

Bidonvilles: from colonial policy to the Algerian War

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The term bidonville (literally a town built of oil drums) originated in North Africa in the 1930s and came into use in mainland France in the 1950s to designate neighbourhoods composed of temporary, makeshift housing, particularly housing that accommodated Algerians. Here, Françoise de Barros shows that the management of these bidonvilles by the public authorities was situated at the crossroads between a colonial legacy and constraints associated with the Algerian War.

In French, the term *bidonville* has been an established part of the language for decades and apparently poses few problems in terms of its definition: everyone seems to agree that it designates a form of accommodation typically inhabited by populations that are marginal and “temporary” in terms of both the quality of materials used and the legality of their existence. But this reality predates the appearance of the term: in interwar Paris, for example, the development of “La Zone” (the area around the former city fortifications – now occupied by the Périphérique ring road – where construction was not allowed) also fitted this description. This thus raises the question of how and when the term *bidonville* was first used to designate a much older reality, about which specialists had already written using different vocabulary.

As soon as one tries to constitute a history of *bidonvilles* in France, the usual chronological and territorial landmarks are immediately called into question, even when the situation is considered purely from the viewpoint of the public bodies who sought to transform or eradicate these slums. For example, *bidonvilles* represented a category of public intervention with regard to the urban fabric, dealt with in two laws, in 1964 and then in 1966, that provided mayors, local councillors and prefects¹ with specific legal tools. However, the actions of the French administration and local councils with regard to *bidonvilles* began long before then, without any ad hoc legal framework. This was the case first of all in the Paris region, where action was taken by personnel from the Paris prefecture of police and, above all, the prefecture of the old Seine *département* (which covered Paris and the inner suburbs), who were recruited to supervise and monitor French Muslims from Algeria (FMAs)² in the early 1950s. The first recorded uses of the term *bidonville* in mainland France appeared in the context of their activities.

Of course, at the time, France was an empire: the term *bidonville*, like the public action that targeted this type of accommodation, had appeared sometime between the 1930s and the 1940s in

¹ Translator’s note: in France, the prefect is the official representative of the state in each *département* (administrative division roughly equivalent to a county); in addition, there are a number of special prefects, such as the prefect of police in Paris, who is the head of the police force in the capital and who formerly exercised many of the responsibilities now held by the mayor of Paris.

² Between 1865 and 1944, French colonial domination in Algeria led to the creation of a specific legal status for Algerians: that of “subjects”, which allowed them to hold French nationality, but not French citizenship. In 1944, this “colonial hybridisation” was brought to an end for all Algerians residing in mainland France: from this point onwards, they therefore had the same voting rights as all other French people. However, a distinction continued to exist in practice, through the creation of a new legal term, “*Français musulmans d’Algérie*” (FMA), or “French Muslims from Algeria”.

the territories that France had colonised in North Africa. Administrative action with regard to *bidonvilles* would be more extensive in Algeria with the Constantine Plan³ initiated in 1958. Any history of state intervention in relation to *bidonvilles* should therefore include, from the outset, an imperial dimension, which implies analysing colonised territories and the mainland together and, as a result, not starting with the “decolonised” period of France’s history.

It is true that this colonial dimension is not the only aspect to be considered. The media attention accorded to *bidonvilles* in 1960s France, together with their structuring effects on later policies regarding urban interventions, was also due to the considerable development of urban policies from the 1950s onwards and, above all, the usage made of them by local politicians. This development was completely foreign to the French empire; However, the imperial dimension of the history of *bidonvilles* in mainland France is clear – first, through the practices of personnel in the prefectural administrations that took charge of dealing with the *bidonvilles*, who were recruited in Algeria; and secondly, because of the role played by *bidonvilles* in the manifestations of the Algerian War in mainland France.

