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Building a “Silk Road”: A View from Below of the Trans-regional Links Between Algeria and China

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Over the last ten years, the question has arisen and been amply debated around the world about whether we are witnessing a revival of the Silk Roads. This phenomenon was initially viewed as a change in the post-September 11 geopolitical context, in trying to understand how the Arab world was turning away from the West and rediscovering China (Simpfendorfer 2009). Today’s Silk Roads do not resemble the ancient and medieval ones: we know where the center is (for the moment, at least, China) and we also know that trade over them takes place more by sea than over land. However, we know less about the ramifications, the places, and the actors involved on a truly global scale, reaching nearly all corners of the Earth.

In this context, the “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR) mega-project launched in autumn 2013 by Chinese President Xi Jinping (now called the Belt and Road Initiative) seeks to take transcontinental relations to the next level. The “road” is maritime and reaches Europe via the Indian Ocean and the Suez Canal. The “belt” is over land and connects China to Europe via Central Asia and Russia. This idea is not new; in fact, the OBOR project is the latest incarnation of the centuries-old imaginary of the Silk Roads.

Yet following Marsden (2017), we may question the nearly total absence of links between the strategies of political institutions and those of the traders who are already involved in transnational networks: “Why sell the dream of a ‘New Silk Road’ when a multiplicity of silk – or perhaps more aptly, nylon – roads already exist?” (Marsden 2017: 23) This question is obviously central because there is always a risk that projects emanating from the top-down hinder, more than help, initiatives that have already been created and are functioning, often on the margins of action by states.

Algeria is emblematic of the restructuring of merchant supply networks in the eastern and southern Mediterranean. In fact, the Silk Road, seen from Algeria, seems apparently to be double: transnational and national. Two roads thus have been drawn at the same time while being linked to each another at many points. The first, a transnational road, has a long history of almost forty years. It led to the emergence in the 1980s of a “trading post” in the Belsunce district in Marseille, France. This kind of form for trading is:

reminiscent of those of the Greek trading colony (emporium), that organisation, created on the initiative of the foreigner, the colonist, that was founded on an understanding between producers and vendors and the functioning of which was very closely tied to the hinterland or took place in a foreign enclave. (Bertoncello/Bredeloup 2007: 94).

During the 1990s and 2000s, Algerian migrant entrepreneurs extended this route further East. This was the booming period of importing consumer products stamped “Made in China”, which led to a reorganisation of Algerian merchant supply networks and a recomposition of the places where they were sold. The second, a national road, crosses the high plateaux of

¹ Translated from French by Cynthia J. Johnson.

eastern Algeria, a pioneer region in the development of import markets. In the agglomerations and the towns dotting this area, new urban marketplaces were reconfigured by the arrival of “Made in China” products. Some of them, such as El Eulma, Aïn Fakroun, and Aïn M’ila, turned into wholesale markets, whose operators link the Asian economic trading centres in Dubai (United Arab Emirates), Yiwu, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen (China) with the Algerian national market that extends through part of northern Africa. Considered as a whole, these marketplaces form a transregional network whose actors deal at different spatial levels to incessantly spread out trade connections with other similar regions in the world.

This article thus considers the simultaneous construction of these routes at three levels, transnational in a commodity chain now extended between Algeria and China and national in a country where consumption increase and retail stores and markets multiply. The transregional level is an intersection of the two other levels that is organized from the anchor points of globalized trading posts and marketplaces located in East Algeria. Comparing these three levels enables us to shed light on the formation of global networks – what we call the route – that are situated at the crossroads of local, regional, national and transnational rationales and arise from arrangements at multiple scales among multiple actors.

It is now possible to sketch a chronology of the growth in the marketplaces where Algerian importers have obtained supplies for almost 40 years, thanks to recent research using the accounts of Algerian traders collected during continuous and regular surveys conducted by the two authors in Algeria, Dubai, and China since the early 2000s. These studies identified the places and the construction stages of this (these) transnational route(s?).

