851).

Faced with these concerns, Bodichon considered Subtil's project. The explorer was correct, Bodichon reasoned: for the moment, only indigenous settlers would take root in Algeria. He agreed that such colonists could be best found by diverting captives from the Saharan slave trade and directing them towards Algeria. Here they would be legally emancipated and put to work on the land. "Ils nous livreraient les bras qui nous manquent dans l'exécution des travaux agricoles", Bodichon (1847: 124) wrote. Unlike European colonists, who fell ill at alarming rates, the slaves were acclimatized to the harshest of African climates. Once established, he continued, they would form a core of hearty colonists, productive and tireless. Moreover, grateful for their freedom, they would embrace Christianity and French ways and become enduring allies of France's cause in Africa.

“Dans cinquante ans d’ici, plus de 100,000 noirs, chrétiens et francisés, implantés solidement en Afrique, nous aiderons à former l’équilibre contre la race arabe”, he wrote (*ibid.*: 128).

Bodichon was so confident in the project that he speculated Algeria might prove to be a lure for oppressed Africans around the world. “Si les villages des nègres réussissent, les noirs libres, les hommes de couleur des États américains adopteraient bientôt l’Algérie pour patrie. Car ici, l’esclavage n’existant pas, et l’Europe étant si près, ils n’auraient pas l’appréhension d’être traités en *mineurs*, à cause de la couleur de leur peau” (*ibid.*: 127). Therefore, this project was the most important way that Bodichon thought his country might fulfill its larger “mandat révolutionnaire et démocratique” in North Africa.

This rhetoric of freedom and liberation for slaves developed in conjunction with a frankly murderous one for Algerians. This was partially expressed in terms of auto-genocide. He cited the case of American Indians to make his point for Algerians. Although Indians had been, in Bodichon’s opinion, benevolently approached by Europeans, “ils ont couru si rapidement vers l’extinction de leur race”. Of a population that once numbered 16 million, Bodichon counted only 2 million surviving in all of North America (*ibid.*: 145). The same thing was happening, “à Tahiti, à la Nouvelle-Hollande, à la Nouvelle-Zélande, sur d’autres îles de l’Australie et de la Polynésie [...]” (*ibid.*: 146). Everywhere that indigenous peoples came into contact with Europeans, Bodichon wrote, they “fondent comme neige au soleil” (*ibid.*). For Bodichon, this was an ethno-biological fact, and it would produce the same results in Algeria, where the French were like “pionniers en Amérique, des Anglais en Océanie et dans l’Afrique australe” (*ibid.*: 151). However, unlike some theories of auto-genocide situated in North America, such as the literary narratives popularized by James Fenimore Cooper (1826) or François-René de Chateaubriand (1805), Bodichon had no interest in constructing heroic, if archaic, virtues for the “last of” the Algerians. And he gave strength and form to his eliminationist arguments with the crudest sort of denigrating caricatures of Arabs. “[L]es Moghrébins ne sont dominés que par la terreur”, he wrote. “Supprimez-la, ils s’abandonnent à leur impulsion naturelle: les insurrections et les rapines se multiplient” (Bodichon 1847: 133). As he put it, Arabs were a block to progress. “Ils restent stationnaires en face de la civilisation, et vivent en hostilité perpétuelle contre tout ce qui n’appartient point à leur race” (*ibid.*: 149).

Such feelings prompted Bodichon to ask his readers to reflect on what, after all, is an Arab... “Qu’est-il en effet?”.

“Il est le droit du plus fort et le droit du talion, l’intolérance religieuse et l’isolement des coreligionnaires. Il consacre l’esclavage, la polygamie, la castration, l’infibulation des femmes, le despotisme, l’asservissement à l’intérieur et l’hostilité à l’extérieur. C’est pourquoi nous devons le combattre, nous chrétiens qui représentons

la prépondérance de la morale, qui rejetons les eunuques et les sérails, et qui portons avec nous la confraternité entre tous les peuples, la liberté pour le fort et le faible, et la bienveillance universelle" (*ibid.*: 142).

