Trying to tote up what the FLN (and/or ALN and the rest) expropriated in Algeria–hospitals, vineyards, factories, homes and their contents, etc.–beggars the imagination, almost making the Vandals seem like small beer, indeed. Even cities like beautiful Algiers itself had–aside from the old Casbah–been largely conceived, designed, and built by the French into an urban beauty of wide avenues, fine buildings, parks, a modern port and its facilities, and so on. FLN thugs never deserved all this, anymore than today’s mafias like Hezbollah, Hamas, or minions of a Ghadafi or Saddam would. In addition to the flight of French Europeans from Algeria in the early ‘60s--my focus today--much Arab and Kabyle suffering was another of the unintended results; to the point where many Algerians currently desire nothing more than escape for a life in the formerly derided metropole, where some 10,000,000 already reside. Pure Animal Farm? Absolutely.

I would like to anticipate here and now any extenuating circumstances that might take the French government off the hook for its part in this ugly denouement; and especially, the FLN it aided and abetted out of weakness, caving in to silly “world opinion” of the era. There was absolutely no excuse for FLN-led expropriation in Algeria. There was and is nothing good to say about the FLN. Some like to argue that they were merely replying to the excesses of OAS violence in the dying embers of a French Algeria, but well before the OAS was even thought of or formed, the FLN had been totally and utterly thuggish. I have seen much archival evidence (to be aired another day) on all the shakedowns they had already operated on their own, i.e., on Algerian
Muslim Arabs and Kabyles, not just in Algeria, but at many factory sites in France.

Yes, in the hexagon itself they had long been on the take. Democratic, as they later advertised in their constitution? Which implies respect and tolerance? They were anything but. In France from the mid-‘50s they conducted an increasingly murderous assault on members of a rival Algerian group, the MNA. And Algerian workers at a variety of French enterprises from Renault to those building dams in the Alps had to cough up monthly subscription fees. When they refused, there were nocturnal visits in their dorms or canteens, and threats, and if money wasn’t forthcoming, these mobsters inflicted savage beatings on these workers, put them in hospitals, and then would threaten them again there—this time with death by strangling, throat-cutting, and the like. And indeed, they murdered these slow payers or non-payers in their thousands—during 1956, ‘57, ‘58, ‘59—again, well before there was any OAS, nor for always clear reasons relating to the Bigeards or Massus (given that so much off the raked-off cash never made it to the ALN in the field, instead enriching Algerian racketeers on the make). Let the John F. Kennedys from afar and of that era idealize the FLN’s ideas of independence; now that the dust has cleared, and the records are copious on their mobster behavior, anyone who exonerates them or simply blames their behavior on the French, is in my mind, deluded. Period. You will receive no scholarly hairsplitting on this point today...

Did the French government under de Gaulle see ahead to massive Algerian expropriation on the horizon? Not very well, nor as early as it should have. Was this in part owing to de Gaulle himself, and his Cartesian, almost priestly superficiality and generality, his drunk-on-verbiage mindset? Absolutely. Certainly de Gaulle wanted to retain the Algerian Sahara for its oil, but the rest? He didn’t get down to such messy details in the many fine
discourses he would offer, jumping into and out of limousines in Algeria, or holding forth in French radio or TV studios. This was the same de Gaulle who had not been able to provide practical detail on how to continue the battle against the Nazis in France or North Africa once Paris had fallen in 1940. There is also plenty of evidence that he had it in for pieds noirs who hadn’t been sufficiently warm to him during World War II. His only hope, as stressed, was to retain the Saharan oil that had recently been discovered and placed on line, almost entirely due to French and “pied noir” efforts; and even that hope turned out ultimately to be chimerical, completing the expropriation scenario.

Should de Gaulle, Michel Debré, and other French government figures have seen that for the FLN, economic spoliation was the name of their game from the word go? It’s the easiest thing to moralize backwards in history, but yes, they should have denoted plenty of handwriting on the walls, literally and figuratively. The literal part refers to the many FLN scrawlings on Algiers’ buildings and those in other cities from at least 1956, promising French and/or Europeans there only two choices—“the valise or the coffin.” Expropriation was very much a part of this phrase that remained an FLN watchword not only to the end, but even after sought-after independence. From early on the FLN both racketeered huge amounts from fellow Arabs and Kabyles, but also derived some of their power by promising them expropriated goodies if they would come on board. Claudine Favret remembers her mother’s Arab cleaning lady in Algiers, remarking well before the dire end of French Algeria and her parents’ ideas of flight that “she would have the refrigerator on their departure! For her [the cleaning lady], as for many other poor people, the notion of independence, of liberation, was associated with the acquisition of riches.” Favret knew many Europeans who later burned up their belongings, rather than
“abandoning them to pillagers.”