From Marseille to Yiwu: Overland Circulation across the Globe

The Cabas and Trabendo Generation

The pioneering research of Alain Tarrus (1995), followed by the work edited by Michel Péraldi (2001), on the trading post in the Belsunce district in Marseille, have shown how the figure of the *trabendiste* or tradesman was constructed. In Algeria, the term *trabendo* (a slang contraction of the word *contraband*) refers to a form of transnational trade in which the “merchant” brings in goods without making customs declarations. Trade *by cabas* designated the transport of goods intended for resale by “professional” (the *trabendistes*) or occasional travellers (simple tourists or emigrants returning home for holidays) who carried goods in their suitcases or in *cabas* (bags) in the hold (aircraft or boat).

In the Europe of the late 1970s – and due to shifts towards the post-Fordist production mode, rising unemployment, and increasing control of immigration – these migrant businessmen created a commercial niche by becoming the actors of informal exchanges between the two shores of the Mediterranean. In Algeria during the 1980s, and complaining a context of shortages and controlled imports, the first *cabas* carriers shuttled between the French port of Marseille and the Algerian cities where they resold the acquired goods. These entrepreneurial forms differ from those of so-called “ethnic trade”, that is, the trade in specific goods for immigrant communities (groceries, services). In contrast, the *trabendo* heralded the establishment of a transnational trade that mobilized new market players in both places simultaneously. The figure of the “migrant entrepreneur” became crystallized and now described the many small Arab traders who frequented the port cities of southern Europe (such as Marseille, Barcelona, Genoa, and Ventimiglia). These marketplaces connected to others in Algeria formed the first hint at transregional connections.

Seeking the Source

In the 1990s, the destinations diversified and the flow of *cabas* merchants became denser. The Mediterranean networks of transnational trade extended. The number of marketplaces multiplied and each became a place for the convergence of other roads, sometimes old, sometimes new, in relation to

the geopolitical upheavals caused by the disappearance of the USSR. In Istanbul, North Africans crossed paths with nationals from the former USSR and the Middle East. In the Gulf, at Dubai or in Saudi Arabia, there were Asian traders, primarily Iranians and Indians, as well as Africans.

“When we saw the Emiratis, the Iranians, we realized that we were not yet at the source,” said an El Eulma trader in Yiwu. The search for the best supply source (“la source des produits”), a redundant phrase in the interviews with transnational traders, refers to this race to find the best prices along a road that becomes gradually less centered on the western Mediterranean and finds another focal point at Dubai. The Emirates are considered the iconic success of trading platforms at the crossroads of the Arab world, Africa, and Asia. But beyond that, we found movement from Cairo passing through Saudi Arabia, which was triggered not only by pilgrimage but also by students from China, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and Africa learning Arabic in the emblematic universities of Islam (Bava/Pliez 2009). This created conditions for communication and trade that have been decisive elements in the expansion of the Silk Roads between different regional areas.

Arriving Step by Step from the Near to the Far East

During the 1990s, Arab and African traders extended their merchant networks into Asia starting from Dubai and the other airline hub cities of the Arabian-Persian Gulf states (such as those of Emirates, Qatar Airways, and Kuwait Airlines). For less than a decade, they experimented with routes leading them to Southeast Asia, to markets in large metropolises such as Bangkok, Jakarta, and Kuala Lumpur, where small cosmopolitan trading worlds formed.

The Asian financial crisis of 1997 and Hong Kong’s return to the Chinese fold the same year led many traders to the gates of China. The Chungking Mansions building of Hong Kong became the new trading post for small transnational traders. From there, they could look for suppliers in the coastal industrial areas and attend Chinese trade fairs, notably the one in Guangzhou, the capital of the industrial Pearl River Delta (Bertoncello/Bredeloup 2007).