Borrowing freely from old discourses of oriental despotism, these arguments went further (Valensi 1987). In this passage, Bodichon created an exclusionary category of who is human and drew bounded communities dividing humanity, represented on one side by those who represented Bodichon's gloss on 1789, and on the other by the frightful "Arab", archaic and violent. Never departing from the terms of republican humanism, Bodichon effectively stripped Algerians of their humanity.

Moreover, Bodichon's writings expressed the developing scientific grammar of modern racism. He claimed there was an essential, racial incompatibility between the French and Algerians. Certainly he rejected the Saint-Simonian "fusion des races" (an influential model structuring much discourse about the indigenous question) as absurd (d'Eichthal 1839), but so too did he find unworkable the sort of assimilation of Algerians based on their resignation and fatalism proposed by military leaders like General Bugeaud and Eugène Daumas, head of the indigenous affairs office. (Both thought that accepting their defeat, Algerians would assimilate as subaltern subjects. In 1853 (*avant propos*, n.p.) Daumas wrote that if Algerians were to disappear, it would be "au milieu des nôtres". For Bodichon, any sort of coexistence was impossible. Indeed, the mere physical proximity of Algerians would compromise France's future in North Africa. Arabs were like a "ver rongeur", Bodichon wrote, which invaded the fragile roots of the civilization France had planted in Algeria and impeded its growth. As he put it, "Il faut à l'arbre de la civilisation européenne une terre assez vaste pour qu'il puisse s'y développer nonobstant les tempêtes; pour qu'ensuite il étende ses branches jusqu'au fond de l'Afrique barbare. Or, si nous n'y prenons garde, l'élément arabe, tel qu'un ver rongeur, s'insinuera dans cet arbre et, bien que cet arbre ait été arrosé et de sueur et de sang, il restera chétif et infécond" (Bodichon 1847: 128-129).

At the heart of the problem was an unalterable racial divide separating Algerians from the French. Bodichon sketched it in zoological terms,

"Le chien, le cheval, le bœuf, à l'état de nature, sont instinctivement les ennemis du chien, du cheval, du bœuf apprivoisés. C'est une vérité démontrée par nombre d'observations. Il en est ainsi de l'homme sauvage par rapport à l'homme civilisé. Le premier éprouve au contact, à la vue du second, une antipathie instinctive, une aversion naturelle qui tôt ou tard dégénère en haine. Ainsi les Moghrébins seront nos ennemis naturels, parce qu'ils seront barbares et que nous serons civilisés" (*ibid.*: 132).

The contrast Bodichon drew between this barrier that separated the Arab from the French, and, on the other hand, the "grateful" slave-colonist, could hardly be more striking. And he used it to shift into contemplations of

extermination. Given the intractability of the Arabs, peace would come to Algeria only when, he wrote “il n’y ait plus d’Arabes sur la surface du Tell” (*ibid.*: 128).

“Si, au lieu de huit cent mille Arabes qui, en Algérie, s’assassinent, se pillent, tuent les prisonniers, les naufragés, font un brigandage perpétuel sur les routes, sodomisent, ne produisent rien, laissent les plaines se changer en marais pestilentiels; enfin, si, au lieu de cette race, qui outrage la nature et l’humanité par son état social, si, au lieu de ces huit cent mille, il n’y en avait pas un seul, en vérité, la nature et la civilisation y gagneraient” (*ibid.*: 150).

Or, as he put chillingly,

“Ici, son extinction est donc un bien” (*ibid.*: 151).

Fully disentangling the web of Bodichon’s thought, accounting for its impact, and tracing its influence is beyond the scope of this essay. The reader will certainly recognize that his texts should be figured among the early core of racist theories that were synthesized a decade later by Arthur de Gobineau in his *Essai sur l’inégalité des races humaines* (1853-1855), or social Darwinists *avant la lettre* like Robert Knox (1850) who authored the dangerous work, *The Races of Men* (Le Cour Grandmaison 2005). What does concern us directly here is to signal the way that slavery, abolition, and a genocidal solution to the indigenous question came together in Bodichon’s thinking. And, in particular, it is interesting to see how his imaginary African “settlers”—essentially slaves brought across the Sahara for a life of servitude in Algeria—allowed him to hold high and untarnished his values of progress and civilization in the midst of the exterminating violence he hoped for Algeria. If African slaves could be brought to Algeria, liberated from their shackles, and made free men and women, and if the labor of these people made the colony blossom with wealth, Bodichon asked, would not the “extinction” of Algeria’s people be for the “general good”, their disappearance part of the civilizing mission?

