

BOOK REVIEW

## Ecologies of Imperialism in Algeria

**Brock Cutler (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2023).  
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Brock Cutler's *Ecologies of Imperialism in Algeria* is a captivating analysis of the ecological foundations of empire and the creation of an imperial ecosystem. The book opens in a bread oven during a deadly famine in Algeria in 1869. Contrary to what one might expect from a disaster book, the oven has little to do with the starving Algerians. The bread it produced was not for them anyway. Instead, Cutler uses the mysterious disease caused by the oven in the French settler population to demonstrate a key theme in his book: the intersection of empire, ecology, power, and disaster in the lives and bodies of both Algerians and their colonial occupiers in the late 19th century. It is an apt introduction to a book that seeks to conceptualize the functions of empire, and particularly the ways that crisis compounded France's efforts to inscribe modernity on both the soil of its empire and the flesh of those who endured it in 19th-century Algeria.

True to its name, *Ecologies of Imperialism in Algeria* is at its core a book about interconnection: connection between man and ecology, between empire and environment, and the nexus of crisis, imperial domination, and capital. The bulk of the original research for this study was extracted by the author from imperial archives, colonial journals, and the reports and sketches of French observers, which Cutler analyzes through, at times, a dizzying array of theoretical lenses in his thematic chapters. Each chapter approaches a particular factor in the imperial ecosystem and shows how elements like space, boundaries, performances, cleavages, humanity, criminality, and liminality were shaped by and, in turn, transformed the imperial ecosystem. Cutler shows how the French imperial system created and reinforced a series of binaries through the repetitive pageantry of imperial practice that cleaved the Algerian colony into imperial and indigenus, modern and unmodern, modern and natural, fast and slow, rational and not rational, and, in doing so, divided the inside from the outside of the colonial system. These imperial constructs defined the humanity and inhumanity of those who inhabited the Algerian colonial ecology, determining what roles each was to play and the boundaries of action that they would be permitted.

In a time of crisis, such conceptual hierarchies had disastrous consequences for hundreds of thousands of people. Imperial attitudes and practices transformed Algerians and their identities into figments of bureaucracy. They were penned into new boundaries and forced to perform new imperial rituals as they were cleaved from their land and repackaged as easily managed raw labor in the new capitalist agrarian system that was created to extract wealth for the benefit of the imperially defined "human" elements of the colonial ecosystem: white settlers and, ultimately, the metropole. During this crisis, Cutler argues that the Algerians were denied their full humanity and instead were classified within "nature" as they had not modernized to the point that they were immune to its ravages (p. 88). Worse, as famine pushed desperate migrants to the cities, they were increasingly associated with the consequences of the famine, namely, poverty, disease, and the apparent threat that those touched by disaster posed to white colonial life. This cleavage led to new constructs in

which Algerians, their actions, and their bodies were rigidly defined by the imperial power and the gaze of French émigrés within a discourse from which Algerians themselves were excluded. In a time of widespread crisis and mass mortality, the denial of humanity made it easier for both imperialist and émigré alike to acquiesce to Algerian suffering as a reflection of reality, albeit one that they themselves had constructed.

Cutler's ecological perspective is important for the book's ambitions. His stated aim is to not write a book that is "primarily French history, and then the history of France-and-Algeria" (p. 10). To accomplish this task, he extends beyond the imperial archive to the "arboreal" archive of dendrochronology, geology, and the nonhuman "(f)actors," which together constitute the ecological context in which humans and their activities are integral parts (p. 13). The locusts on the cover of the book serve as an apt representation of this goal. The insects and the crisis represented by them serve as a backdrop for the imperial project and the transformative effects that colonists, military, metropole, imperial ideology, and its performance had not only on the land, but also on Algerians themselves. As Cutler argues, such nonhuman actors and factors are not necessarily agents in the imperial pageantry that unfolded between the 1830 invasion of Algiers and the crisis of the 1860s, but their effects on the ecosystem, as a whole, were inescapable elements of the human ecology and the imperial efforts to shape it for the sake of both the capital and capitalism. This thematic structure and the ways in which Cutler conceives of modern imperial governance and the nonhuman forces that shape human ecosystems echo the work of Timothy Mitchell and Alan Mikhail, and to some extent recall Alexis Wick's rich application of concept and theory to a spatially defined historical subject.

However, while Cutler strives to escape the traditional imperial historical formula, this is a tall task for a book that is undeniably a commentary on imperialism as told through colonial sources. The research interrogates nonhuman archives, but apart from the analysis of dendrochronology and ecology in appropriate places, the influence of those nonhuman elements is difficult to detect outside of the endnotes. However, an even more conspicuous silence is that of human voices from the other side of the imperial binary. While *Ecologies of Imperialism in Algeria* is intended to be about the practice and effects of imperialism, as opposed to what the historian Kamal Salibi called "history from within" or even history from below, the book's sourcing made it nearly impossible to find Algerians whose experiences were not filtered through the interpretations of their colonizers. Without non-French sources, and by extension, non-French voices, it was difficult to position Algerians as anything more than passive receptacles of disaster or targets of imperial processes that were beyond their control. The absence of Algerian narratives is particularly unfortunate since Cutler's examples of Algerian agency, like Amara Ben Ali and Ahmed Lakhdar's use of bureaucracy to redirect blame on the French for the Oued Mahouine massacre, or Mohammed Ouled el Hadj's rejection of the patriarchal gender binaries of the imperial legal system, offer fascinating glimpses into the nuanced responses to imperialist interventions by those whose lives were most affected by them.

*Ecologies of Imperialism in Algeria* is an ambitious effort that often succeeds due to Cutler's talents as a writer and a thinker. His prose is complex and vivid, and he has a knack for tying passages up with an epigrammatical bow. In passages analyzing crisis in Chapter 4, or his discussion of ecology in Chapter 2, his depictions captivate and his synthesis of theoretical frameworks highlight key points about his case studies, all while suggesting a universality to his judgments. However, at times, Cutler's knack for analogy can be an obstacle, particularly when it overcomplicates his theoretical analysis or it is a substitute for direct evidence from the sources. In Chapter 3, his theatrical metaphor is slow to develop and feuds with the other, more effective, framing offered by him. Ultimately, this book is at its best when Cutler's prose is most direct and when theory is used to illuminate his case studies, rather than direct them.

Overall, *Ecologies of Imperialism in Algeria* is an important addition to the history of empire and disaster in the Middle East. Cutler's analysis of imperial ecology and disaster

demonstrates the importance of understanding the overall context of imperial systems and the interchange of factors beyond the control of policy and human agency. Crises are complex events that defy human efforts, to be sure. But their effects are also indications of values and structures that define society, and ultimately divide it. As this book shows, in the depths of crisis, such divisions can be amplified, sometimes to fatal effect.