

# What Has Independence Meant?



The Kasbah-ancient Arab section

troyed much of what was left. The departure en masse of the European population of Algeria deprived the country of capital and of almost its entire technical and professional class. Algeria was left a country without industry or people to run it, a country that kept its budget balanced only with the help of foreign aid, a country where men could not find work. Such would seem to be the fruits of independence.

Yet despite the havoc independence has brought to the country, a long-range view reveals that it may have also brought the basis for the eventual establishment of a fairer, sounder, economic future. Independence has given rise to one of the most interesting enterprises of the new Algeria—its attempt to establish a unique type of socialism adapted to the country's needs.

Although Marxist influence in government echelons is strong, the government denies it is attempting to enstare Marxism, or even communism. Nor, despite the fact political reactionaries are still attacked as "bourgeois", do they explain their revolution as Marxist. "We accept the economic principles of Marxism and the ideology of Islam", Ben Bella explained to us. A more vehement affirmation of socialist principles would prove embarrassing in view of the fact that the state officially supports the Moslem religion, and allows the presence of a large sector of private enterprise.

#### SOCIALIZATION INCOMPLETE

Although government proclamations might give the impression that all Algeria has been socialized, that is far from the case. Large portions of the economy are yet dominated by private enterprise. The extent of socialization varies from region to region. It was mainly the large estates of the French colons, deserted when their owners left for France, which have been socialized. A number of factories, such as textile mills, brickeries and food processing plants have also been nationalized. All hotels and of course the press are government operated.

Yet many farmers, with holdings under the maximum 40 hectares, retain their property, and even the capital city boasts only a few nationalized stores. Ports

are still largely privately operated. The vital oil and gas industry remains under the control of private enterprise; Algeria, lacking both capital and technicians, has no choice but to let the French companies continue to "exploit" her largest resource. Socialism is by no means all-embracing. Whether it ever will be is another question; the government makes no attempt to hide its hopes for the growth and extension of public ownership.

#### WHOSE CHOICE?

"We did not choose socialism—it chose us", party theorists were fond of telling us. They refer to the spring of 1963, when planting time saw many of the large estates managerless after the departure of their former owners. In absence of the colons, the peasants on many of the deserted terrains took things into their own hands and plowed and planted as they had done each spring before. But although spontaneous co-operation may have been a factor in the establishment of socialism, the alacrity of government leaders, well known even before independence for their socialist leanings, in passing the famous March decrees to instate formal collectivization of all deserted

lands cannot be ignored. Estates were lumped together to form huge farms, often swallowing up the family lands of small land owners in the process. Technical directors were appointed to farms by the government. Peasants—even where an ignorance of democratic procedure led to great difficulties—were taught to elect committees of direction and presidents to manage each farm. Government committees were set up to see to distribution of material and machinery among farms. The effort paid off—the combination of the people's efforts and the governmental administration allowed Algeria to boast a record harvest in 1963, the first year of socialism.

Each collective farm has two directors—a president elected by the farm's permanent workers, and a trained technical director appointed by the government. Although theoretically the president is head of the farm, on the farms we visited he seemed to act in accordance with the wishes of the technical director. The combination of president and technical director symbolizes the attempt to combine democratic autonomy with central planning and control. To date, however, the lamentable lack of economic planning of any nature in Algeria, has meant the government control that could be exercised through the technical director has not been of great significance.

#### FRINGE BENEFITS

As well as a daily wage of about \$2.00, permanent residents of farms are provided with homes and produce, and a share in year end profits should any capital be left after reinvestment in machinery and livestock.

The advantages collective farms could bring to a economically underdeveloped country are many. Small independent farmers can afford neither machinery nor good livestock. What is more, the small farmer is likely to be traditional and inefficient in farming methods.

Yet Algerian socialism—even in the agricultural sector where it is held to have been most successfully applied—is fraught with difficulties. Managerial difficulties result from a lack of democratic experience and desire to work together. Frequently workers coming to farms from outside have provoked grumbling among the farm's permanent residents, who fear that their year-end share is being diminished. Complaints about inefficiency in distribution of machinery and stock by government agencies are frequent. Inevitable are the reports of simple sloth. Unlike the north-European, the Algerian has not yet learned to deify labour; he is reputably content with the proverbial *bread-on-his-table-shirt-on-his-back*. Now that his former "exploiters" are gone, now that his freedom has been proclaimed, he sees no reason to refuse self-indulgence. As one farm director reported, "I told them that there was no time for sitting under a tree. But they said, 'Why not? We are only stealing from ourselves'". In the context of a co-operative farm, the logic is irrefutable. On another occasion, a somewhat divergent party member, after politely agreeing with my optimistic impressions about the prospects of socialized farming, undertook to correct my picture. "The people do not work as they used to when they were working for themselves", he informed me. "Things will have to change . . ."

#### EFFECTS OF SOCIALISM

What of socialism in the industrial sector? Due to the fact that the French viewed Algeria mainly as a primary producer, the country is only slightly industrialized—80% of the population remains rural. And even some of the factories that had been in operation, stand idle since the departure of the French for lack of technicians. Few, however, have been reorganized on the socialist model of elected committees and presidents working with technical directors, which was introduced into the agricultural sector. Again, the emphasis is on "auto-gestion", or direction by workers.

French newspapers and Algerians themselves report frequent cases of confu-

sion and waste due to mismanagement and poor organization. But it would be unfair to blame instances of failure on the system itself. How can people who have never held responsible positions be expected to work with others equally inexperienced in successfully managing an industry from raw products to distribution? The Algerians can do little more than blunder and learn, import and train technicians, and look optimistically to the future.

Only the future will reveal to what extent the difficulties that beset the Algerian economy are merely transitional; only the future can tell whether socialism will eventually dominate all sectors of the country's economy. Ben Bella has staked his government on the socialist experiment. The future of his government, and perhaps the future of Algeria itself, depends on the success of Algerian socialism.



Emancipation?  
only some want it . . .