When in 2001 the People’s Republic of China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO), the Chinese phase of Arab trade route globalization was already underway and strong bonds with the Muslim worlds had developed due to several circumstances (globally economic changes following the end of the USSR, international sanctions against China after Tiananmen and later 9/11). These connections grew rapidly with a new “generation” of trading posts, first in Guangzhou and then in Yiwu from 2002, giving the impression that the route had (finally) reached its final destination.

Much has been said about Yiwu (Belguidoum/Pliez 2015a). This city of 1.5 to 2 million people, located two hours by train from Shanghai in Zhejiang Province, is the largest wholesale market in China and one of the largest in the world. It focuses on the sale of small commodities (stationery, jewelry, set of tools, interior decorations, etc.). The *alabo fan dien* quarter (“Arabic restaurant” in Chinese), also called *el maedah* (“the table” in Arabic), an urban district of a few streets in the heart of the city, was thus born from the growing presence of merchants from the Arab world and all other Muslim areas. The latter included Chinese Muslim communities, namely the Uyghur from Xinjiang and the Hui from Ningxia, who were already involved in transnational trade and knew Turkish or Arabic languages. Some of them had learned Arabic in the Gulf or in Egypt; their encounters with Arab traders would give birth to this restaurant district. The first restaurant was Egyptian, but about thirty others would follow. Most of them were created together with one Chinese partner, the official owner, and a foreign partner, who managed the place. In 2006, according to our own observation, 32 restaurants advertised themselves as Muslim and served halal food. They were Chinese (7), Egyptian (7), Iraqi (5) and Syrian (4) as well as Indian, Pakistani, Yemeni, and Algerian. In 2015, the number of restaurants in the neighborhood had remained nearly the same (33), but the breakdown of nationalities differed (10 Chinese, 2 Egyptian, 3 Iraqi, 2 Syrian, 4 Yemeni restaurants) related to the unrest shaking up the Arab world. The “Arab Springs” had led to political crises and civil wars in North Africa and the Middle East, which hampered consumer markets and disrupted trade networks. Therefore in Yiwu, the trading post reconstructed its networks with less Muslim traders from the Arab world but more and more from Turkey, Iran, the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia after 2011.

In conclusion, during the 1990s and 2000s, the transnational trade between Algeria and China grew massively in terms of volumes of imported goods, changing from *cabas* to containers (Péraldi 2001). By globalizing their practices and their links, these small Arab businesses broke out of their original framework of trade within immigrant communities located around the Mediterranean trading posts. This led to the disappearance of the geographical and post-colonial community framework of trade by *cabas*. The first hint at transregional connections became less Mediterranean and more global, but still emanated from a regional area located in East Algeria.

In Algeria: From *trabendo* to business

In Algeria, this global route materialized through the establishment of a network of transnational and national places combining the experiences and skills that these new market players had accumulated over the past 40 years. Major urban and peri-urban markets emerged, reconfiguring the hierarchy of urban networks and the internal structure of cities with the creation of commercial streets and districts. Today no city, large or small, is without its import market.

First confined to the periphery of cities and often existing informally, these transnational trade markets would progressively enter the urban fabric in peri-central districts such as former colonial suburbs or newly established quarters. At the end of 2010, the public authorities listed some 765 sites for informal trade, where some 70,000 merchants operated.² With its 40 million inhabitants, whose purchasing power has been steadily increasing for several decades (largely linked to the redistribution policy thanks to gas and oil export revenues), Algeria has become an important consumer goods market, which helps explain the growth of this transnational trade.

Creating a Transregional Market Network

With the transition from *trabendo* trading to *business*, a new phase was reached in the 1980s and 1990s. The growing number of marketplaces connected to transnational commodity chains became generalized over the Algerian territory in about fifteen years (Cote 2001); They marked a change of scale in the organization of trade. The cross-border economy with Morocco and Libya (Boubakri 2000) was gradually becoming transnational. Changes to Algerian legislation in the mid-1990s, which put an end to the State's monopoly on foreign trade, abolished an extremely rigid framework, and in less than ten years, 34,000 private import companies were created. The liberalization of these markets triggered a new dynamic of transnationalization at a local but also at a regional scale.

