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Christine Mussard, *L'Obsession communale: La Calle, un territoire de colonisation dans l'Est Algérien, 1884-1957*. Aix-en-Provence: Presses universitaires de Provence, 2018. 356 pp. Notes, maps, charts, bibliography, and annexes. €27.00. (pb). ISBN 9791032001462.

Review by Charlotte Ann Legg, University of London Institute in Paris.

This interesting and meticulously researched study goes directly to the heart of the settler colonial situation in Algeria, taking as its object space and its appropriation. Bringing to bear the geographical sensibilities and approaches of scholars such as Hélène Blais on the particular administrative space of the *commune mixte* in Algeria, Christine Mussard seeks to “decrypt the processes of appropriation of colonized territory” which supported the imposition of French sovereignty (p.19).^[1] To achieve this task, Mussard makes effective use of a case study—La Calle—examining the conceptualization, construction, and administration of the *commune mixte* in this region on the Algerian-Tunisian border. In the course of her study, she exposes the central mechanisms of colonial expansion and raises interesting questions about the temporality of settler colonialism, as well as the gap between imperial imaginaries and colonial realities.

The principal objective of the *commune mixte*, as conceptualized by agents of the state in both the metropole and Algeria, was “to allow the advance of colonization by the settlement of land in the interior of the territory” (p. 13). Taking a longer view than that suggested in the title of the work, Mussard traces the roots of this particular administrative form to the end of the 1840s and the increasing influence of settlers on colonial rule in the wake of the initial decades of conquest. In this phase of colonial experimentation, answers to the pressing question of how to ensure secure settlement were sought, first and foremost, amongst the familiar apparatus of the French state. It was in this way that the administrative framework of the *commune* came to structure colonial Algeria, first, beginning in 1843, in the form of scattered *communes de plein exercice* primarily populated by Europeans, and then, from 1868 onwards, in the additional forms of *communes subdivisionnaires* for the administration of *douars* and tribes, and *communes mixtes* for the administration of regions containing both European settlements and Algerian *douars*. The internal distinction between populations and between their respective spaces of habitation, as Mussard points out, constituted a defining feature of the *commune mixte*—a feature which, in the context of the competing interests of groups of settlers, Algerians and representatives of the state, gave rise to significant tensions following the establishment of the civilian regime in 1870.

If, under the Second Empire, the *commune mixte* was imagined by French officials as a space of cultural contact in which Algerians would be civilized by proximity to Europeans, it became, under the Third Republic, an effective mechanism for pushing back the settler colonial frontier.

Mussard's analysis cautions against any stark contrast between military and civilian regimes however, by underlining the extent to which the *commune mixte* was conceived of under the Second Empire as a transitory structure--the means by which areas sparsely populated by Europeans could be prepared for colonization and elevation to the status of *communes de plein exercice*. Although Mussard does not engage with the work of anglophone scholars of the French colonial empire, these observations of continuity in the state's understanding of colonial "progress" chime with those presented in recent English-language studies, most notably Gavin Murray Miller's *The Cult of the Modern*.^[2]

The conceptualization of the *commune mixte* as a space of transition within a teleology of colonial progress justified the creation of European centers of settlement. The land for these centers was taken from neighboring *douars* as delimited by the *sénatus-consulte* of 1863. This Second Empire legislation similarly delimited the authority of the *djemaa*, often constraining this council of Muslim notables to accept an "amicable" expropriation against which they had little defense (p. 57). Using Tarf and the centers of colonization in La Calle as examples, Mussard describes in detail this process of expropriation as it was enacted under the Third Republic, and in which instances of formal opposition on the part of Algerians--as in the case of the *djemaa* of the Ouled Messaoud in 1887--were rare and quickly quashed under the weight of administrative procedure. The act of dispossession, Mussard notes, "revealed the asymmetrical nature of relations between groups [of colonizers and colonized] and durably marked social relationships" (p. 72).

If the state succeeded in appropriating 90,628 hectares of land between 1871 and 1895, its efforts to take the necessary subsequent steps to permanently install a European settler population on this land were beset with difficulties. Mussard explains the myriad ways in which the administrative vision of a rationally organized and productive *commune mixte* was undermined by colonial realities, including the logistical challenges of properly surveying and dividing the land and the premature departure of disappointed colonists. Although the difficulties of official colonization in this era have been noted by historians, Mussard brings new perspectives by illustrating the particularities of this border region, where settler emigration to Tunisia following the establishment of the Protectorate in 1881 was a source of considerable concern for French officials.^[3] The vacation of concessions by Europeans attracted to better-prepared lands across the border led to their inhabitation by Algerian tenants, whose presence undermined the segregated spatial dynamics of the *commune mixte*.

