

“Pieds Noirs Masques Blancs: European-Algerians in Le premier homme”

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Abstract:

In his posthumously published masterpiece, *Le premier homme*, Albert Camus attempts to flesh out a description and history of the inhabitants of Algeria of European descent. Writing at the very end of France’s 130-year failing experiment in North Africa, Camus uses uncharacteristically complicated and poetic prose to evoke the love of the *pied-noir* people for the land that, if it belonged to their ancestors, seems increasingly unlikely to belong to their descendants. The specific relationship, or lack thereof, of the European-Algerians with metropolitan France seems to be at the heart of many important questions pertaining to their identity, leading to them being described as “citoyens théoriques d’une nation imprécise.”

This intervention will examine the three principal snapshots in time that Camus provides regarding the history of the European-Algerians, his people. The lyrical descriptions of a childhood economically impoverished but experientially rich will be analyzed for their hints about the specificity of the *pied-noir* culture. The return to Algeria of the now-adult protagonist during the Algerian War will yield insight into the very moment when the European-Algerian people saw their world coming to an end. Finally, the epic account of the founding of Solferino by European revolutionaries will provide a glimpse at the building of a heroic narrative concerning the *Pieds-noirs*. This paper hopes to render somewhat less theoretical and more precise the understanding of who the European-Algerians were, at least as portrayed by Albert Camus in his final work.