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How repatriates forge social change in the metropole: a cross-cultural migration perspective

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ABSTRACT

If we want to understand how the trauma experienced by repatriates influenced the country where they settled after decolonization, we should not only focus on the way these migrants and their descendants were able to mobilize their material and cultural-political claims, but also pay attention to their infrastructural role within the state bureaucracy, especially with respect to migration and integration. This paper shows that, the relation between France and Algeria is an extremely revealing case, because here we see the confluence of returning organizational migrants who originated from the metropole, and labour migrants with roots in the former colony. This article uses the Algerian migration to France as an example, drawing attention to the largely hidden infrastructural-bureaucratic role of repatriating civil servants and the military, and as such serves as an supplement to the public trauma drama of political representatives of associations of repatriates.

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Introduction

The political and societal impact of "repatriates" from (former) colonies on the country of the (former) colonizer has been studied extensively, both in national and comparative frameworks. Most studies distinguish between, on the one hand, temporary migrants from the metropole who used the colonial circuit to work temporarily in the colonies and, on the other hand, their descendants, most of whom had never set foot in the land of the colonizer and who were partly of (ethnically) mixed descent. Most attention has been paid to the settlement process of the latter category in former imperial centres during the era of decolonization. Apart from the usual indicators such as structural and identificational integration (Lucassen 2005), most of these

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studies focus on identity politics, social movement formation and the battle over the memory of imperial legacies (Smith 2003; Bosma et al. 2012; Borutta and Jansen 2016; Buettner 2016).

The Cultural Trauma of Decolonization, edited by Ron Eyerman and Giuseppe Sciortino, fits into this tradition while adding an important new dimension. It thus marks a new step in this comparative historiography, in particular because it introduces new analytical instruments to understand why, in certain cases, repatriates were heard and had their narratives acknowledged, while others were ignored and silenced. The Goffman (1959) dramaturgical concept of "cultural trauma", intimately linked to "symbolic opportunity structures", is helpful in this exercise, and together they explain why the repatriation from Algeria had a very different impact on the host country than most other repatriate experiences.

My contribution to this discussion dossier joins the approach of the editors to systematically focus on the national opportunity structure and the busy arena of claim making, with the aim of elucidating how these determine the extent to which representatives and associations of repatriates can influence the collective memory as well as cultural and political systems (Eyerman and Sciortino 2020, 206). But it also goes beyond this cultural and political gaze by applying a wider cross-cultural migration (CCM) perspective that assumes that migrants, including "repatriates", have a deeper, infrastructural, impact on receiving societies (Lucassen and Lucassen 2017).

Cross-cultural migration and social change

Broadly speaking, the study of relations between immigration and social change fits in well with recent developments in the field of global migration history, which focuses on how very different types of newcomer influence the structure of the receiving society in the short and long run (Manning 2013; Lucassen and Lucassen 2014). The key assumption in this approach is that migrants, even when they share the same language and some aspects of cultural heritage, as in the case of repatriates, introduce the receiving society to new cultural experiences, which force those already present in the receiving society to reconsider, consciously or unconsciously, their ideas and practices, both at the individual and institutional level. Ranging from technology to food, and from ideologies to bureaucratic practices, such interactions change the society that encounters them. To what extent, however, and in what domains and how fundamentally, depends on the migrants themselves (their status, power, numbers) as well as the openness of the opportunity structures of the society in which they build their new lives.

An important, but often neglected, role is played by what I have termed "organizational migrants" – people whose migratory pattern is largely determined by the organization that they have joined – bureaucrats, soldiers,

missionaries, posted skilled workers in international companies or NGOs, for example (Lesger et al. 2002; Lucassen and Smit 2015). Many of them moved through imperial networks and circuits and left their mother country only temporarily. Because their exposure to new cultures in the colonies changed them, we could consider them to be cross-cultural migrants who, after their return to their home country, plowed back their experiences into the home culture.

An interesting illustration of this mechanism is afforded by African-American soldiers whose tour of duty brought them to Germany after World War II. The brief exposure (one to two years) to a non-segregated society where they were more or less treated as equals by the native population, and could even date white women without the risk being lynched, came as a shock. It made them aware of the alternatives to the racist society in which they had been raised. As a result, upon return to the USA many of them joined the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and became active in the Civil Rights Movement, showing how the temporary stay of organizational migrants can deeply influence institutional structures back home (Höhn and Klimke 2010).