This does not mean that certain Arabs or Kabyles did not demonstrate varying attitudes when expropriation became a reality. Some were heartsick to a degree, knowing well that a new mafia-like, frying pan-into-the fire regime was in store, with plenty of new inequities to outdo the old ones. Raphaël Draï recalls that he had never heard his father “speak an unkind word about his Muslim associates [in Algeria]. We had been raised with respect for Muslim religion and culture.” Draï himself learned to speak Arabic fluently. When the end came for that family in the fall of 1961, and their house was thinned out after an agonizing choice of contents, Draï saw old Muslim employees and friends of his father pretending “not to see or to understand. I am certain,” he adds, “that ... hearts were divided, and souls, too.”

But all knew that for the Draïs and other Europeans or Algerian Jews, almost all was being lost.

The conditions under which people left Algeria in 1961-62, and beyond, too, with little or nothing were dire, in the extreme; and only the personal really illuminates that well. Raymond Baracchini remembers Camus’ Belcourt sector of Algiers as a “Chicago” (of the ‘20s) before he left with his wife and small child. Danger was everywhere. But leaving with what little they could take was dangerous as well. They thankfully obtained three providential airplane tickets for the early spring of 1962; however, an FLN strike meant no tram or bus service from their home, and an Arab there took severe risks coming at 4 a.m. to drive the author with his valises, then going back to get his wife and little girl! There followed a two-day wait on their suitcases without food or water, due to another strike; and finally, on April 3, 1962 they were on the plane, arriving penniless in Marseille, divested of jobs, trying to use worthless Algerian currency, and heavily patronized there.
Orli K., whom I interviewed on December 28, 2010, had bought into a quadriplex in Algiers in the late ‘50s, where she had a good job, along with her husband Charles. At one point she and her husband were offered 650,000 old francs for the condo apartment, and did not take it. By 1962, it was too late, and they lost the entire investment and their furniture, lucky enough even to get out with their lives.

The French government not only underestimated this massive expropriation they aided and abetted; they underestimated the sheer numbers who would have to leave with very little amidst an Algerian atmosphere in 1961-1962 of constant assassinations and the like—and quickly! Where before 1962, some 150,000 Europeans departed Algeria, in 1962 alone that number swelled to about 651,000. Just in a pathetically awful June 1962—no comparison to June ‘62 in, say, Muncie, Indiana, not to mention the Beach Boys’ California--328,434 arrived in France! All this sauve qui peut far exceeded economic-demographic war game scenarios put forward by bureaucratic planners in France. So the French government pretended, euphemized, and underplayed. The so-called “charte des rapatriés” of December 26, 1961 was far too theoretical, and chimerically predicated real help for French Algerians following independence. After the inking of the Evian Accords March 19, 1962, the previous law’s paucity of value was supplemented by another of April 2, 1962 (this after serious massacres of Europeans in Algiers). But many historians agree that aid was still not forthcoming to many beleaguered Algerian Europeans. And the government contributed to their penniless state on fleeing, including by taxes on moving expenses, not lifted until June 1962. Pending, however, all sorts of bureaucratic forms and receipts to be filed, which was very difficult for people trying simply to make it away in time with their lives. Underestimation remained the key factor here. At most the French
government had figured (as of Christmas 1961) on some 400,000 Europeans eventually leaving Algeria, but spread over four years to come--not months! As late as May 30, 1962 President de Gaulle scandalously remarked: “There is no exodus....” And all through that terrible summer of 1962 both Louis Joxe, Minister of Algerian Affairs, and Robert Boulin, Minister of Repatriation (Secrétaire d’Etat aux Rapatriés), were both calling the massively fleeing Europeans in their myriad numbers mere “vacanciers.” Sectors of the press followed suit by frequently labeling these people “vacationers” as well. Only when it was far too late and after independence, did the government try to counter this “dépossession en masse”, starting up an office for the “defense of property and interests of the repatriated from Algeria.” And only in October of 1962 did de Gaulle himself really avow the nature of this exodus. Only by then did various forms of aid become more forthcoming to the dispossessed, wracked also by much hostility on the mainland, unemployment, déclassement, and the rest.6

