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Osama W. Abi-Mershed, *Apostles of Modernity: Saint-Simonians and the Civilizing Mission in Algeria*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010. xii +328 pp., Tables, figures, maps, appendices, notes, bibliography, and index. \$60.00 U.S. (cl); ISBN 978-0804769099. \$60.00 U.S. (E-book) ISBN 978-0804774727.

Reviewed by Naomi J. Andrews, Santa Clara University.

This book is a very welcome addition to the literature on the early history of France's presence in Algeria. Focusing particularly on the outsized influence of Saint Simonian ideas among the military officers and "Arabists" in the *Bureaux arabes*, Abi-Mershed's book is a thoughtful, detailed, highly readable, and engaging work that brings the insights of recent scholarship on the civilizing mission to a story last fully told by Marcel Emerit during the German Occupation.[1] Abi-Mershed's work demonstrates the complexities and inconsistencies of colonial rule during the July Monarchy and Second Empire, periods that have received far less attention than they deserve until quite recently.[2] Moreover, *Apostles of Modernity* complicates the neat bifurcation between "assimilation" and "association" that characterized a prior generation of French colonial historiography by documenting both the associationist doctrines of the Saint Simonians and the metropolitan and settler politics that dictated their eventual abandonment. Moreover, in backdating the articulation of associationist ideas to the 1830s, Abi-Mershed has illustrated the contextual development of colonial policy and its embeddedness in the local politics of colonization.

Equally important is the insight that the work provides into what we might call the "do-gooder" mentality of both the "civilizers" of the French empire and of French social reformers, more generally. Throughout the book Abi-Mershed illustrates the ways that Saint Simonian notions of social order and improvement were well meaning and exploitative at the same time. As a result of the author's sensitive approach to his source materials, we see how French republicans and their championing of the "rights" of settlers in Algeria worked to undermine efforts by military reformers to preserve--albeit temporarily--indigenous rights and cultural autonomy through the restructuring of education and land tenure policies. Ironies abound in the arguments about military tyranny and republican freedoms documented by Abi-Mershed.

The book is organized chronologically and consists of six chapters. The issues with which the book is concerned are laid out in the introduction and revolve around two key problematics. The first is the aforementioned issue of what the author terms the "unfounded confidence" of historians in the assimilationist model of French colonialism (p. 5). In the author's view, this has produced three major problems in writing the history of French Algeria, problems to which the book is a corrective. The first the author identifies is the tendency to favor ideology over practice, with the "doctrinal opposites" of association and assimilation most particularly oversimplifying the influence of context, expediency, and technocratic expertise on the practice of colonialism in Algeria.

The second, and of course related, problem is the notion that colonial bureaucracy is monolithic, undifferentiated, or uniform. As the book richly chronicles, much of the policymaking was

determined by local events, “ideological subcultures” within the bureaucracy, and the “relational solidarities” that determined the loyalties and approaches of the implementers of empire (p. 6). By focusing on the local conflicts and debates within the colonial administration (and between civilian and military governments of the colony), Abi-Mershed’s book effectively disrupts the supposed consistency of metropolitan directives and illuminates the way that said directives were derailed by the practical realities of Algeria.

The third problem the book tackles is the traditional periodization of French Algeria in which there is a purported “clean break” at the inauguration of the Third Republic, the colonial policy of which was thereafter marked by assimilationist impulses (p. 7). Abi-Mershed proposes instead to distinguish the phases of imperialism in Algeria by the modalities of colonial rule and the local applications of the civilizing mission. This is indeed one of the key arguments of the book because the clean break applies equally to the redemptive characterization of republican imperialism that the assimilationist narrative encompasses. By the conventional account, furthermore, the modern republic is sealed off from its monarchical and imperial predecessors, and the military and colonial antecedents to the development of modern civil political culture elided. Abi-Mershed’s ambition for the book, realized for the most part, is thus to situate the practice of imperialism in North Africa at the heart of narratives of French republican political culture, rather than allowing it to remain on the periphery, both literally and figuratively.