*

In these two projects, we see that the history of slavery and abolition in Algeria is a complicated affair, one reaching far beyond the local decisions of commanders in the field seeking order and stability. Subtil’s 1840 project shows that even as the French state had legally committed itself to ending the trade in African slaves, its highest agents were ready to build an Algerian colony with the labor of people purchased as slaves. More than just tolerating indigenous forms of slavery, in 1840 the French government approved buying slaves, a decision that had it been implemented would have involved the French state directly in the trans-Saharan slave trade and

opened the possibility that Algeria might become some sort of slave colony. Rather than a stopgap labor fix, this project hinged upon resolving the indigenous question, a question embedded in the unique condition in Algeria, a settler colony in an already settled land. Its main thrust responded to the sort of ambitious projects military leaders like General Bugeaud envisioned to solve the indigenous question and the security crisis: namely, his military colonies could be built and populated by slaves. Supposedly politically docile, even listless, African slaves of color represented a source of manpower that could not be found elsewhere in post-Revolutionary France where “dangerous classes” lurked. Of a much different political persuasion, other public figures like Dr. Bodichon used the question of abolition and slavery to develop extreme solutions to the indigenous question. Bodichon’s texts of the 1840s, *bagatelles pour un massacre*, are both bizarre and troubling. Bizarre to find a committed progressive leader espousing such hateful rants about Algerians, and troubling in as much as his work directly contributed to larger discourses that legitimated extreme violence in colonial situations and other situations of “racial” conflict (Traverso 2002). And given that Bodichon’s writings depended upon the institution of slavery to solve both the demographic problem of an Algeria without Algerians, and to give his genocide a moral veneer, enshrining it as part of a larger progressive movement to abolish the evils of slavery, they serve as a reminder that the history of abolition and slavery is one that touches upon many intersecting histories—political, social, and intellectual—that link events in Africa to those in the Mediterranean, and beyond.

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ABSTRACT

Like in sub-saharan Africa, Algerian slavery died a "slow death". It did not end with French abolition in 1848 but maintained its importance in some regions through the nineteenth century. Partially shaped by the colonial administration's pragmatism, the history of abolition in Algeria is similar to other parts of colonial Africa. At the same time, there are differences stemming from the special case of Algerian colonization. In particular, colonial planners faced the indigenous question, or how to create a settler colony in a country that was already settled. This essay examines how slavery, abolition, and the "indigenous question" came together in French plans of the 1840s to import slaves to Algeria. These plans helped colonial authorities envision a final solution to the indigenous question, whereby sub-Saharan Africans purchased as slaves would replace Algerian populations.

RÉSUMÉ

Repenser l'abolition en Algérie : l'esclavage et « la question indigène ». — L'esclavage algérien s'est terminé dans une « mort lente », comme dans les pays d'Afrique subsaharienne. L'abolition française de 1848 ne l'a pas achevé, mais l'a fortement maintenu jusqu'à la fin du XIX^e siècle dans certaines régions. Partiellement influencée par le pragmatisme de l'administration coloniale, l'histoire de l'abolition en Algérie est semblable à celle des autres territoires de l'Afrique coloniale. Cependant, il existe des différences provenant du cas particulier de la colonisation algérienne: les dirigeants coloniaux se trouvaient confrontés à « la question indigène », c'est-à-dire la construction d'une colonie de peuplement dans un pays déjà peuplé. Cet article tente d'examiner comment l'esclavage, l'abolition et la « question indigène » ont été réunis dans un plan français des années 1840 pour importer des esclaves en Algérie afin de régler la question indigène. C'est ainsi que les autorités coloniales voulaient substituer les Africains subsahariens, achetés comme des esclaves, aux populations algériennes.

Keywords/Mots-clés: Algeria, abolition, genocide, slavery, violence/Algérie, abolition, génocide, esclavage, violence.