Controlling the *bidonvilles*: an imperial policy (1930s–1950s)

The term *bidonville*, the reality it designates, the explanations concerning its apparition and the “solutions” developed through public action found for it all make *bidonvilles* one of the last avatars of colonial domination in terms of spatial organisation. Its origins are to be found in the geographical and historical space of the French colonisation of North Africa in and around the 1930s.⁴ Before the Second World War, the *bidonville* is thus confined to French colonial urban space and designates the urban consequences of the uncontrolled arrival of “indigenous Algerians” in the largest “European” cities within this space, owing to the agricultural unemployment crisis caused by colonisation. The public authorities in Algiers only began to come up with “solutions” from the 1940s and early 1950s.⁵ At this time, it was a matter of inventing and building “Muslim dwellings”,⁶ by finding architectural and urban methods of constructing housing that adapted to the colonial problem of what was the “right” urban distribution of “Europeans” and “Muslims”.⁷

The term *bidonville* and the colonial notion of urban intervention that *bidonvilles* conjure up apparently only crossed the Mediterranean in the 1950s, despite an already significant Algerian presence in mainland France from the 1920s onwards. It would seem that, at the time when the *bidonville* was identified in “North Africa”, the word was not used in mainland France to designate

³ See: Sacriste, F. 2012. “Surveiller et moderniser. Les camps de ‘regroupement’ de ruraux pendant la guerre d’indépendance algérienne”, *Métropolitiques*, 15 February. URL: <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/Surveiller-et-moderniser-Les-camps.html>.

⁴ Vaillat, L. 1931. *Le visage français du Maroc*, Paris: Horizons de France; Royer, J. 1932. *L’urbanisme aux colonies et dans les pays tropicaux*, La Charité-sur-Loire: Delaunay, 2 volumes; Rivet, D. 1996. “Hygiénisme pasteurien et exclusion des pauvres dans la ville coloniale : l’exemple des pauvres du Maroc du début des années 1930 à 1945”, *Mélanges Charles-Robert Ageron*, Tunis: Fondation Temini pour la recherche scientifique, volume 2, pp. 689–703; Liauzu, C. 1976. “Un aspect de la crise en Tunisie : la naissance des bidonvilles”, contribution to the symposium entitled “L’Afrique et la crise de 1930 (1924–1938)”, *Revue française d’histoire d’outre-mer*, nos. 232–233, pp. 607–621 (to back up this “Tunisian” theory, the author cites Adam, A. 1972. *Casablanca*, Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 2 volumes); Descloîtres, R., Descloîtres, C. & Reverdy, J.-C. 1961. *L’Algérie des bidonvilles. Le tiers-monde dans la cité*, Paris: Mouton, pp. 84–87. For a recent view that discusses above all the Moroccan and Tunisian circumstances of this development, see Cattedra, R. 2006. “Bidonville : paradigme et réalité refoulée de la ville au xx^e siècle”, in J.-C. Depaule (dir.), *Les mots de la stigmatisation urbaine*, Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l’homme–Unesco, pp. 123–163 and Cattedra, R. 2010. “Bidonville”, in C. Topalov, L. Coudroy de Lille, J.-C. Depaule & B. Marin (dir.), *L’aventure des mots de la ville à travers le temps, les langues, les sociétés*, Paris: Robert Laffont.

⁵ The publication of Jim House’s work on *bidonvilles* in Algiers, currently under way, is eagerly awaited.

⁶ Descloîtres, Descloîtres & Reverdy. 1961. *Op. cit.*; and also Socard, T. 1946. “L’urbanisme en Algérie”, “Logement musulman”, *Documents algériens*, Service du cabinet du gouverneur général d’Algérie, Série culture, no. 9.

⁷ Pelletier, J. 1955. “Un aspect de l’habitat à Alger : les bidonvilles”, *Revue de géographie de Lyon*, no. 3, p. 286.

accommodation for North African workers, whose presence was nonetheless already a subject of concern for the mainland authorities.⁸ Those studies that took an interest in such matters either were unaware of the existence of *bidonvilles*,⁹ or perceived them as a form of housing typical of the indigenous peoples living in the colonial territories.¹⁰

