



A Clear Conscience, Albert Camus

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The gulf between metropolitan France and the French of Algeria has never been wider. To consider the metropole first, it is as if the long-overdue indictment of France's policy of colonization has been extended to all the French living in Algeria. If you read certain newspapers, you get the impression that Algeria is a land of a million whip-wielding, cigar-chomping colonists driving around in Cadillacs.

This is a dangerous cliché. To heap scorn on a million of our fellow Frenchmen or quietly disdain them, indiscriminately blaming all for the sins of a few, can only hinder rather than encourage the progress that everyone claims to want, because such scorn inevitably affects the attitudes of the French settlers.

Indeed, at the moment a majority of them believe that metropolitan France has stabbed them in the back—and I ask my metropolitan readers to measure the gravity of this situation.

In a separate article I will try to show the settlers that their judgment is incorrect. Nevertheless, it exists, and the settlers, united by a bitter sense of abandonment, cling to it except when dreaming of criminal repression or stunning surrender.

What we need most in Algeria today, however, is a body of liberal opinion capable of moving quickly toward a solution, before the country is bathed in blood. In any case, this need should force us to make the distinctions essential to a just apportionment of the respective responsibilities of colony and metropole.

Those distinctions are in fact quite easy to make. Eighty percent of the French settlers are not colonists but workers and small businessmen. The standard of living of the workers, though superior to that of the Arabs, is inferior to that of workers in the metropole. Two examples will suffice to make this clear. The minimum wage is set at a level below that found in the poorest parts of France. The father of a family with three children receives not quite 7,200 francs in social benefits, compared with 19,000 in France.

Those are your colonial profiteers.

Yet these same ordinary people are the first victims of the present situation. They are not the ones placing ads in the papers, looking to buy property in Provence or apartments in Paris. They were born in Algeria and will die there, and their one hope is that they will not die in terror or be massacred in the pit of some mine.

Must these hardworking Frenchmen, who live in isolated rural towns and villages, be sacrificed to expiate the immense sins of French colonization? Those who think so should first say as much and then, in my view, go offer themselves up as expiatory victims. It is too easy to allow others to be sacrificed, and if the French of Algeria bear their share of responsibility, the French of France must not forget theirs either.

Who in fact has wrecked every reform proposal of the last 30 years, if not a parliament elected by the French? Who closed their ears to the cries of Arab misery? Who remained indifferent to the repression of 1945, if not the vast majority of the French press? And finally, who, if not France, waited with a revoltingly clear conscience until Algeria was bleeding before taking note of the fact that the country even existed?

If the French of Algeria nursed their prejudices, was it not with the blessing of the metropole? And wouldn't the French standard of living, as inadequate as it was, not have been worse but for the misery of millions of Arabs? All of France battered on the hunger of the Arabs—that is the truth. The only innocents in this affair were the young men who were sent into battle.

The true responsibility for the current disaster rests primarily with a series of French governments, backed by the comfortable indifference of the press and public opinion and supported by the complacency of lawmakers. In any case, they are more guilty than the hundreds of thousands of French workers who scrape by in Algeria on their miserable wages, who responded three times in 30 years to the call to take up arms on behalf of the metropole, and who are rewarded today by the contempt of the very people they helped.

They are more guilty than the Jewish populations that have been caught for years between French anti-Semitism and Arab distrust and who today find themselves forced by French indifference to seek refuge in another country.

Let us admit, therefore, once and for all, that the fault here is collective, but let us not draw from this fact the conclusion that expiation is necessary. Such a conclusion would become repugnant the moment others were called upon to pay the price. In politics, moreover, nothing is ever expiated.

Errors can be repaired, and justice can be done. The Arabs are due a major reparation, in my opinion, a stunning reparation. But it must come from France as a whole, not from the blood of French men and women living in Algeria. Say this loud and clear and I know that those

settlers will overcome their prejudices and participate in the construction of a new Algeria.

The End