



Algerians and the police: colonial continuities and the weight of the War of Independence

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How can the treatment suffered by Algerians at the hands of the Paris police in the mid-20th century be explained? Emmanuel Blanchard's recent work – the fruit of detailed investigative research – describes the role played by the transfer of Algerian organisational structures, career structures and colonial practices to mainland France, and underlines how the context of the War of Independence loomed large in the genesis of this police violence.

For Emmanuel Blanchard, 17 October 1961 is “a date that stands out in the history of law and order in 20th-century Paris” (p. 378), if only because of the extreme physical violence used by the various forms of police present in the French capital (riot police, mobile *gendarmerie*, police constables and district companies in particular), as illustrated by his assessment of the situation: at the very least, several tens of Algerians were killed and almost a thousand seriously injured, not just by gunshot but also by drowning, beating and suffocation. Although addressed in the final chapter of the book, this outbreak of violence is one of the starting points for the investigation carried out by the author into the practices of the Paris prefecture of police (PPP) directed at Algerians between 1944 and 1962. Bearing this in mind, this monograph can be read from two different perspectives. The first is as a sociological study of the police combined with a sociological study of the professions concerned, the world of work, the administration and the legitimate uses of physical violence. This is particularly interesting, as it takes into account the practices of “officers on the ground” as well as those of the prefects of police and – as far as sources allow – those of Algerians themselves. It is, however, a second perspective that we shall focus on here, namely that of “imperial movements” within a space comprising “metropolitan” territories (i.e. mainland France and Corsica) and colonised territories. To do justice to the contribution of this work with regard to this second perspective, three different tiers of “movement” can be identified: structures, careers and practices. The quality of Emmanuel Blanchard’s analysis serves to identify and qualify the processes of continuity at play at every level, with their limits and nuances, and ultimately highlights the role played by war situations.

Organisational structures for Algerians: historical continuities and geographical transfers

From the interwar period to the end of the Algerian War, at least, the PPP put in place specific permanent structures for Algerians, with the exception of the years between 1945 and 1953. This apparently simple continuity immediately raises a key question: what type of continuity is at play here – territorial or temporal?

On the one hand, the creation in 1925 of a North African Brigade (Brigade nord-africaine, BNA) and an “assistance service for native North Africans” (Service d’assistance aux indigènes nord-africains”, SAINA) at the prefecture of the Seine *département*¹ was effectively a means of extending “colonised” status to Algerians living in mainland France. The BNA was abolished in 1945 when the Organic Statute of Algeria adopted at this time gave Algerians living in metropolitan France full legal equality with other French citizens. In 1953, an “Aggression and Violence Prevention Brigade” (Brigade des agressions et violences, BAV) within the *police judiciaire* (the criminal investigation division of the national police) was created by the prefect of police as a way of specifically monitoring and later repressing Algerians, despite this legal equality. This therefore amounted to a temporal continuity of legally inoperative colonial discrimination.

The start of the Algerian War definitively removed any ambiguity regarding the colonised status of Algerians – even those in mainland France – and, from this point on, the multiple structures put in place by the PPP from 1957 with regard to Algerians once again reflected a certain continuity, with structures created in Algeria replicated in mainland France throughout this “war of decolonisation”. For example, 1958 saw the creation of: a “Coordination Service for Algerian Affairs” (Service de coordination des affaires algériennes, SCAA), essentially a transposition of the intelligence and action centre at the prefecture of Constantine, the role of which was to facilitate working relations between the police and the military; “Technical Assistance Divisions for French Muslims from Algeria” (Sections d’aide technique aux Français musulmans d’Algérie, SAT-FMA), based on the Algerian model of “Specialised Administrative Divisions” (Sections administratives spécialisées, SAS), to ensure the social, police and political control of Algerians in a given area; and an “Auxiliary Police Force” (Force de police auxiliaire, FPA), the equivalent of *harkas* (Algerian auxiliary military companies) responsible for protecting personnel from the SASs in Algeria. In 1959, these structures were complemented by the Vincennes Identification Centre (Centre d’identification de Vincennes, CIV), one of the most infamous Parisian components of the “custodial archipelago” in mainland France that was the network of “Residential Surveillance Centres” (Centres d’assignation à résidence surveillée, CARS), for Algerians only, following the model of detention centres set up in Algeria by military personnel accorded (from 1955) police powers.

