
When the French government recognized the independence of Algeria in July 1962, the idea of what it meant to be French changed radically. Todd Shepard explores how this happened—and how deeply it reached—in this monograph based on his 2002 Rutgers dissertation. Shepard demonstrates convincingly that the discursive strategy employed to justify the abrupt *volte-face* in French policy towards Algeria overwhelmed over 130 years of legal standards, institutional structures, and political practices developed to align the reality of colonialism with republican traditions, the consequences of which continue to affect notions of French national identity and citizenship. An even broader consequence of this discourse, which articulated “the tide of history” as its basis, was the introduction of “decolonization” as a natural, even inevitable, world historical development, an assertion that Shepard challenges as occluding the role that contingency plays in the outcome of events. Shepard provides a cogent and methodical analysis of how history quite literally “gets made” and how it can affect conceptions of identity and policies rooted in those conceptions.

Much has already been written recounting the liberation struggle led by the FLN (Front de libération nationale), the role of the Algerian crisis in Charles de Gaulle’s return to power at the head of a newly formed republic, and the “dirty war” carried out by the OAS (Organisation de l’armée secrète) to keep Algeria French during the period lasting from 1954 to 1962. Shepard’s concern is not to retrace those events or examine their influence in shaping an independent Algeria; rather, he focuses on how France remade itself through the very process of ceding sovereignty to a territory claimed as indivisibly French for over a century. An entrenched tenet of republican faith was almost instantaneously forgotten when French officials and
intellectuals adopted a new consensus that Algerian territory and its majority non-European inhabitants were not and never could “become” French. Laws, practices, and institutions that elaborated Algerians’ national identity, citizenship, and rights were created and continually modified in parallel with the evolving identity of France itself as republic and empire from the 1830s into the 1960s, showing how French leaders regarded Algeria and its people as an integral part of the nation, albeit one whose complex demography created cultural differences at various degrees of assimilation to the norms that afforded full citizenship rights. In analyzing efforts to keep Algeria French as late as 1958 by widening the circle of citizenship, Shepard observes:

“The French Revolution’s promise of universal adult suffrage was fulfilled not when women’s suffrage was accepted in 1944 but when the Constitution of 1958 extended full citizenship to all Algerian men and women….” (46) Until very late in the response to the Algerian crisis, the prevailing view was that to be Algerian was to be French. “The Algerian Revolution,” Shepard contends, “was at the same time a French revolution.” (1)

It was a French revolution because it suddenly redefined the national body and its constituents, breaking sharply with the republican notion that all Algerians could be assimilated into a national unit based on universal human rights and the structures and practices that proceeded from this view. Shepard presents this revolution as emerging out of new ideas about colonial liberation offered by intellectuals as varied as Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Raymond Aron, and Jean-Paul Sartre converging with the political exigencies and ambitions thrown up by the Algerian War that erupted in 1954. The narrative of historical determinism trumped the aims of republican ideology, as Algeria’s separation from France came to be accepted as the indisputable consequence of differences due either to fundamentally incompatible cultures and the respective institutions they implied (the liberal view, following Aron) or to the dialectic of
colonial oppression that needed to be broken in order to free both colonizer and colonized (the
Left view, following Sartre.) This narrative became such a powerful weapon in metropolitan
political debates that it reflexively relegated those who persisted in the campaign to keep Algeria
French to the ranks of fascist reactionaries seeking to beat back the tide of history and undermine
the Republic, especially as OAS terror intensified and raucous demonstrations erupted in the
“European” quarters of Algerian cities. Shepard demonstrates with insightful scholarship,
however, that the propaganda mobilized in defense of “Algérie française” relied upon appeals to
republican principles, ideals, and methods that ironically went ignored by the vast majority who
conflated the campaign for Algerian independence with defending the Republic. It’s not quite
clear how sincere supporters of French Algeria were when embracing the rhetoric of republican
legalism, or why the metropolitan supporters of Algerian independence failed to engage their
arguments; but Shepard depicts 1962—a year that encompassed the conclusion of the Evian
Accords, a double-referendum affirming the government’s policy and also critically expanding
the executive’s powers, and the consequential trials of OAS leaders—as a missed opportunity to
examine carefully notions of what it meant to be French in terms of nationality, citizenship, and
rights.

The brief period when the Evian Accords were being negotiated witnessed a profound
shift in the basis of these notions, as Shepard explains in a pivotal fifth chapter, titled “Making
Algerians.” He meticulously analyzes government reports with a grasp of nuanced details
resembling that of the very technocrats who wrote them and pays careful critical consideration as
well to media representations in showing how political realities and popular conceptions of
national identity had moved quickly away from those still accepted by French officials
negotiating the Evian Accords who grew increasingly frustrated as they recognized that the
models they depended upon in working out meanings of “repatriate” and “minority status” no longer seemed to fit. The result was “an ethnicized vision of the [French] nation: although still explicitly ‘universal’ in pretension, to be French became more closely wedded to being ‘European.’” (167) Shepard follows this with two illuminating chapters: the first clarifying the national identity of Jews in light of this discursive and conceptual shift; the second exploring gendered discourse as an element in the larger discursive strategy. The final third of the book extends and solidifies his contention “that the Algerian Revolution was the crucial conflict for French people over the shape and meaning of France in the post-1945 era” (269) by examining the reconfigurations that occurred amid “the exodus” of Algerians of European ancestry (known as pieds noirs) to France—a chapter that reprises the discussion on gendered imagery to show what role it played in the acceptance of these “repatriates” as “French”—and the rationale behind “rejecting the Muslims” of Algeria as meriting French national identity.

Shepard’s book offers much to think about. It underscores the inherent reciprocity and enduring influence of colonial relationships by elaborating how the national identities of citizens in countries with extensive imperial histories like France were constructed as part of the same processes that relegated others to “difference”. It also prompts us to question the categories that frame historical representations and the historically constructed processes that put those categories in place. It is an excellent work that should be considered essential for upper-level undergraduate or graduate courses on decolonization, given how it problematizes that very concept. Scholars seeking to enhance their own or their students’ understanding about the interaction of national identity with law and politics, the impact of colonial legacies in constructing notions of ethnicity and gender, and more specifically the transition from a France with Algeria to a France without Algeria will find it valuable.
Michael Clinton, Associate Professor of History, Gwynedd-Mercy College