As administrative intentions collided with colonial realities, the *commune mixte* lost its transitory character and became a permanent fixture of French administration in Algeria. In this way it not only constituted a microcosm of broader efforts to administer a colonial population in the context of demographic imbalance, but also made manifest what Laurent Dubois has referred to, in another colonial context, as the perpetual deferral of the political assimilation of the disenfranchised group.^[4] This deferral was exemplified by the measures taken by the state to prevent land falling into the hands of Algerians despite the evident decline of European centers in the interwar era. Mussard traces the exchanges between influential settlers and worried colonial officials, explaining the elaboration of policies including the regrouping of concessions, and the introduction of distancing and curfews for Algerians.

The question of the boundary between the European centre and the *douar* crystallised what Lorenzo Veracini refers to as "the paranoiac dispositions characterizing the settler colonial situation" (p.5). Although the *douar* brought financial relief to European centres through the

heavy taxes imposed on its Algerian inhabitants, its proximity was often perceived as a menace. Its continued separation from the developing infrastructure of settlement, moreover, challenged the transformative logic of settler colonial presence. The dilemma facing French administrators, as Mussard explains, was whether “the douar should be considered a section of the *commune mixte* [...] or a completely separate entity bound for autonomy?” (p.166). Despite the continued tutelage of the French authorities, the recasting of the *djemma* as an elected body with the reform of 1919 would prove decisive in resolving this question, by providing a space for the elaboration of a collective consciousness amongst Algerian Muslims and leading to the transformation of *douars* into autonomous municipalities in 1937. Its mixed nature undermined, the *commune mixte* would not endure.

Mussard’s analysis of the slow death of this administrative form between 1947 and 1957 is concise and insightful, foregrounding the impact of the enfranchisement of Algerian Muslims in 1946 on the perceived relationship between the organization of space and the imagination of a polity. Taking stock of the achievements of the *commune mixte* with a view to reforming administrative structures, officials in La Calle could not say it had served the purpose of cultural contact or fulfilled the objective of development. Indeed, only one center of colonization in the circumscription—Lamy—was ever raised to the status of *commune de plein exercice*, and this in 1948, at the insistence of European residents and in the context of the imperative necessity of structural reform. The *commune mixte* emerges in Mussard’s analysis as a form which endured more through force of circumstance and the cumulative weight of administrative process, than through practical applicability.

As a significant mechanism in the machinery of colonial domination, it nevertheless became a target of the FLN during the fight for independence when farms and agricultural equipment were destroyed, Algerian workers incited to cease activity, and Algerian administrative intermediaries assassinated. Here again, Mussard underlines the particular significance of the border in the experience of the conflict in La Calle, which was traversed by strategic supply routes. The war, as Mussard notes, further exposed the ways in which the administrative ordering and reordering of space underpinned dynamics of colonial control, as plans for administrative reform were pursued in parallel with “*maintien de l’ordre*.” Part propaganda exercise, part desperate bid to ensure a closer control of the territory, the transformation of Algerian municipal centers into *communes rurales* in 1957 spelled the end of the *commune mixte*, just five years before French rule in Algeria also came to an end.

Mussard’s approach is solidly historical, based on the careful collection and presentation of archival data from the General Government, the *préfecture*, *sous-préfecture* and *commune mixte*, as well as the *Sections administratives spécialisées* for the period of the Algerian War. The text is densely woven with historical detail and interspersed with maps which chart how the space of the *commune mixte* of La Calle was both imagined and organized by administrators. An appendix brings together a number of documents from the archives, providing a useful resource for classes examining colonial governmentality, the organization of colonial space and the lived experience of settler and Algerian populations. Although this methodological approach is well-suited to the case study, the themes addressed by Mussard would doubtless be further illuminated by engagement with settler colonial theory and with recent comparative studies of settler colonialism by French scholars, including Joël Michel, Amaury Lorin and Christelle Taraud.[6] This detailed local case study nevertheless gives a clear and thoroughly contextualized example of the mechanisms by which land was appropriated and colonial space imagined and administered.

NOTES

[1] Hélène Blais, "Coloniser l'espace: territoires, identités, spatialité", *Genèses* 74 (2009): 145-159; Hélène Blais, Florence Deprest and Pierre Singaravélou, *Territoires impériaux. Une histoire spatiale du fait colonial* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2011).

[2] Gavin Murray Miller, *The Cult of the Modern: Trans-Mediterranean France and the Construction of French Modernity* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017).

[3] Charles-Robert Ageron, *Histoire de l'Algérie contemporaine*, (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1964), 51.

[4] Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 4.

[5] Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 75.

[6] Joël Michel, *Colonies de peuplement. Afrique, XIXe-XXe siècles* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2018); Amaury Lorin and Christelle Taraud, eds., *Nouvelle histoire des colonisations européennes (XIXe-XXe siècles). Sociétés, cultures, politiques* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2013).

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