Imperial administrative careers: geographical trajectories, specific expertise and experience of punitive measures

In the absence of *ad hoc* structures between 1945 and 1953, the supervisory and support measures reserved for Algerians created during the interwar period were maintained *a minima* thanks to a minority of BNA and SAINA personnel who continued to work in contact with Algerians on behalf of the PPP or the prefecture of the Seine *département*. When, in 1950, new “Algerian population specialist” posts – styled “social counsellors” – were created, they were filled on the basis of linguistic skills in Arabic or Berber languages, personal links with the Algerian colonial administration and/or society, or even through membership of the corps of non-commissioned officers of the colonial troops and strong character references resulting from the colonial administration in Algeria. Recruitment for the structures set up from 1958 onwards established even closer ties with the colonial administration: the SAT-FMA and identification services at the CIV were composed exclusively of officers from Algerian Affairs, while the FPAs

¹ The Seine *département*, abolished in 1968, covered the city of Paris proper and the inner suburbs.

were essentially made up of Algerians. But before the War of Independence, “colonial” recruitment was not the norm in these new structures. In particular, it represented a very small minority in the BAV, owing to its local recruitment procedures, while the National Police recruited from both metropolitan France and Algeria. As the number of people employed in the BAV was significantly higher than the number of “social counsellors” operating during the same period, we can even conclude that a numerical minority of police personnel – among all those assigned to the “Algerian police” in Paris – were from colonial backgrounds or had personal links with personnel from such backgrounds.

However, if we consider the senior hierarchy, from the interior ministers to the prefects of police, the colonial dimensions are continuous, but with very different implications. They range from merely “taking into account the interests of settlers” (based on effective links or ideological proximity) for ministers, to real administrative specialisations for prefects – all of whom, as policing specialists, had previous experience as governors-general of Algeria, from the 19th century on. Nevertheless, the longevity of the relationship with Algeria tells us nothing about its true nature, and nor, therefore, anything about the interpretation that one may make of “colonial careers” in terms of the practices they induced. For instance, Maurice Papon, originally from mainland France, was converted to “counter-revolutionary psychological warfare” in Algeria and during the violent colonial repression in Morocco, while his contemporary André Dubois, a “third-generation Algerian”, refused the post of prefect of Algiers, as this may well have required him to adopt and implement insufficiently liberal policies. In this way, Emmanuel Blanchard invites the reader not to artificially homogenise appointments in Algeria, or indeed in any other colonised space, and instead to analyse the colonial administration as a separate and specific social and professional space, which, though “connected” to metropolitan France, is nevertheless diverse and even relatively complex, especially when actual practices are considered.

From discriminatory practices to punitive practices: what continuities can be identified?

Continuities in terms of structures, personnel and careers are inseparable from continuities in terms of practices, as continuities relating to colonial practices are often derived from continuities in structures and/or careers. And yet the author’s constant preoccupation with trying to understand practices with regard to Algerians shows that the links between structures, personnel and practices often vary considerably.

The discriminatory practices of the BNA, and subsequently those of the “social counsellors” employed by the prefecture of the Seine *département*, involved using social and health assistance to monitor and punish Algerians. They could therefore be seen as a replication on the mainland of the kinds of control measures applied to native populations in Algeria (via the “mixed municipalities”,² whose administrations were involved in implementing such tasks) – especially as Algerians were also the subject of descriptions that partly recycled “knowledge” acquired from “colonial experts” outside the PPP. However, the author points out that this has long been one of the methods used by police with respect to other stigmatised populations, such as prostitutes or “vagrants”. Other stigmatising treatments, such as excessively sordid or pessimistic descriptions or the criminalisation of political activities in speeches and statistics supposed to describe particular populations, or even the imposition of identity cards, the keeping of files on individuals and racialisation, were not restricted to Algerians either: prostitutes, “nomads” or “Jews” also suffered these measures.

