

## BOOK REVIEWS

IAN COLLER, *Arab France: Islam and the Making of Modern Europe, 1798-1831* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). 288 pages. \$63.00 cloth, \$28.95 paper.

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A mesmerizing account of a mostly forgotten French-Arab population in the early nineteenth century, Coller's *Arab France* seeks to do no less than change our understanding of France and its people. It examines the lives of the "Egyptian Legation" (those who followed Napoleon back to France from Alexandria in 1801) and the Arabs who traveled to Paris on their own later on in the early nineteenth century. These individuals came from different religions, countries, and social classes, and developed different understandings of France and their place within it. Some created homogeneous Arab enclaves (particularly in Marseille) while others worked to enter French society and institutions as fully French (though perhaps also fully Arab, depending on the individual). What could the neglected story of a small diaspora have to tell us about France today? In making the case that this forgotten chapter of French history can improve our understanding of competing French ideological commitments, the book also challenges the reader to rethink the category of identity: how it is constructed and how it should be studied.

Coller begins by describing a central "paradox" in French society: why is it "that a nation that so long prided itself on its commitment to freedom and equality, its fearless intellectual critique, and its cosmopolitanism has been unable or unwilling to negotiate the realities of diversity and difference on its own soil" (vii)? Similarly to Richard Fogarty's *Race and War in France*,<sup>1</sup> Coller argues that France's inconsistent commitment to equality and cosmopolitanism is the result of competing narratives of Frenchness and of the nation, narratives that have long fought with one another for dominance. Through his investigation of this roughly thirty-year period (1798-1831), Coller traces how various regime changes (or changes within one regime, such as Napoléon's opportunistic discursive shift on religion as he sought the legitimation of the Catholic church) produced different policies on how to treat this Arab-French population. Thus, we are able to see how the revolutionary spirit behind the cosmopolitan idea of "sister republics" gave way to the rhetoric of possession and empire. Importantly, however, Coller recognizes that even the notion of "sister republicans" was not wholly

egalitarian: while the French empire under Napoleon openly judged individuals for their “fit” with France based on their usefulness to the state, the earlier cosmopolitan spirit also embraced “cultural difference” only “where this embellished and did not challenge the ruling order” (117). The result is a nuanced portrait of a nation that has sought to radically redefine its place in the world on multiple occasions, each time defining itself in part through an elite articulation of the state’s relationship to difference. Outsiders thus simultaneously serve as reminders of the state’s successes and failures in its ideological and imperial pursuits. This makes for a risky subject position, as the book demonstrates.

Those who study state and society relations as well as those who study political and legal identity will appreciate how the book roots its discussion of identity in material terms of power and social hierarchy. Given the nature of the data, Collier cannot assess whether identity statements made by Arab-French individuals were made for purely strategic reasons or out of genuine sentiment. That is not necessarily a shortcoming, however, given that Collier is not trying to locate pure or essentialized accounts of French-Arab identity (18). By taking it as a given that identity is, on the individual level, complex and ever-shifting, Collier can move on to the more interesting question of what identity “does” in a world of unequal power, racial bias, and changing national narratives. Collier demonstrates how various Arab-French individuals mobilized specific identities with respect to the expectations of their audience for political or social self-advancement. Politics and needs informed the decisions of the Arab-French to present themselves in various ways (Egyptian, Arab, Catholic, Muslim, war veteran, etc.) in order to obtain pensions, jobs, entrance to French society, and community support. We also see how reductionist attributions of identity by others, or the refusal of others to acknowledge a hybrid Arab-French identity, led to social rejection, violence, and even murder.

Collier deserves praise for his approach to the archival research, which he describes as “an intentional act of seeing” (2). It is in piecing together seemingly disjointed entries coming from the state’s few official interactions with this small Arab-French population—mostly formal requests for pension increases and police surveillance files—that Collier locates evidence of the Egyptian Legation. Of course, these sources tend by their very nature to be atomizing. By looking for connections across these National Archive entries and supplementing them with additional sources (personal letters, scholarly writings, and contemporary artwork), Collier reconstructs the “groupness” of the Egyptian Legation. Readers learn about the Egyptian Legation in terms of (for example) family ties, quarrels for group authority, their schools, and even their disputes over the acceptability of involvement in “Parisian entertainments” (189). In this way, Collier establishes that there was a sense of what political scientists who study race would call “linked fate” among the

Egyptian Legation: Arab-French individuals (and their descendants) found that their destiny and life experiences were shaped by membership in that larger community.<sup>2</sup>

Purposefully seeing—and celebrating the pluralism introduced by—a minority ethnic community in a nation ambivalent or even hostile to the political recognition of sub-national communities is somewhat provocative. Collier makes it clear from the beginning of the book that *Arab France* includes a critique of contemporary French difference-blindness, and he concludes by expressing the hope that an examination of France’s “plural past” may lead to a reconsideration of the space for pluralism in French politics today. Today’s rejection of pluralism and multiculturalism in France stems primarily from a particular interpretation of *laïcité* (very loosely translated as secularism) that takes offense at the increasing visibility of Muslims. Given this situation and the parallels Collier is making, it would have been interesting to see more space given in the book to the role of Islam among the life stories of the Egyptian Legation and their interaction with the state. While many of the individuals in this Arab-French population were Egyptian Coptic Christians and Syrian Melkite Catholics, Collier maintains that for all its diversity, the Egyptian Legation and the Arabs who came to France later during the period under study all shared the Islamicate culture. The text does not spend much time defining Islamicate culture, however, or (at least until the very end of the period under study) identifying moments when and ways in which it influenced the lives of these people.

The text itself is a delight to read, immersive and richly written. That said, it will not be accessible to most undergraduate students. Human geographers will enjoy (though possibly wish there was more of, but that is not the goal of this book) the examination of space as a method for interrogating group politics. Class differences among the Egyptian Legation, for example, were demonstrated in a comparison of the relatively affluent Egyptian village of Marseille and the Arab communities found further outside of town. The concept of space is often mobilized to highlight a shared, Arab and French physical existence (such as in analysis of period engravings). Establishing that co-existence is valuable given the predominance of studies about Arab immigration to France following World War II.

Overall, *Arab France* is a fascinating challenge to the commonly understood story of the “newness” of Arabs in France. Its parallels to today’s political discourse are not perfect given that the population under study included many Christians and did not live under the long shadow of France’s second colonial empire and the painful events of the Algerian War. That said, the parallels Collier draws and his overt argument for pluralism are certain to stimulate much conversation and debate.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Richard Fogarty, *Race and War in France: Colonial Subjects in the French Army, 1914–1918* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup>Michael C. Dawson, *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African-American Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).