



PROJECT MUSE®

---

*Markets of Civilization: Islam and Racial Capitalism in  
Algeria* by Muriam Haleh Davis (review)

Burleigh Hendrickson

L'Esprit Créateur, Volume 64, Number 1, Spring 2024, p. 160 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/esp.2024.a929213>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/929213>

talism, a meticulous exegesis of the Caribbean critique of social form, and a stirring defense of the moral imperative of justice as equality.

PHILIP KAISARY  
Carleton University

Muriam Haleh Davis. *Markets of Civilization: Islam and Racial Capitalism in Algeria*. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2022. Pp. xiv + 264. \$99.95 cloth, \$26.95 pbk.

Muriam Haleh Davis's *Markets of Civilization* traces how French ideas about race and religion informed economic policy in Algeria. Davis introduces two powerful ideal types that emerged out of French colonization, *homo economicus* and *homo islamicus*. These imagined concepts weighed heavily on colonial debates and determined economic policy from the nineteenth century through the early days of Algerian independence.

Davis argues that in French Algeria, "Islam was the basis of a racial regime of religion, which underpinned the economic structures of the settler colony" (20). Defining Algerian Muslims as "natives" provided France with a legal language to deny Muslims property and citizenship rights, and to limit their economic activity. This "racial fix" also exempted French settlers from onerous taxes and justified the redistribution of agricultural lands to white settlers deemed more suitable to develop them.

By the late nineteenth century, the French relied on a native subproletariat that garnered a fraction of white wages for the same labor. French policymakers eventually gave up on converting Algerian Muslims and instead focused on "economic assimilation." No longer fixated on Algerians' religious fanaticism, colonial officials redefined racial difference in relation to production. Twentieth-century development projects (*mise en valeur*) would integrate Muslims into capitalist production without having to renounce Islam. Facing dangerous nationalist and communist currents, officials placed their hopes on rising income levels to convince Algerians of Western superiority.

On the eve of the Algerian Revolution, officials increasingly viewed native peasants (*fellahs*) as a threat to modernization due to their "oriental passivity" and "mistrust of Western techniques" (108). This updated version of *homo islamicus* led planners to ban traditional sharecropping practices. In theory, rural Algerians prone to rebellion would be pacified once they experienced the economic benefits of France's Constantine Plan. Though it ultimately failed to bolster production, the plan did succeed in destroying local agricultural practices.

Whether on the part of French technocrats or early Algerian nation-builders, Davis convincingly argues that French colonial tropes provided an "essential grammar" that coupled "religious principles and economic organization" (120). After independence in 1962, Algerian President Ahmed Ben Bella reconfigured French colonial myths to claim that Islamic values were actually essential to economic success. Restructuring included socialist initiatives like land nationalization, but it also incorporated colonial systems of credit.

Some readers may yearn to know more about the impact of French racial capitalism on everyday Algerians, who sometimes appear only as statistics. But Davis is up front that the book is not a history from below. Instead, she brilliantly details how colonial ideas about race, religion, and economy provided the discursive power that enabled the rise of neoliberalism. Colonial humanism transformed into neoliberal international development, and even informed Algerian socialism. At times, the *homo islamicus* and *homo economicus* binary seems in conflict with the complex racial, religious, and economic hierarchies that Davis expertly uncovers. But ultimately, *Markets of Civilization* combines skillful research with a creative revival of racial capitalism. It should be of great interest to scholars of French empire and the intersections of cultural and economic history.

BURLEIGH HENDRICKSON  
Pennsylvania State University