

H-Diplo REVIEW ESSAY 298

5 January 2021

Owen White. *The Blood of the Colony: Wine and the Rise and Fall of French Algeria*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020. ISBN: 9780674248441 (hardcover, \$39.95/£31.95/€36.00).

<https://hdiplo.org/to/E298>

Editor: Diane Labrosse | Commissioning Editor: | Production Editor: George Fujii

REVIEW BY FRANK GERITS, UTRECHT UNIVERSITY

Owen White's *The Blood of the Colony* is an unexpected and intriguing exploration of the role wine and viticulture—the science, study and production of wine grapes—played in the history of French Algeria. White highlights how wine, like no other product is “embedded” within society and shaped by “social ties, cultural assumptions, and political processes,” making it a vital commodity to study social change (6). The colony, officially a French province, was the fourth-biggest wine producer in the world during most of the twentieth century. Based on research in governmental and commercial archives in France and Algeria the author provides readers with biographies of producers, farmers, and local leaders and argues wine “was fundamental to France’s colonization of Algeria” (233). The book wants to replace the “Rise and Fall paradigm” (3) of much of the colonial history writing by focusing on individual narratives of rise and fall, such as the story of Charles Debonno, the son of poor migrants from Malta who became successful but also ran into bankruptcy.

The author further highlights to what extent “wine was often a rather aggressively ‘capitalist venture’ despite the dominant notion in the 1880s that Algeria should remain an agricultural colony with a small industrial base” (4). While the first topic of this book methodologically draws on Frederick Cooper’s histories of African labor by highlighting the often counterintuitive and complex social roots of anticolonial resistance and labor, the second topic adopts Sven Beckert’s approach in the *Empire of Cotton*, which traced the history of a major commodity, cotton, to illuminate the global history of capitalism.¹ The result is a complicated history of the relationship between capitalism and colonialism. White discusses how wine drew Algerians into salaried work for the first time, determined to a large extent what the colony looked like, led to conflict with producers in the metropole who feared competition for Euro-Algerians (as White calls the French settlers), and by the 1960s had created a peculiar type of continued dependence upon the metropole. Algerian wine, after all, was consumed most by the former colonizer.

The reader is taken through seven multi-layered chapters that explore the “social history of French Algeria” (5). Chapter one, “roots,” establishes that wine was already being made in Algeria during the Roman period. It also highlights a contradiction that would become more pronounced in the colonial and postcolonial period, namely the tension stemming from alcohol production in a majority Muslim country. It was mainly Christians who pushed the ‘Wine Frontier’ and recognized that Algeria’s climate was ideal for the cultivation of grapes. Moreover, the viticulture of the Christian missionaries converged with the drive to colonize, with Trappist monks being particularly eager to turn Algeria into “another France” (33).

¹ Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (San Francisco: University of California Press, 2005); Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Knopf, 2014).

Chapter two explores how settlers in the final decades of the nineteenth century got caught up in credit-fueled agricultural capitalism of Algeria as land-holdings were increasingly concentrated. The vine-planting boom of the 1880s provided ‘rags-to-riches stories’ and enabled colonists to amass wealth despite the wine often being of poor quality (45). The pastoralist fantasies of French settlers were quickly being replaced by the image of the ‘vinelords,’ who became serious competitors to metropolitan producers.

In Chapter three White explores how after World War I successful producers increasingly began to invest in Algeria and expected increased political influence to flow from those investments. Chapter four explores the increasingly tense relationship between settlers and the metropole in the 1930s. Unlike the British case, where conflict with Kenyan and Rhodesian settlers centered on the appropriate representations of Africans in an unfair racial democracy, Paris feared its Algerian settlers because they could be transformed into competitors for French producers. Chapter five analyses how wine proved to be fertile ground for the creation of *Caves coopératives* and the labor movement. It focuses on prominent wine-related labor conflicts of the 1930s to dispel the myth that “any sort of conflict between rural Algerians and Euro-Algerians was on some level ‘anti-colonial’” (144). White argues that workers wanted to improve their conditions, rather than fight the anticolonial struggle.

Chapter 6 begins with an analysis of the colonial policies of the Vichy Regime and ends with the agreement to end the Algerian War in Evian in March 1962. Wine became caught up in the wartime economy and the Vichy regime came to see wine as a means to develop “the territory’s industrial base” (173). At independence, wine was still fundamental to the colonial economy, but changing demographics and geographies—the decline of rural settlement—more than Islam led to the end of wine’s dominant position in the colonial economy. Algeria’s decolonization led to the nationalization of the vineyards, which is highlighted in the final chapter. Rather than offering a neo-colonial interpretation of economic ties with France, Owen argues that when it came to wine, it was French producers who were the victim of continued dependence, since Algerian wine continued to enter France on favorable terms.

This book is a page-turner and is compelling particularly for its focus on individual experiences of Euro-Algerians as well as the laborers in the fields. White successfully shows the complexity of imperial relations. The book is therefore an excellent teaching tool to turn conventional narratives of metropole-colony relations on their head. This book takes on the relationship between capitalism and colonialism, the role of wine in modernization projects, the position of the settlers, and the precarious position of wine after independence. At the same time, the richness of the analysis and the absence of an explicit dialogue with scholars and discussions of the historiography on the topic make it difficult at times to grasp White’s central argument.² This book therefore needs to be read like good wine, slowly, so as to acquire a genuine appreciation of all the facets.

Frank Gerits is Assistant Professor in the History of International Relations at Utrecht University. After completing a Ph.D. at the European University Institute in 2014, he accepted postdoctoral positions at New York University (2015) and the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, South Africa (2016). In 2017 he was Lecturer in Conflict Studies at the University of Amsterdam. He has published articles in *Diplomatic History*, *the Journal of African History*, *Cold War History* and the *International History Review*.

² Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria’s Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Jeffrey James Byrne, *Mecca of Revolution: Algeria, Decolonization, and the Third World Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Muriel Cohen and Annick Lacroix, “Entre Algérie et France: Écrire Une Histoire Sociale Des Algériens Au Vingtième Siècle,” *French Politics, Culture and Society* 34:2 (2016): 1–10.