Similarly, Emmanuel Blanchard contextualises the use of certain forms of physical violence (beatings, deprivation of food or sleep, damage to personal property during interrogation) which are now legally defined as torture. Indeed, he reminds us that professional police standards in metropolitan France after 1945 (including in the *police judiciaire*) very officially advocated such levels of violence, which today are prohibited. Finally, the fact that firearms (and the use thereof)

² “Mixed municipalities” (*communes mixtes*) were very large administrative districts in Algeria containing significant Muslim populations and reduced European populations.

became far more commonplace during World War II triggered a trend for summary executions of “gangsters” in the late 1940s. The use of firearms outside the legal context of self-defence only began to decrease in the late 1950s, at a time when their use against Algerians was on the increase. Algerians were therefore not the only targets of the discrimination and (sometimes extreme) physical violence meted by the Paris police in the middle of the 20th century; however, such treatments had the overall effect of generating a consistently negative image and public opinion, widely disseminated by the press, which at the same time failed to investigate the professional practices of the *police judiciaire* or the police intelligence services.

From 1958, the punitive practices suffered by Algerians in Paris were as specific as those to which they have been subjected in Algeria since 1955: not just summary executions and “Algerian-style” torture, i.e. using “instruments”, but above all “administrative detention”, i.e. arbitrary detention, with no maximum duration and in physical conditions that were difficult, to say the least. Although it is true that such practices occurred in metropolitan France less frequently and in a less systematic manner than in Algeria, they nonetheless differ from typical mainland police practices of the time in terms of how far they strayed from the public freedoms guaranteed in metropolitan France by police work being subordinate to the work of the judiciary and thus to legal rules protecting individuals. Summary executions and torture cannot be quantified, due to a lack of records, but a number of elements indicate that they were common occurrences. By contrast, the archives clearly show that “illegal” internment affected a large proportion of the Algerians in the Paris region: 67,000 in 1960 and in the CIV alone! The massive scale of this wrongful internment was made possible by carrying out equally massive raids and round-ups of Algerians.

In addition to identifying and analysing these practices – which went against the rules of police work applied to “Europeans” in metropolitan France at the time – Emmanuel Blanchard shows that they were not the exclusive reserve of personnel produced by the repressive machine in Algeria and recruited to the PPP by Maurice Papon. Or rather, the effects of their practices – beginning with those of the prefect of police – significantly change the framework of practices of all PPP personnel in contact with Algerians. The FPA’s illegal methods of arrest and of interrogation with torture spread the idea of “no holds barred” and, as a result, influenced investigations conducted by personnel without any “Algerian specificity” and who were expected to continue to comply with the rules of procedure. Above all, Maurice Papon called for and, in 1958, obtained a decisive change in the legal framework that until then had governed police work, enabling the imposition of a curfew on Algerians, permitting their administrative detention on the basis of prefectural orders, and, in practice, allowing Algerians to be shot on sight. While it is true that the senior personnel within the PPP – even before Maurice Papon’s arrival at its head – had for a number of years ceased to monitor the way police officers used their firearms, it was Papon who legalised this lethal violence against Algerians specifically.

The repression and resulting massacre of 17 October 1961 formed part of this gradual change in the rules for the use of physical violence by the police, with additional factors being the actual measures implemented and the way police personnel were managed. More specifically, the police officers in question were not instructed to disperse an illegal public gathering (the “normal” method of policing in metropolitan France in the 20th century), but rather to grab and kill as many people as possible. Consequently, the way in which the police – at all hierarchical levels and in all corps – reacted to Algerians’ protests against the ban prohibiting them from entering public spaces bears many similarities to the repression of similar “native” initiatives in Algiers in 1960 and in Morocco in the early 1950s.

The careful analysis presented by Emmanuel Blanchard therefore avoids becoming trapped in an “internalist” approach to these practices; on the contrary, it reveals the various aspects that these practices owe to the specific historical and social contexts in which they occur, as not everything can be explained by the trajectories or origins of those responsible.

