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Brock Cutler, *Ecologies of Imperialism in Algeria*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2023. xii + 224 pp. Notes, references, and index. $65.00 (hb). ISBN 978-1-4962-3253-3.

Review by Caroline Ford, University of California, Los Angeles.

This wide-ranging book on the environmental and social impact of French imperialism on the ecosystem of French colonial Algeria from the 1860s to the 1880s focuses on a series of natural and man-made crises that stemmed from poisoning, droughts, locusts, famine, and disease, resulting in the death of more than 800,000 people between 1865 and 1870 alone. While identifying the destructive consequences of these crises, Brock Cutler sets out to show how they reshaped Algeria's ecosystem and furthered the aims of an imperial system of extractive capitalism and settler colonialism.

In the first chapter of the book, which outlines the scope of his analysis, Cutler begins with a dramatic episode in the history of Algiers. In 1869, large numbers of French settlers fell ill from consuming bread that contained oxidized lead and zinc. Ironically, the source of the toxins was treated wood and construction debris that had been shipped to Algeria following building demolitions associated with the Haussmannization of Paris. Cutler views this incident as part of a larger phenomenon that was unfolding in Algeria in terms of the creation of a modern imperial ecosystem, which is the central focus of the book. He draws on a range of French and English primary sources. He contends that his "archive is imperial" while also "arboreal" (p. 11), but in the end he does not really integrate the "voices" of trees and soils or local languages in his discussion of the larger ecosystem of Algeria, his brief discussion of dendrology and tree rings as evidence of climate conditions in chapter four notwithstanding.

Ecologies of Imperialism in Algeria contributes to a growing literature on the environmental history of the Maghrib, which ranges from Diana Davis's *Resurrecting the Granary of Rome: Environmental History and French Colonial Expansion in North Africa* to Spencer Segalla's *Empire and Catastrophe: Decolonization and Environmental Disaster in North Africa*.[1] Cutler distinguishes his work from that of others by seeking to explore "how to think with the expansive network of potential agents, actors, actants, and figures that make up historical ecosystems" (p. 13). He starts with the premise that "imperialism is an ecosystem" and that "modernizing imperialism in Algeria is like an ecology" (p. 7). His use of the term "ecosystem" is capacious, including, as it does, climate, changing political administrations, the drawing of boundaries, agriculture, imperial violence, and land use. He contends that crises, on which he focuses in subsequent chapters, created a new imperial ecosystem. For Cutler, at the core of this new

ecosystem were the divisions and borders that the colonial state and settlers constructed and maintained in myriad forms, including those that were territorial and social. His broader goal is to understand the long-term effects of nineteenth-century imperialism and how the case of imperialism in Algeria fits into the larger history of imperialism.

Cutler's second chapter surveys the historical ecology of nineteenth-century Algeria before exploring how the space of a new historical ecosystem was created. Chapter three, "Performing the Border," is less concerned with environmental change and its consequences than with how the French created and delineated boundaries and articulated new forms of territorial sovereignty through treaties and taxation. It is only in chapter four that Cutler returns to the ecological crises engendered a plague of locusts, droughts, famines, and cholera that punctuated Algerian history under the French Second Empire and early Third Republic. It is here, in one of the most compelling parts of the book, that Cutler traces the connection between the ecological crises of these years and the El-Muqrani Rebellion (1871-1872), which was the single greatest challenge to French colonial rule since the pacification of Kabylia in 1857. Named after one of the leaders of the rebellion, it illustrated the complicated relationship between events in the metropole and conditions in the colony. Following drought and a cholera epidemic, indebtedness and misery were widespread. Algerian troops refused to go to France to fight in the Franco-Prussian war where the French were defeated and successfully resisted the French military at home in Algeria, until the uprising was finally defeated. While the rebellion was a clear example of colonial resistance, Cutler demonstrates how the ecological conditions on the ground shaped the way in which it unfolded.

Returning to the theme of division, chapter five shows how ecological tensions resulted in internecine violence between indigenous tribes. He highlights the case of the dispute between the Hammama, a Tunisian tribe, and the Nemencha in Algeria, which led to a massacre in which the French were implicated by deepening the divisions between the two tribes. Expanding on instances of social disputes in the context of stress and crisis, in chapter six, which is perhaps the least convincing chapter in the book, Cutler examines how Algerians were increasingly "conscripted into the binaries that defined modern imperialism: human-nature, healthy-sick, productive-unproductive, man-woman" (p. 109). He uses the case of Mohammed el Ould Hadj, a beggar dressed as a woman who was rounded up in the streets of Oran in 1867. Here Cutler focuses on the consequences of his induced migration from an impoverished countryside to a colonial center and how "imperial subjecthood" emerged from narratives of "work, crime, nature, and gender" (p. 110). The case involved the policing of sexual behavior, which Cutler argues was "part of a broader set of ecosystem relations" (p. 110). Mohammed was put in jail, which Cutler sees as evidence of his "unacceptable behavior in the modern imperial ecosystem" (p. 110). The connections that Cutler draws between this individual case, which he uses as a starting point to discuss forced migration, crime, and a divisionary imperial regime in the context of the environmental crises of the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s are tenuous at best, even if he has some interesting observations to make about articulations of gender in a colonial or imperial context. To assert that the "ecosocial relations" in this case were not "mere background" and the "evocation of gender division could not have happened without the need of locusts to live and reproduce," as well as regional climate, with "the cycles of the North Atlantic Oscillation and its interaction with the sirocco," are claims that might well be called into question (p. 124).

Brock Cutler returns to the case of the toxic bakery in his penultimate chapter. While it was hardly an environmental crisis, like a drought or plague of locusts, and it primarily affected European settlers in Algiers, he nonetheless uses it as a lens through which to return to the theme of imperial divisions. Indeed, he provides a set of ruminations on an imperial system that "enforced and calcified a boundary between Algerians and Europeans" (p. 154). While Cutler makes a case for continuing to explore the environmental implications of imperial expansion and colonial rule and sheds light on the enormous human suffering endured because of man-made disasters and natural catastrophes, he unfortunately relies on a vague and overly broad use of the term "ecosystem" as well as on catchphrases that become a source of obfuscation. This is particularly true of his repeated references to "performance," which include "the performative evocation of binary gender boundaries" (p. 19), the "performance…of land tenure" (p. 38), the "often contradictory performances of imperialism" (p. 47), "performances of the border" (p. 49), and "the performance of modern imperial sovereignty" (p. 64). But this obfuscation is equally true of his definition of "imperial ecosystem as the abstraction of social practice from space, accomplished through divisions that become naturalized through repeated performances" (p. 148).

Cutler's last chapter, "It's About Time," explores some of the long-term legacies of imperialism in Algeria, the persistence of imperial divisions and borders, as well as the continued use of Algerian territory by the French, which had environmental consequences. He cites the testing of an atomic bomb, "Gerboise Bleue," in 1960, for example, and the continued induced migration of North African populations. While focusing on the mid- to late nineteenth century, Cutler thus suggests that historians should take the long view in considering the past. His book should be of interest to historians of empire, the environment, and the Maghrib.

NOTES

[1] Diana K. Davis, *Resurrecting the Granary of Rome: Environmental History and French Colonial Expansion in North Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007) and Spencer D. Segalla, *Empire and Catastrophe: Decolonization and Environmental Disaster in North Africa and Mediterranean France since 1954* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2020).

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