From the CCM perspective the influence of repatriates, and especially organizational migrants, on the politics of the imperial motherland constitutes a highly interesting topic. In *The Cultural Trauma of Decolonization* this impact is touched upon in most chapters, ranging from the support of disillusioned returning soldiers for Portugal's Carnation Revolution in 1974 to the pressure of *pieds noir* associations on French politicians such as François Mitterrand and his Socialist Party with respect to reparations and statist memory politics. The latter resulted in the "Memory Law" of 2005 which gave legal recognition to the memories of the colonizers, especially in Algeria (Loytomaki 2014).

For countries such as Germany that are not discussed in this volume, the lobbying by conservative Vertriebene irredentist associations since the 1950s has been well documented (Kossert 2008; Connor 2014). Somewhat similar is the involvement in the Netherlands of native Protestant confessional conservative organizations such as the Door de Eeuwen Trouw (Faithful Through the Centuries). In the postwar era they stood up as defenders of colonial migrants who had been instrumental in upholding the colonial order, either as civil servants or soldiers, like the Moluccans (Van der Kroef 1971, 134; Laarman 2013, 108). The latter had many features in common with the Harkis who fought for France in Algeria (Jordi and Hamoumou 1999).

In this contribution I will limit myself to the question of how repatriates, as migrants with a specific (colonial) understanding of the nature of "race", religion and culture more broadly, impacted the postwar immigration and integration policies in the metropole – not least because their arrival in Western Europe coincided with the largest influx in history of newcomers from other

continents, both from the colonies and as "guest workers" from North Africa and Turkey.

France is an interesting case study because of the presence of two different categories of migrants, ex-colonials who were instrumental in transferring and reproducing colonial relations in the metropole, and a considerable number of Algerian labour migrants. So far, most attention has been paid to the political and public activities of ex-colonials, especially pertaining to their support of the extreme right Front National, an organization that from its beginnings in 1972 evidenced anti-Arab anti-Muslim sentiments, sometimes mixed with anti-Semitic tropes, and which was highly prominent in Algeria (Camus 1996; Stora 1999; Choi 2020). But France is also one of the few cases where repatriates consisted in part of civil servants who, upon arrival back in the home country, were appointed in considerable numbers as policy advisors on migration and integration for national, departmental and local authorities, not only with respect to Algerians but soon to labour migrants in general.

The cross-cultural migration approach mentioned above highlights how organizational migrants played a key role in forging social change. In the case of repatriates this influence is not limited to the colonies but was mobilized upon return to the metropole. Some were born abroad, others belonged to "colonial circuits" (Bosma 2007) that continually circulated experts between the motherland and the colonies. Due to the focus on the public and political role of *pieds noir* in staging "trauma drama", the backstage organizational role of returning colonial experts is much less discussed in the literature, even in the otherwise excellent chapter by Sung-Eun Choi in *The Cultural Trauma of Decolonization*. If we want to understand how the broader framing of (colonial) immigrants and their descendants in France came about, however, this more infrastructural role of these experts deserves much more attention.

Algerian colonial experts as cross-cultural migrants

The influence of colonial experts in France dates back well before Algerian independence in 1962. Their expertise was called on early in the twentieth century in the metropole in order to control Algerian workers in France, who had started to immigrate soon after World War I but increasingly did so after 1945 when all Western European countries were confronted with a structural lack of low-skilled workers (Lucassen 2005). From 1914 onwards colonial and racist ideas about Algerians as primitive Arab Muslims who could not be trusted were transferred from Algeria to France and immediately institutionalized. A striking illustration of this is the fact that the Paris police were given the job of "aliens control" during the Interbellum (Rosenberg 2006). Although the Parisian special aliens police branch was meant primarily

to control non-French citizens, most of its energy was devoted to mapping and controlling the presence and activities of migrants from the colonies.

With the growing numbers of Algerian migrant workers in France in the 1950s (from 280,000 in 1954 to around 700,000 in 1971) these colonial conceptions spread as the French state decided to take advantage of colonial expertise in domains other than police surveillance – notably in housing. A key role was accorded to the technical advisors in Muslim affairs affiliated to the CTAM (Conseillers Techniques pour les Affaires Musulmanes), an organization established in 1952. They advised the French authorities in regions with concentrations of Algerian workers, in the North and in and around Paris in particular (De Barros 2005, 2006). These experts were part of a much larger group of French civil servants (and military) who had been posted to Algeria. In 1963 this reservoir still consisted of some 15,000 French teachers and 10,000 Frenchmen serving in the Algerian administration. (Cohen 1980, 117).

The CTAM experts who were active as advisors at all levels of the French administration, especially in those regions where many Algerian workers and their families settled, were joined by other representatives from the Algerian colonial circuit who returned to France to lead new housing centres, established to replace the *bidonvilles*.[1] Their prominent role underlines how their expertise became an integral part of mainstream French institutional life and led to the permanent separate treatment of Muslims (De Barros 2005, 33).