It was between 1953 and 1955 that the first occurrences of the term were recorded to designate spaces in mainland France that were thought to be among the first to be inhabited by Algerians – namely the *bidonvilles* of Nanterre, in the inner western suburbs of Paris.¹¹ From this point on, the term *bidonville* rapidly replaced the more traditional *taudis* (slum) and *garni* (lodging house), used since the 19th century to designate the most dilapidated housing, for Algerians and indeed all disadvantaged populations. The migration of the term *bidonville* from one side of the Mediterranean to the other is therefore not altogether concomitant with the migration of Algerians; rather, the term arrived, first and foremost, with the migration of “technical advisors for Muslim affairs” (known in French by the initialism “CTAM”), recruited from 1952 in Algeria to supervise the Algerian population in mainland France;¹² and, second, the recruitment of “North African social advisors” (known in French by the initialism “CSNA”) by the prefecture of the Seine *département* from 1950. The most developed area of the CTAMs’ activity was housing,¹³ even before the creation of Sonacotral¹⁴ in 1956. Like the solutions developed in Algiers to combat *bidonvilles*, the CTAMs’ action in this regard was not only concerned with providing appropriate housing for Algerians, but also with distributing the Algerian population appropriately within the urban space.¹⁵ It was only at the end of the 1960s that the category “*bidonvilles*” began to appear in the housing classifications used by INSEE (the French statistics office), at a time when a national *bidonville* clearance policy had only just come into force. This policy came into being as a result of the adoption of two ad hoc laws in 1964 and 1966, after more than 10 years of de facto clearance operations undertaken by specialised personnel such as CTAMs.

⁸ Laroque, P. & Ollive, P. 1938. *Le problème de l’émigration des travailleurs nord-africains en France*, Paris: Archives du Haut Conseil de l’Union française; Mauco, G, 1932. *Les étrangers en France*, Paris: Armand Colin, p. 345 et seqq.; Bernard, A. 1930. *L’Afrique française*, cited in Michel, A. 1957. *Les travailleurs algériens en France*, Paris: CNRS; and Sanson, R. 1947. “Les travailleurs nord-africains de la région parisienne”, *Documents sur l’immigration*, Paris: Institut national d’études démographiques, Travaux et Documents, Cahier no. 2, pp. 162–193.

⁹ Études sociales nord-africains. 1951. *Cahiers nord-africains*, “Le logement des Nord-Africains”, January/February; Rager, J.-J. 1956. “L’émigration en France des musulmans d’Algérie. Principaux aspects démographiques, économiques et sociaux. Rapport établi à la demande du Haut Comité consultatif de la population et de la famille”, *Documents algériens*, Service d’information du cabinet du gouverneur général d’Algérie, Série sociale, no. 49.

¹⁰ Chevalier, L. 1947. *Le problème démographique nord-africain*, Paris: Institut national d’études démographiques, Travaux et Documents, Cahier no. 6, p. 151.

¹¹ De Barros, F. 2003, “Les municipalités face aux Algériens : méconnaissances et usages des catégories coloniales en métropole avant et après la Seconde Guerre mondiale”, *Genèses*, no. 53, pp. 69–92.

¹² In 1952, the French Interior Ministry appointed “technical advisors for Muslim affairs” (in French, *conseillers techniques pour les affaires musulmanes* or CTAMs) to assist certain prefects in mainland France. The number of CTAMs increased following the insurgency of 1954 and continued to increase throughout the war, from 4 to 34 in 10 years. Their prerogatives also increased at the same rate: originally responsible for “facilitating the organisation of moral, material and social assistance for the Muslim population” and “the adaptation of French Muslim citizens in mainland France and ensur[ing] their professional and social promotion”, they were given express authority over “all matters relating to Muslim affairs” from 1958. See: de Barros, F. 2006. “Contours d’un réseau administratif ‘algérien’ et construction d’une compétence en ‘affaires musulmanes’. Les conseillers techniques pour les affaires musulmanes en métropoles (1952–1965)”, *Politix*, no. 76, pp. 97–117.

¹³ To our knowledge, no surveys have been carried out into the actual practices of CSNAs. For a description of their official duties, see: Viet, V. 1997. *La France immigrée. Construction d’une politique*, Paris: Fayard, pp. 180–184.

¹⁴ Translator’s note: Sonacotral (Société Nationale de Construction pour les Travailleurs Algériens) was a company created in 1956 to provide housing for Algerian workers who had migrated to France.

