



BOOKS AND CLASSICS

## The latence of the European colonial past

Kiran Klaus Patel

Ludwig-Maximilians-University München, Munich, Germany

Corresponding author. E-mail: [patel@lmu.de](mailto:patel@lmu.de)

(Received 11 November 2022; accepted 11 November 2022; first published online 21 December 2022)

### Abstract

The history of European integration, even if yet a rather minor sub-field, has seen a good deal of developments in the last two decades. New scholars have joined the field and new topics of research have been considered. Megan Brown's *The Seventh Member State* is an impressive contribution to the literature. The book does not only demonstrate that a main goal of the European Economic Community was to rescue the imperial nation-state, but illustrates the point by means of considering the complex relationship between France and Algeria, also marked by Algeria becoming part of the territory of the European Economic Community. As Brown shows, this had lasting effects, especially after Algeria's independence. Doubts, however, can be raised regarding the extent to which the title of the book is not a trifle exaggerated. Not least because Algeria was never offered the status of member state, but remained subordinated to France. If its territory was part of the EEC, it was indeed as a result of the peculiar status assigned to Algeria under French law. In addition, it could be argued that the conclusions of the book would have been strengthened if a wider set of archives and literature would have been consulted (Dutch and German, and above all Algerian literature).

**Keywords:** European integration history; imperialism; Eurafrica; membership; Algeria; France

For a long period of time, the history of European integration has failed to attract significant scholarly attention. The situation is very different in history's neighboring disciplines, such as law and politics, where the analysis of the European Union has long been a well-established field of research, notably on both sides of the Atlantic (and beyond). Before discussing Megan Brown's book in detail<sup>1</sup>, I would first like to place it in a broader historiographical context and stress how it adds to the state of research. I will then discuss two further reasons why the book is important before raising three more critical points. In doing so, I am writing as a historian. But I am aware that most readers of this forum share a special interest in the role of law.

While the history of European integration has remained a rather minor sub-field, two developments are remarkable. Firstly, it has seen a great deal of conceptual innovation over the past 15 to 20 years. While it long concentrated on diplomatic and economic histories, revolving around treaty negotiations and national economic rationales, recent studies have added transnational, cultural, and many other dimensions. Law, which was basically absent until the turn of the millennium, has finally attracted historians' attention. The key role of decisions made by the Court of Justice of the European Union, established some seventy years ago in 1952, has become an especially lively and productive area of historical inquiry.

<sup>1</sup>M Brown, *The Seventh Member State: Algeria, France, and the European Community* (Harvard University Press 2022).

Secondly, most of these innovations – and in fact almost all the historical research on this issue – have originated in work done in Europe by European historians. The absence of US-based colleagues is particularly striking. During the 1980s and 1990s, scholars such as Charles S. Maier, Michael J. Hogan, and John R. Gillingham contributed to the debate about postwar European integration efforts, such as the Marshall Plan and the European Coal and Steel Community. Since then, rather little has happened. Recent interventions by established scholars such as Konrad H. Jarausch and Perry Anderson are the exceptions that prove the rule. It is striking how few young US-based scholars are joining the field. Just consider how ancient history, or study of the Enlightenment or Meiji-era Japan would look without the key contributions of US-based scholars. Against this backdrop, the American absence in European integration history is all the more striking. Having said this, I see interesting changes, particularly over the last five years or so. Partly for good, partly for sad reasons (most importantly, the increasingly tight ‘European history’ job market in the United States), a younger generation has started to discover European integration history. They tend to eschew a conventional, nation-centred perspective even more than their European colleagues; very often, empire looms large in their work. The (published and unpublished) work of a new generation of scholars such as Owen White, Muriam Davis, and Venus Bivar represents an exciting development that might turn into a trend – a trend to which Megan Brown is now contributing with her work. Interestingly, most of these scholars were trained in French history and ended doing European integration history via the detour of French colonial history. This is a highly productive avenue, and one can only hope that this current will gain further momentum.

Megan Brown’s analysis of Algeria in the first decades of European integration is an impressive contribution to the field. Others have already explored the many ways in which postwar efforts to unify Europe reflect a late-colonial mindset and reality; European integration did not mean the continent turning inward, but it represented another – helpless and hapless – effort to secure Europe’s continued global dominance. While Algeria has already been covered from several angles, *The Seventh Member State* takes the debate several steps further. Its key argument plays on a well-established formula: In the 1990s, historian Alan S. Milward argued that European integration was more about the rescuing of the nation-state than peace, idealism, and supranational federation. Brown now convincingly demonstrates that, for France especially, European integration and the European Economic Community (EEC) as the most important predecessor of today’s EU served to rescue the imperial nation state. Algeria is a very special case in this context: Politically and legally, Algeria was an integral part of France during the early postwar period, not a far-away colony. This, together with the bloody war of independence until 1962, make its history particularly significant for understanding the colonial dimension of European integration. Brown cites many examples of the mindset and practices of European (mainly French) politicians and administrators, demonstrating the complex dynamics that resulted from this constellation. One effect was that Algeria became a de facto part of the EEC for several years. Moreover, she goes beyond other studies to show that these late-colonial ideas did not just impact European integration in the 1950s, but they had lasting effects also during the 1960s and 1970s (the first ten years after 1945 would have deserved more attention in the book). All in all *The Seventh Member State* is an important contribution to a field that still suffers from an inward-looking tendency that frequently downplays the – mostly problematic – impact of European integration on third countries, especially those in the global South.