During the Algerian War, and the numerous terrorist attacks by the Algerian Liberation Front (FLN) in France, controlled housing centres were primarily meant to prevent Algerian workers and their families from supporting the FLN. After independence in 1962 this form of social control was continued, based on the ingrained colonial idea that Algerians were "big children" who needed clear guidance in a modern society (Stora 2003, 2005). The continuing dominance of former colonial experts is illustrated by an overview in 1972 of the background of the directors of the *Foyers* (housing centres) for Algerian workers. These centres were supervised by the national organization for the housing of workers (SONACOTRA), established in 1963 and were a continuation of a similar agency for Algerian migrants (SONACOTRAL). Of the 151 directors 94 per cent had lived in North Africa, many of them employed in the military, and they thus played a key role in reproducing colonial conceptions and hierarchies (Ginesy-Galano 1984, 129).

Impact on the framing of migration in general

The role of colonial experts was not limited to Algerian labour migrants in France, but their colonial practices (*savoir faire*) soon structured French postwar aliens and migration policy in general, especially by reproducing

the colonial dichotomy between Western and non-Western (De Barros 2005, 33; Bosma 2012, 201) – a hierarchy that from the 1970s onwards became central in the categorization of immigrants in other Western European countries with a colonial past, such as the Netherlands. Or as Nandita Sharma (2020) has remarked, under postcolonial rule claims to autochthony are mobilized to define true national belonging, thus excluding those "out of place".

In the course of the 1960s the services put in place to control Algerian migrants were broadened to include the entire migrant population (Spire 2005). The most important of these new, mainstream institutions was the Direction of Population and Migration (DPM), a continuation of an umbrella welfare institution (established in 1958) aimed at encouraging Algerians to embrace "universal" modern French values and reject Algerian independence (Lyons 2009, 69). The DPM was established in 1966 and was headed, not surprisingly, by Michel Massenet, an ex-colonial civil servant, while ex-colonials were generally well represented among its staff (Tapinos 1975, 69–71; Laurens 2009; Lyons 2009). Their influence was so dominant that soon a whole bureaucratic culture evolved based on the Algerian experience and characterized by a narrow view of immigration (Laurens 2009, 138).

How the colonial binary of "Europeans" versus "natives" was transferred by ex-colonial civil servants in their function as cross-cultural migrants is well illustrated by France's Minister of Labour in the years 1962–1966, Gilbert Grandval (himself briefly resident-general in Morocco in 1955), who clearly preferred European labour migrants over those from North Africa, because their skills and origin would make them a better "racial fit" with the French population (Lyons 2009, 83), thus illustrating his belief that "race" was inseparably linked to religion. Or, in the words of Benjamin Stora: "Simply belonging to the Muslim faith was a mark of distance from 'Western civilization'" (2005, 235). It should therefore not come as a surprise that, from the mid-1960s onwards, when "migrants" became the new overarching policy category, a clear distinction was made between Algerians and other Maghrébins and Europeans, and at the same time emphasis was given to origin rather than nationality and Islam portrayed as a violent religion (De Barros 2005, 33; Cavanaugh 2009)

Conclusion

If we want to understand how the trauma experienced by repatriates influenced the country where they settled after decolonization, we should not only focus on the way these migrants and their descendants were able to mobilize their material and cultural-political claims, but also pay attention to their infrastructural role within the state bureaucracy, especially with respect to migration and integration. As I have shown, the relation

between France and Algeria is an extremely revealing case, because here we see the confluence of returning organizational migrants who originated from the metropole, and labour migrants with roots in the former colony.

The organizational migrants belonging to the French colonial migration circuit that included Indochina were first socialized as civil servants and soldiers in colonial power relations and racialized hierarchies. Thus socialized, their return to France constituted a secondary migration over cultural borders and, as experts back home, they inserted this mentality and these working practices in the metropole. These twofold cross-cultural migrants were highly influential in reproducing colonial relationships, especially versus Algerians and, more widely, versus immigrants in general. From the perspective of *The Cultural Trauma of Decolonization* we can conclude that giving up Algeria deeply influenced the way France handled its immigrants, especially those from North Africa, and fundamentally shaped the migration and integration policy pertaining to Algerian labour migrants. This article thus draws attention to the largely hidden infrastructural-bureaucratic role of repatriating civil servants and the military, and as such serves as a supplement to the public trauma drama of political representatives of associations of repatriates that is central in Eyerman and Sciortino's volume.

Note

1. For the colonial roots of *bidonvilles* (shantytowns) in Morocco under French rule before World War I, see Wright (1991: 153). See also Nasiali (2012).

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