¹⁵ De Barros, F. 2005. “Des ‘Français musulmans d’Algérie’ aux ‘immigrés’. L’importation de classifications coloniales dans les politiques du logement en France (1950–1970)”, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, no. 159, pp. 27–45.

Current research is such that it is impossible to say whether this civilian personnel had already had similar experiences in dealing with Algerian *bidonvilles*. As far as CTAMs were concerned, for example, their careers in Algeria did not require them to deal with *bidonvilles* as – very rare exceptions aside – they occupied posts in extremely rural areas. However, it has been attested that the head of the SAT-FMA (Technical Assistance Section for French Muslims from Algeria), established in Nanterre in 1959, had previously occupied a position in the SAU (Urban Administrative Section) for the Algiers *bidonville* known as Le Clos-Salambier.¹⁶ But the individual concerned was a serviceman whose only interventions with regard to *bidonvilles*, in both Algeria and France, were in the context of the French repression of separatists.

The Algerian “specificity” of *bidonvilles* did not, however, derive solely from the colonial dimension of the first public interventions made in their connection or from the socialising effects on those that came into contact with the specialised personnel mentioned above; it was both reinforced and modified by the local effects of the Algerian War of Independence.

Apprehension regarding *bidonvilles* shaped by experiences during the War of Independence¹⁷

Between 1954 and 1962, the war in Algeria brought an extreme physical violence into French society, which, locally, put municipal politicians in difficult situations, especially in cases where they had established earlier ties with Algerian separatist militants. Local mayors and councillors had to run towns where “conscripts’ families” lived alongside several thousand Algerians who were suspected, wrongly or rightly, of supporting (willingly or under duress) separatists, or even participating in armed separatist activities. Indeed, between the start and the end of the War of Independence, the *bidonvilles*, often perceived as separatist fiefs,¹⁸ were always to be found alongside more legitimate housing and residents – established detached houses at first; new social housing at the end. The tensions associated with the conflict thus created very uncomfortable situations for local politicians: explaining the conflicts meant exposing themselves to consequences beyond their control in a general political context that was becoming increasingly unclear. For these politicians, especially those belonging to the French Communist Party (PCF), the situation therefore became unmentionable, at the risk of physical violence becoming widespread.

The arrival of war-related violence in local political spaces manifested itself with the posting of French soldiers to Algeria, which led to the “fear or pain of having lost a son, a husband or a brother”¹⁹ among the population, and made political support for “Algerian patriots” difficult. The year 1956 marked not only the distancing of nationalists from the PCF and the PCF-affiliated General Confederation of Labour (CGT) trade union, caused by communist MPs voting in favour of full powers in March,²⁰ but also the substitution of Algerian protests²¹ – organised since the start of the 1950s at the initiative of the MTLD (Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties), the separatist party led by Messali Hadj – by conscripts’ protests. In Nanterre, where French Muslims from Algeria were the subject of extensive electoral efforts since the 1940s, the arrival of

¹⁶ Blanchard, E. 2011. *La police parisienne et les Algériens (1944–1962)*, Paris: Nouveau Monde, p. 322.

¹⁷ This part of the text is based on a much reduced version of: de Barros, F. 2012 (to be published). “Les effets de la guerre d’indépendance algérienne sur des espaces politiques locaux métropolitains : représentations ‘coloniales’, pratiques électorales et politiques publiques communales”, in Bellanger, E. & Mischi, J. (dir.), *Les territoires du communisme. Élus locaux, politiques publiques et sociabilité militante*, Paris: Armand Colin.

¹⁸ See: Blanchard, E. 2012. “The police and the ‘Algerian medinas’ in France. Argenteuil, 1957–1962”, *Metropolitiques*, 7 March. URL: <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/The-police-and-the-Algerian.html>.

¹⁹ Stora, B. 1991. *La gangrène et l’oubli. Mémoire de la guerre d’Algérie*, Paris: La Découverte, pp. 52–55.