Especially importantly in the context of the present forum, *The Seventh Member State* brings in law in interesting ways and pays particular attention to the role of the European Court of Justice. Brown analyses several rulings that overturned discriminatory practices against non-French Europeans and non-Europeans who had worked in Algeria but were denied recognition of the ensuing health and pension entitlements. The court ruled, as the book underscores, in favour of these individuals. In *Horst*, for instance, it maintained that Member States had to recognise employment in Algeria prior to independence from France in 1962, and also in the period until

1965, thus emphasising how strong ties continued to link Algeria to the EEC during the transitional post-independence period. These are highly relevant findings. They bring in legal history in a meaningful way, while also giving European integration a human face. They demonstrate how mostly abstract and multi-faceted political and administrative processes impacted individual lives, of people such as Gerd Fiege, Ulrich Horst, Auguste Hirardin, and Tayeb Belbouab, whose careers reflected the labor mobility of the postwar era. A lot of recent EU legal history has focused on internal dynamics, through landmark decisions such as *Van Gend & Loos*, *Costa v ENEL*, and *Cassis de Dijon*. This book shows that the Court also played an important role in shaping the EEC's external relations, including matters reflecting complicated colonial realities and legacies.

As more critical points, I would first like to discuss the book's title. While snappy and attractive, it implies a promise that the volume does not intend to meet. One could even find it apologetic – which would be the very opposite of the author's intention. One significant aspect that the book fails to reflect is that Algeria was not the first contender to be named a seventh member state. Contemporaries and historians of European integration have long discussed the case of the German Democratic Republic. German postwar division was the reason why only West Germany became part of the EEC. It also helps to explain why the GDR was given a special arrangement with the Member States, even if this did *not* make it a seventh member. Another problem is much more important. The expression 'Member State' carries great legal weight, also in the original treaties, as Annie Niessen has recently shown in a hitherto unpublished PhD thesis. Algeria was never given membership status. While it was dragged into the Common Market, and to an extent profited from that, it was never invited to the decision-making table. Calling Algeria a seventh member state downplays the extreme power asymmetry and the fact that Algeria was long kept in limbo. That reflected the racialised and inward-looking dimensions of European integration. One could argue that it takes a catchy title to attract readers' attention and then bring in the complexities. But such a decision comes at a high intellectual price.

Secondly, on the book's methodology. One reason why European integration history has remained a rather small field is that established standards are very high. For many issues, multi-archival, multinational and hence multilingual research has become the gold standard. Coming from fundamentally different intellectual traditions, postcolonial studies and global history have also stressed the need to bring in a plurality of voices, including those from the global South. *The Seventh Member State* discusses the role of all of the EU's original Member States plus Algeria, but almost exclusively on the basis of sources and literature in French and English that are available in European archives and libraries (and in the United States). That creates certain biases, as the roles of important players such as the Dutch and the Germans are depicted only through the lens of non-Dutch and non-German sources, leading to clear distortions. Given the topic, the dearth of Algerian sources is even more problematic. The book does reproduce certain public statements, but very little to explain dynamics within Algerian political circles and society. It argues convincingly that the Algerian government ultimately took a rather pragmatic stance, accepting the benefits of close relations with the EEC whenever possible. Given the importance of the liberation movement and ideas about an alternative world order beyond Western domination and the Cold War, it would have been extremely helpful to learn more about internal Algerian debates.

Thirdly, back to law: for all the focus to the European Court of Justice, other dimensions of EU legal history would have deserved more attention. The book examines policy fields as diverse as agriculture, migration, and industrial commodities. Under EEC law, these policy domains followed different legal logics and produced different chronologies. Most importantly, some of these fields became more supranational than others, creating a situation of variation in the role and room for maneuver of the member states, the Commission, but also an actor such as the Algerian government. The book provides insights into the dynamics in these policy fields, but fails to reap the full harvest by comparing the role of law (and other factors) across them systematically. This holds particularly true because of Algeria's ambivalent role in European integration:

it found itself in a constellation where law sometimes mattered, sometimes not. Moreover, law was occasionally used to define a state of exception – a paradoxical situation that was quite common in colonial constellations and accentuates the role of law as a still under-researched tool of white supremacy and European domination. Hence, law would have deserved even much more attention.

All in all, *The Seventh Member State* is an impressive book. It deepens our knowledge about the history of European integration in various ways. Most importantly, it challenges widely circulating but simplistic accounts, according to which European integration was an internal and postcolonial European affair without a complicated and problematic colonial dimension and legacy.

**Competing interests.** The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.