Henceforth, the rise of container shipping in Algerian ports (Mohamed-Chérif/Ducruet 2011) contributed to the rapid diversification of supply chains from places in Asia and Western Europe, from Dubai as well as from Turkey and Spain. In those ports, various freight forwarders serviced importers. A reorganization of flows occurred along with a reconfiguration of the trading network covering Algerian territory, made of marketplaces connected by roads and far away from major urban centers. In fact, importers were concentrated mainly in five provinces, three of which are in eastern Algeria and account for 68 percent of the import trade. El Eulma alone (Sétif province) concentrated almost 10 percent of these importers, while the province of Oum El Bouaghi, one of the least urbanized in Algeria (with the two marketplaces of Aïn Fakroun and Aïn M'lila), concentrated 5 percent (Centre National du Registre du Commerce 2011). In consequence, today, El Eulma and Aïn Fakroun are the most illustrative of these new transnational places, which structure the import trade in commodities and ensure the supply of the national market and especially regional marketplaces.

² Press conference with the Minister of Commerce quoted in the daily Algerian newspaper *Liberté* on December 11, 2010.

In the beginning of 1990, El Eulma created its *Dubai souk*. Located near the new bus station, the market annexed a small urban district and then extended over two other new quarters. First specialized in hardware and cleaning products, in a few years it became the main center for furniture, household items, interior decoration, toys, home appliances, mobile telephones and small electronics in addition to its original specialties. More than three thousand merchants are located here, sourcing in China, Dubai, the Middle East and Turkey. In 2015, the *Dubai souk* of El Eulma occupied an area of 110 ha and had a linear street frontage of more than 20 km containing 3,249 stores (Belguidoum/Chouadra/Alikhodja 2017).

It was also at this time that Aïn Fakroun emerged specializing in cheap clothing. In 2013, there were 2,000 merchants, including 400 importers and 200 wholesalers. Following the El Eulma model, the market was housed in a new district made of several-storied buildings with imposing architecture, entirely financed by the merchants. The spatial and architectural transformations were spectacular and the town, which was still a large village in the 1980s, was now a city in the making (Belguidoum 2011).

While Aïn Fakroun did not reach the scale of El Eulma, the two places operated according to the same model: as a place for importers to register their companies, a place for warehousing and redistribution on the national market, and as a concentration of commercial premises attracting a large and diverse group of customers. Since the Arab revolutions and their impact on the Tunisian and Libyan economies, merchants from these two countries are often present in the two markets, reversing the flows of the 1980s. The strength of these marketplaces is their specialization, but also their redistribution networks that link them to the entire national market, and even the larger North African and sub-Saharan markets.

Marketplaces at Different Scales

As places for warehousing and the redistribution of imported goods, the two towns of El Eulma and Aïn Fakroun draw people from all over the country and function on several scales depending on the type of trade: wholesale, semi-wholesale and retail. The circuit mobilizes know-how related to transport and commercial skills, as well as relational networks that have been capitalized on over recent decades. These places are at the heart of the emerging transregional area of trade.

At the transnational level, import merchants organize the wholesale market by introducing large quantities of goods. Their strength is based on mobilizing capital: they obtain it by playing on legal mechanisms, e.g. authorization to exchange currency that their being listed on the Trade and Companies Registry entitles them to do; but above all they resort to some side practices in exchanging currencies, supplied by collecting currency from immigrants, especially the retirees who are numerous in the region.