A decisive war context

The wartime context of the period in question plays a decisive role in the development of police practices affecting Algerians. First, the structures, practices and much of the personnel put in place by Maurice Papon from 1958 at the PPP were both colonial and military in nature and, moreover, were derived from a form of military action invented during the Indochina War to combat the guerrillas: it brings together military and police personnel in order to carry out intelligence and enforcement work that goes against the professional rules of both the mainland French police and the army. Papon made no secret of his desire to transform the Paris police into a “counter-revolutionary” army targeting Algerians.

But the War of Independence had wider-ranging effects on the PPP too. First, in the late 1950s, the recall of the first conscripts to mainland France coincided with recruitment difficulties at the prefecture of police; in a context of high staff turnover, the PPP therefore gave its full backing to the recruitment of these former conscripts – so much so that, at this time, a substantial proportion of new police constables in Paris, whose numbers had been significantly increased, were likely to have experienced not so much Algeria as the War of Independence and therefore its extreme violence. For earlier generations of police officers, it was the Second World War that provided a form of war-related socialisation. The use of firearms was permitted in contexts extending far beyond self-defence; executions became the norm instead of arrests; and large stocks of munitions were maintained. These war-related socialisations were reinforced by the fact that, from January 1958, the separatists started targeting Paris police officers, making their job much more dangerous. The widespread radicalisation of police violence against Algerians sought by Maurice Papon’s policymaking from March 1958 was thus also sustained by warlike movements among police and separatists alike.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the war context was dominant at the political level. In 1957, the political powers were threatened by the army and thus became more heavily dependent on the police to avoid being overthrown by force. They were then also dependent on the police to ensure that the FLN (National Liberation Front) was in a weak position during negotiations. These political imperatives, defined by the war, played a key role in the appointment of Maurice Papon to the head of the PPP as a “theorist and pragmatist of the ‘counter-revolutionary’ war” (p. 316) and the approval of his policies by the prime minister and the president. But before this period in which the political system itself is called into question, it is the start of the War of Independence that enables the PPP to obtain the necessary legal instruments to develop the imposition of identity cards for Algerians, initiated in 1950, with the creation in 1955 of a national identity card, made compulsory in 1956 for all travel requests. Emmanuel Blanchard’s demonstration that the administration is not always disconnected from the political arena is not the least of this work’s merits.

While the highest political institutions in the land opened the way for Paris police practices to evolve towards those of a “counter-revolutionary war”, it was, however, public opinion in metropolitan France – via newspapers and some more or less organised groups (e.g. retailers, sports movements) – that helped prevent Maurice Papon from implementing even more widely in Paris the methods he had tested in Constantine.

Challenging the colonial era

From every point of view, Emmanuel Blanchard’s work is a valuable tool for those researching imperial issues. First of all, from a formal perspective, it stands out thanks to the quality of the critical apparatus: dense, precise and up-to-date. Above all, in the field of law enforcement, it precisely identifies the contours and content of imperial movements.

In this way, it identifies some continuities in time between structures specifically dedicated to the supervision and control of Algerians in Paris before the war and the practices of certain prefectural

agents in the 1950s. But this form of supervision, together with other discriminatory practices, was not restricted to Algerians, except to the extent that it was effected by personnel who were supposed to “know” them as a result of their experiences in Algeria. On the other hand, the very real specificities of police control with regard to Algerians after the war (which were not used for other police “clientele”) are all linked to the context of anti-guerilla war that unfolds in Paris from 1958. While it is true that these extremely violent practices were promoted and initiated as a result of certain personnel transfers from Algeria – principally military staff and Maurice Papon – it was only the broader implications of the War of Independence that made their action possible and, above all, efficient. The war not only raised the level of physical violence among all Paris police officers, in their working conditions and in their personal experiences prior to joining the PPP, but also rendered the unlimited use of this violence essential for the public authorities.

It is thus tempting to conclude, for this period beginning in 1957, that the circulation of people and practices between Algeria and metropolitan France was both war-related and colonial in nature, just like the overall policy framework in place. Ultimately, it must be remembered that this extraordinary escalation in the level of physical violence in mainland France was legalised and encouraged with a single target in mind – Algerians – by the political authorities in Paris. The highly selective nature of this extraordinary physical and legal violence suggests that there was no escaping the racial organisation of these colonial practices, whatever the “colonial” background or otherwise of their perpetrators.

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