There was also much psychological expropriation related to economic spoliation, and again, the French government was very much a part of that. Too much of the metropole concurred in the imposition of this strange term “pied noir,” which only began making the rounds as a moniker for Algerian Europeans in the late ‘50s, and then became rooted as if there from time immemorial. To expropriate well—or to allow it without much of a peep—you first have to patronize well; obviously a far, far more serious series of expropriations and mass murders comes to mind in the Holocaust. But in each case you have to marginalize, and this is what happened to the “pieds noirs,” to the point where they themselves began adopting that term as a badge of persecuted honor. Already they had been patronized, mis-estimated, un-thanked by the FLN vultures, so this became a double patronizing, if you will. As Pierre Dimech puts it, “To the
destructive hatred of lives, which pushed them to choose between the valise and the coffin, was added ... the hatred composed of scorn, condescension, and negation of their characterological contributions.” Among the “cortège de clichés” that arose in this era was the tag-line of “fascism” which in almost all cases, was an absurd one; and yet the French government was checking for that still-feared quality of the ‘30s and ‘40s in European newcomers coming to France circa 1961-62.

The French government added to the “pied noir” devaluation by coining the term “repatriated” for the many in Algeria who had never lived in France at all! Eric Savarèse calls this “l’invention des rapatriés” and for Andrea L. Smith, it led to true absurdities, such as Maltese Europeans forced to reject the Algeria to which they had so contributed in favor of a France they had never known. The tremendous patronizing endured by those arriving in Marseille and making their way to other parts of France is well known. It was shown literally in unjustified hikes in prices of rents and taxis, and also in epithets of clear disgust related to this group that often had distinct Algerian accents. That patronizing emanated even from Marseille’s mayor of the period, and a national politician as well, Gaston Deferre. De Gaulle himself, always known for going above and beyond mere humans, felt little about any of this, too, speaking in Amiens in June 1964 about the “painless” integration of the pieds-noirs in France, which many ex-Algerians found a meretricious claim; and then on July 23, 1964 simply ending the short-lived Repatriation Ministry. But this was typical de Gaulle–on paper all was resolved, and the jagged edges of reality could be passed over. Nor did the Gaullian regime do a thing to protect, or even try to protect, those Europeans who stayed in post-independence Algeria, which translated into some 40,000 beleaguered souls still in Algiers as of March 31, 1965 and about 20,000 in Oran. By that
time they had been squeezed out in every way possible. First—tons of cars stolen, big rake-offs from pied noir farmers, religious edifices ruined or changed into mosques; and then nationalization of many agricultural products November 1962, of hotels and restaurants run by Europeans in March 1963, of remaining farms run by pieds noirs (c.f. Stalin and the kulaks) October 1, 1963; not to mention medical and hospital personnel ejected from their positions, and all the while, gigantic fines exacted and the rest. Where was le grand Charles on all that?\(^\text{11}\)

The trauma of psychological expropriation, to which I referred, lasted much longer in many lodged in the metropole than did the actual loss of their possessions. It was seen in intermittent longings for return trips to Algeria, though the sense that that country had painfully changed constituted an overwhelmingly stark reality. A Paul lawyer who had to leave Algeria abruptly in 1962 kept taking these return trips in his imagination—plotting everything he would do and visit in the Sétif, Constantine, and Algiers of his youth. But he never took the actual trip.\(^\text{12}\)

Claudine Favret and her husband did make such a voyage 30 years on (after her departure from Algeria), that is, circa 1990. Another pied-noir with “la nostalgie du désert” had organized a tour that would get down to the Sahara. But first, there was brief time to be spent in the cities of the north, and hurriedly Favret took her husband on a walking tour of her old haunts in Algiers. However, she was utterly shocked by the Animal Farm deliquescence she beheld everywhere—painting on buildings peeling, elevators that didn’t work, gardens gone to seed and without flowers, iron balconies dilapidated, wooden shutters broken, and plentiful cockroaches claiming the sidewalks. A final walk on a quai by the water revealed none of the old plant odors she had once loved, but instead, horrid ones of oil. Oran seemed similarly awful, and Algerians to whom she spoke whispered frantically about wanting only to leave these awful conditions
(created by Algerians). On the whole, this pied noir “nostalgerie” was better kept in France itself via photo albums, bulletins, or in sacred dates honored, such as massacres on Algiers’ Rue d’Isly March 26, 1962, or in Oran, July 5 of that year.\(^{13}\)