In Algeria, there are in fact two main types of import markets. The first deals in home furnishing goods. With a low sales tax rate (between 5 and 15 percent), large importers dominate this market and have a *de facto* monopoly. The second market, that of consumer goods which are the focus of transnational trade, is heavily taxed (30 percent customs duty plus 21 percent VAT, thus 51 percent). These two markets are involved in a subtle and complex system that enables merchants to play on the foreign currency reserves of the Central Bank of Algeria, on customs duties, and on VAT. These importers prefer to buy currency on the parallel market at rates higher than those of the bank of Algeria but to pay less tax on entry. This informal system, which operates on a large scale, makes it possible to offer products at lower prices in the consumer market and therefore to expand the customer base to include the less affluent but numerous working class while ensuring that importers have comfortable profits.

The second level of distribution occurs at weekly regional wholesale and semi-wholesale markets. Another category of merchants, those associated with importers or having bought

items second-hand, crisscrosses the three major regional markets of Sidi Khatab in the West, Aïn El Hadjel in the center, and Tadjanet and Bir El Ater in the East of Algeria. Deliveries are also made directly to semi-wholesale merchants up to Medina Jedida in Oran, the main place for reselling this type of product, and even to Tamanrasset in the Central Sahara, where some of the goods will then be sold in neighboring countries. At El Eulma, a dozen companies specialized in transport have a large fleet of semi-trailers that ensure connections with the various cities of the country.

The third level comprises retail and semi-wholesale sales, which are done through the hundreds of shops in these localities. Attracting an increasingly large number of buyers, the retail trade has become a serious contender, and the urban context has tended to follow the market's growth: One sign of this new prosperity is that in twenty years, from 1987 to 2008, their population doubled, from 68,000 to 150,000 for El Eulma and 25,500 to 55,300 for Aïn Fakroun. The success of the merchants in Aïn Fakroun and El Eulma can also be seen in the opening of shops and shopping centers but also of many restaurants and hotels in Algeria's major cities. In Constantine, there are at least five shopping centers that have been built in Sidi Mabrouk and six on the road to Onama (the city's largest marketplace) by traders from Aïn Fakroun.³ These shopping centers can also be found in Algiers, particularly El Hamiz, where there are many merchants from El Eulma, and in Oran where at least five shopping centers in Medina Jedida were opened in 2012 by investors from eastern Algeria.

Through these broad outlines of the organization of trading circuits, we can glimpse the strategy that is the real strength of these marketplaces. The multiple scales are interconnected and attest to the spirit of entrepreneurship and market conquest driving these new entrepreneurs, who are constantly searching (1.) for supply chains (today mainly in China, but goods are imported from other places, including Turkey, as Syria's textile workshops have moved there since the outbreak of the civil war); (2.) to diversify their trading partners; (3.) to penetrate the main regional markets; and (4.) to keep their biggest customers. This strategy has also affected urban organization, with great impact on real estate and the construction industry, particularly visible in the new urban areas in or around the cities of the transregionally connected area of East Algeria.

Networks and Entrepreneur Profiles: Three Generations

Yiwu, Departure Point for Goods, Destination for Traders

The emergence of new market platforms, and the speed and magnitude of that emergence, raise questions about the new and often young merchant entrepreneurs. In breaking with traditional circuits, their spirit of initiative is remarkable. Although some were born into families of traders, nothing predicted that they would become the pioneers of new trade routes. In addition to these young people, with university or secondary school degrees in a variety of disciplines, we also find small traders who were already integrated into the regional *souk* network and some large, established traders who seized the new opportunity. It was the convergence of various types of skills and experiences that would result in this collective movement.