²⁰ Guy Mollet’s government requested – and obtained – “full powers” from parliament enabling them to take action in Algeria without first referring the matter to parliament, which allowed it to accord “special powers” a few days later to the army, dispensing it, in turn, from having to report its actions to the public authorities.

²¹ Tartakowsky, D. 1990. “Les manifestations de rue”, in Rioux, J.-P. (dir.), *La guerre d’Algérie et les Français*, Paris: Fayard, p. 132.

“conscripts’ families” into the local political space was significant, long-lasting and supported by local politicians – as if the latter were trying to counterbalance the feared effects of previous political efforts made with regard to the Algerians. The politicisation of the war by local politicians in Nanterre then focused on the concerns of these “Nanterre families”, the new figures of the anti-colonialist cause in October 1955. The presence of *bidonvilles*, home to the majority of the many Algerians in Nanterre, appears to be a factor that exacerbated tensions; however, it was also a means of avoiding violent consequences, as it provided grounds for neighbourhood disputes that replaced conflicts relating to the Algerian War. Such war-related conflicts were therefore silenced *per se*, while at the same time being expressed in terms of Nanterre’s urban fabric. In towns where there were no *bidonvilles* as such, other types of slums were the target of similar interventions, with the implementation of urban renewal projects that would have the same effects – as was the case in Roubaix in 1957.

In 1960, the mayor of Nanterre stated that “it is certain that continuing the war in Algeria generates, *on both sides*, a climate that is making everyday life more difficult and more tense”, and was creating a “*gap* that is widening every day”.²² But this gap could only be expressed clearly to those whom it directly concerned, namely the 64 “residents of Le Petit-Nanterre” who complained by petition about the “Algerians from the *bidonville*” and to whom Raymond Barbet responded with the words quoted above. The growth of the *bidonvilles* inhabited by Algerians in Nanterre during the war became the focal point of a latent conflict between those who lived in these slums and those who lived alongside them. This focus was facilitated by the fact that the *bidonville* of La Folie set the stage for the development of physical violence by becoming a battleground both between different separatist groups in 1957²³ and between separatists and police officers from the Paris prefecture of police, particularly from 1959 onwards, when a *harka*²⁴ – an Algerian auxiliary military company (the *harkis*) – was established opposite the *bidonville*.

Complaints about the “Algerian” *bidonvilles* made to local politicians in Nanterre were periodic between 1953 and 1966, but the way they were treated by elected officials underwent profound changes, particularly with regard to the war. During the war, the mayor sought to modify the definition of the situation suggested by the complaints and thereby avoid accusations being aimed at Algerians, which could aggravate the conflict. While the complainants presented themselves as victims of aggressive Algerians, Raymond Barbet developed extensive written arguments explaining why the Algerians were themselves victims. Once independence was declared, providing explanations of the confrontation was no longer a problem: the mayor stood by the definition of the situation proposed by the complainants, deeming Algerians’ behaviour and practices as unacceptable – as if the end of the war situation no longer justified the tempering of complaints against Algerians.

All of these elements reveal the considerable impact of the French empire on the existence of *bidonvilles* in mainland France, regardless of the angle from which they are examined, be it the terminology used, the housing conditions for Algerians that this term designates, the development of solutions to this phenomenon by the public authorities, or the effects of *bidonvilles* on local populations during the War of Independence.

²² Nanterre Municipal Archives. 1960. “Immigrés–bidonville 1955–1961”, letter from Raymond Barbet, 31 May. Our italics: although the *bidonvilles* are not explicitly referred to, they are nonetheless clearly designated by the implicit opposition in “on both sides” and “gap”.

²³ Stora, B., 1992. *Ils venaient d’Algérie. L’immigration algérienne en France (1912–1992)*, Paris: Fayard, pp. 109 and 151–170; Cohen, M. 2003. *Les Algériens des bidonvilles de Nanterre pendant la guerre d’Algérie : histoire et mémoire*, master’s degree dissertation, Université Paris-1.

²⁴ Hervo, M. 2001. *Chroniques du bidonville. Nanterre en guerre d’Algérie*, Paris: Le Seuil, p. 143; Viet, V. 1997. *Op. cit.*, p. 188.

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