The oil expropriation issue really was a shame, too, given the romantic, tireless explorations in the Sahara by such as the legendary Conrad Killian and André Rossfelder, much of it thankless, much only tardily recognized and supported by the French government; and anything but important to the Muslims, until—pardon the pun—the petroleum potential really began panning out circa 1956. From then on the French government made new arrangements for the Sahara, and from then, too, the F.L.N. desired what some Muslims now were calling the fruit of Allah. From 1956 in their newspaper *El Moudjahid* and elsewhere “the FLN placed the incorporation of the Sahara with northern Algeria at the top of the agenda for cease-fire negotiations with French authorities.” Members of the Arab League jumped tardily on the bandwagon later in the ‘50s, and the Arab Petroleum Congress also made resolutions on the subject. After terribly hard negotiations, the Evian Accords of March 1962—disastrous in pretty well every respect—theoretically granted the French use of “existing hydrocarbons” in the Sahara. But the FLN never saw this as anything but a brief interlude, not unlike the Nazis of World War II, when they would make armistice or ghetto terms supposedly set in stone, which were then subsequently and quickly altered. By 1965 the agreement on oil was radically transformed and by 1971, “the last vestiges of French influence in petroleum affairs were swept away.”\(^{14}\)

Naturally the “Animal Farm syndrome” kicked in here as in other domains, and in Hocine Malti’s study of Algerian oil, he blames terrible mismanagement by the country’s post-1962 leaders for the poor standard of living in the country, to the point where he also looks skyward as
well for what is often termed the “curse of oil” (malédiction pétrolière) within the country.

“Why,” he asks, “did this gift of the heavens [!], which should have caused joy and happiness become the source of such misfortunes?” The real answer, he says, is that “Algeria is sick from its leaders” and the country “has become a hell, so that the destiny of millions of Algerians is only a bad life and sufferings, even blood and tears.” He concludes that this Algeria became “neither democratic nor for the people....”¹⁵

But as the French government should have been able to predict, even amidst the euphoria of decolonization, the easy apothegms of a JFK, or the Fanonesque Holy Writ of that time: when you hand everything over to a mafia, and/or let it expropriate massively, this becomes the result. Not only today’s Algeria is what one gets from this, but other parts of contemporary North Africa and the Middle East as well.
1. Simply on the agricultural innovations of eucalyptus planting in a new Algerian variety after 1860 to reduce extent of swamps; the tremendous innovations of early season vegetables in the Sahel; regional Algerian wines that worked; the novelty of clementines around the turn of the 20th century; reduction of grasshoppers—none of which would have occurred without the French and Europeans there—see Joëlle Hureau, La Mémoire des pieds-noirs (Paris: Perrin, 2001), 121-122, and passim.


3. Claudine Favret, Tribulations d’une famille d’Alger (Saint-Cyr-sur-Loire: Editions Alain Sutton, 2003), 301, 302. On the issue of whether to burn or leave furniture and the rest, Jean-Jacques Gonzales remembers an agonizing family division there. Before departing Algeria, his strong mother wanted to “leave the gas opened so that the whole thing would go up in flames. My father didn’t want that. He locked the door before leaving.” Gonzales, Oran: Récit (Paris: Ségui'er, 1997), 165. Gonzales remembers Oran having become before their departure “a gigantic bazaar full of intoxication and blood, where the beds were still made, the closets still full of shirts, dresses.....”; but he also remembers “broken dishes and garbage overturned,” and just visual chaos everywhere outside. Ibid. 166. He likened it all to a “souk.”


14. See the rather biased account of Ali Aïssaoui, *Algeria: The Political Economy of Oil and Gas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), quotations 48, 59. He considers this nationalization—or really, full expropriation—“inevitable” (78), arguing that it was a good thing (ch. 4). It should be noted that the author had been a senior advisor to the Algerian Ministry of Energy, as well as a member of the OPEC Board of Governors. Rachid Ouaissa in *La Classe-état algérienne 1962-2000: Une histoire du pouvoir algérien entre sous-développement, rente pétrolière et terrorisme* (Paris: Editions Publisud, 2010) says nothing about expropriation, only the passage from Ben Bella in 1962 to “le clan d’Oudja” and subsequent economic troubles in Algeria from about 1968. Ibid., 89 (quotation), 105.