Aïn Fakroun shows how a route could be rapidly established based on networks that are both flexible and efficient. Initially, the sales industry at Aïn Fakroun was rather inconspicuous. In the mid-1980s, young people took advantage of the large network of people from the region who had emigrated to France to start *cabas* trading. Others began trading with Bir El Ater, near the Tunisian border, which was a hub of cross-border trade at that time. The goods were

³ On the changes in the market at Constantine, see Bergel and Kerdoud (2010).

sold in local regional markets as far as Constantine. Starting in 1992, Aïn Fakroun changed dimension, extending its links in direction of the places of supplying abroad and of retail markets located in all parts of Algeria and the surroundings countries. Local traders set up their own networks in Libya and Egypt. Goods were brought by semi-trailers, stored at Aïn Fakroun, and resold at the urban markets of the region. In 1997, the first imports came through Dubai and local traders specialized in importing cheap clothes. In the early 2000s, the goods were brought directly from China. There were ever-increasing flows of goods from Yiwu, Guangzhou, and Shishi (Fujian region). The Algerian traders had finally reached their aspired “source des produits”.

The various interviews we conducted with the traders of Aïn Fakroun and El Eulma show that their first trading venture most often started based on family solidarity (father, brothers, and uncles), and sometimes those of friends, which allowed for mutual financial assistance and the exchange of information needed to carry out the business. The first great successes were copied by other traders trying to follow the same way. This made it possible to structure networks that were flexible and hierarchical and based on relationships of trust.

Pioneering Figures on Transregional Routes

The organization of this kind of trade requires support in the countries where purchases are made. The prosperity of El Eulma was also due to the fact that the first “traders” to settle in Dubai were largely from El Eulma. These pioneering figures were the same agents who would later continue on to China and set up their first offices in Yiwu and Guangzhou.

In the mid-1990s, most Algerian importers still went to Istanbul, although Dubai was an increasingly popular destination as it was considered the source of products. Ahmed, a native of El Eulma with an engineering degree, left Algeria in 1997 in the middle of the civil war. He left for Dubai to join a childhood friend from El Eulma who had opened a commercial transit office. Since Ahmed spoke Arabic, French, and English, he was quickly hired by an Iranian who had a maritime freight service agency, before setting up his own business with his brother. The majority of products destined for Algeria still arrived in Tunisia, Libya or Egypt because there was only one direct line for container ships between Dubai and Algiers. This was the golden age of Dubai for the pioneers. Three agencies run by Algerians⁴ had a near *de facto* oligopoly in organizing transactions with importers and wholesalers, who then sold the imported goods throughout Algeria. Their profits were as high as 300 percent.⁵

The import business proved to be lucrative enough that very soon, in the early 2000s, there were others who wanted to emulate the work of wholesalers and then have their own customers. The spread of the job of importer had multiple consequences. For example, when small importers arrived in Dubai and believed they had reached the products’ source, other importers who were already established in Dubai, such as Ahmed, used the city as a base for prospecting Asian supply cities in order to get out ahead of the “small” traders and then offer them their services. These pioneers already travelled regularly from Dubai to Hong Kong and attended the annual fair in Guangzhou, and then the Yiwu wholesale markets. Between 2001 and 2005, in each of these cities, they opened offices in order to supply a growing number of customers, mostly from eastern Algeria. This axis would become the backbone of the “Made in China” product supply route for Algeria.

Thus in less than ten years, the pioneers consolidated their position as intermediaries in all import services along an axis that stretched from El Eulma to Yiwu via Dubai and

⁴ Three other agencies, one run by an Iranian, another by a Yemeni and the last by a Palestinian, also played an important role in meeting the needs of the Algerian clientele.

⁵ Interviews with two pioneers conducted in 2011 and 2015.

Guangzhou. However, the competition was fierce and required the main players to continually reinvent their business. They had to offer new products and open up new markets and maintain their reputation and margins because they were quickly joined by others. Dubai and Yiwu became the starting points from which Ahmed's company prospected for new buyers in East and Central Africa, as they are less demanding markets and/or the competition among importers was less intense. The axis Yiwu-Dubai is rich of opportunities to create such direct commercial links outside the usual transregional connections of the traders with their country of origin. Such traders have become nearly global.

Yiwu now has about fifty offices run by Algerians and a population of several tens or even hundreds of small traders (Belguidoum/Pliez 2015b). This last, larger generation is made up of young people aged 22 to 35. Supported by their importer-trader parents, who would now benefit from a permanent correspondent in China, or joining friends already settled there, this young generation learned by working in existing offices and doing small trades on their way to becoming self-employed. The large number of orders for Algeria leaves a margin for these small traders, who nevertheless compete with the large companies and also, more recently, with former Chinese translators who have set up their own trading businesses.

Kader is part of this new generation. Today, in 2017 aged 32, he worked for five years for his uncle in Guangzhou. In 2011, he set up a business with one of his cousins in Yiwu, married a Chinese woman, and now offers his services as an interpreter to visiting traders. He built up an address book of contacts of Algerian importers and opened his own company at the end of 2012. Unlike their predecessors who learned Chinese on the job, these new traders took language courses (6-month courses in private schools for 8,000 Yuan/RMB, about 1,000 Euros). As a sign of their desire to settle there for the long term, they married Chinese people (Muslims, they wanted to point out to us), in a society where, unlike France, which has historically been a country of Algerian emigration, they have few or no cultural reference points.

Reorganization of Trade Routes?

The establishment of routes and networks was marked by constant rearrangements, which underscores their high level of instability. The ambiguities of Algerian international trade policy and the authorities' repeatedly stated desire to tighten the conditions for imports mean that permanent uncertainty weighs on the traders. In addition, the constant rise in currency values (dollar, euro, and revaluation of the Yuan/RMB) against an increasingly devalued Dinar poses a challenge. Competition between trade offices, their need to keep their customers, new Chinese trading businesses that send their traders to Algeria to attract wholesalers by offering attractive credit terms, the reduction of the period to get a visa for China since 2017 are all other factors to be taken into consideration.

However since 2015, there has been a movement to restructure trade circuits and, in a way, to "professionalize" transnational trade. The consolidation of the marketplaces for regional redistribution, as evidenced by the growth of El Eulma, has occurred alongside the professionalization of the job of importer. After the golden age of discovery in the late 2000s, there was a period of restructuring driven by large Algerian importers and large trading offices in China.

Conclusion: The Inconspicuous Geography of Transnational Networks

Observing the actors and the organisation of market platforms for imported products enables us to understand how routes for mobility and trade are constructed. This happens when multiple actors at various scales from local to global assemble the various segments of routes,

which operate depending on sales opportunities and national or geopolitical constraints. Networked urban hierarchies are superimposed over those drawn up by states within their national territories, and those networks are often inconspicuous.

Following a Silk Road, or more often a plurality of less visible Silk Roads, between China and Algeria and highlighting the links between distant places, as we have done here, is of interest both methodologically and heuristically for social scientists trying to grasp how transnational networks function. Today's networks do not spring into existence spontaneously, nor do they refer to the maritime trading posts of Antiquity, the medieval Silk Roads, the trans-Saharan caravan routes culminating in the 19th century, nor foreign trading posts of the early 20th century in China.

We need to both situate these routes in specific geographical scales and also to define the contexts within which they were formed. The global routes that emerged cannot, of course, be reduced to a simple line that stretches between places of production and places of supply. Economic, geopolitical, as well as migratory or religious factors, are intertwined on a global scale and become more complex as the transnational chains of trade extend. These factors must, therefore, be observed at all levels, from the local to the global, and be studied in context in order to better understand the mechanisms and forms of regulation involved in building global trade routes.

In this perspective, local market places as Aïn Fakroun and El Eulma are at the very heart of three spatial levels: a transregional level as they link a specific area of Algeria to other world regions, namely Europe, the Arab Gulf and East Asia; in another perspective, the market places of this area are directly integrated into transnational networks of wholesale linking global marketplaces without the support of public policies or multinational firms; and finally, at a national level, their function in warehousing and redistributing imported commodities in Algeria and its neighboring countries is central.

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