The Saint Simonians are essential to understanding this connection because they did not demarcate metropole and colony as their contemporaries did, but rather saw Algeria as a *lieu d’essai* for the larger social restructuring necessary in France, as well. It is to this story that much of the remainder of the book is devoted. First, however, Abi-Mershed provides two chapters of background, one of which explores the military culture of the *écoles* that produced so many of the “arabophile” military officers who staffed the bureaucracy during the July Monarchy and Second Empire. In this discussion, the appeal of Saint Simon’s ideas is attributed to the military culture of the elite schools and to the inherent hostility to democracy that characterized their students. Also by way of context, the author includes a thoughtful account of prior French contact with Islam (Napoleon in Egypt) and of pre-conquest Ottoman Algeria, exploring particularly the mode of rule of the Turkish authorities and challenging traditional characterizations of them as having an “imperial or expansionist ideology” rather than one that “obviously” accepted the natural limits of their North African stronghold (p. 47).

The heart and strength of the book, found in chapters three through six, focuses on the vagaries of colonial governance through archival research (seemingly all conducted in French colonial archives) on education policy and the attempts of the military government to originate and implement schools by which the long-term *francisisation* of the Arab population could be effected. This material is where the larger historiographical ambitions of the book take on substance. On the one hand, the reader is shown in detail the interrelation between association—by which indigenous society would be separated from European society and nurtured toward civilization in a kind of cultural incubator imagined by the military officers influenced by Saint Simon’s ideas—and assimilation, the ultimate, if not near-term goal of the associationist program. The Arabist officers’ agenda, carefully documented by Abi-Mershed, included the noble-sounding ambition to safeguard Arab lands and mores from colonial intrusions. However as the author has also shown, the result was devastation of the indigenous society, in particular through the dismantling of Muslim education networks, land tenure systems, and the decimation of the educated Muslim classes. Repeatedly illustrated through the author’s account of educational policies and land policy, the purportedly well-intended “arabophile” efforts of the military are shown to interact in insidious ways with the civilian colonial administration that governed areas dominated by European settlers.

The unholy alchemy produced by internecine struggles between military and civilian policies and personnel is nowhere clearer than in the last chapter, “Napoleon, Emperor of the Arabs.” In Abi-Mershed’s account of the “Saint Simonian on horseback,” Napoleon’s theoretically sympathetic approach to the indigenous population, pivotally influenced by the ideas of Thomas Ishmaïl Urbain, the strands of the story come together. Dating from the mid-1850s, Napoleon put his support behind the military Arabists’ proposals for a separate homeland for the Arab population, one that would protect native land tenure practices and provide a means for the gradual “maturation” of the society toward the eventual realization of individual property rights and cultural assimilation to French metropolitan expectations. In promulgating a series of government decrees (the *senatus consults* of 1863 and 1865 most devastatingly) theoretically designed for the protection of the native populations, Napoleon III’s regime lay the groundwork for the dismantling of native autonomy, both in terms of land and in terms of educational institutions, by the aggressive *colons* population. Hostile to the authoritarian empire in no small part due to their republican ideological leanings, the colonists of Algeria—growing markedly in the 1840s and 1850s as Abi-Mershed demonstrates—aggressively opposed the policies of the *Bureaux arabes*, and sought a different, and ultimately triumphant, form of assimilation from that envisioned by an earlier generation. By the colonists’ model of assimilation, it would be the land and the European settlers of Algeria that would be assimilated to the French metropole, and the cultural assimilation of the indigenous populations—however dubious an enterprise in itself—would be left on the drawing board.

Outstanding as the book is in documenting the policy and personnel debates within the military and in its conflict with civilian authorities, the context and ideological proclivities of the colonist population is not as thoroughly treated as one might have hoped. Although works of other scholars have demonstrated the range in both political commitments and economic means of the European populations, the *colons* appear in this book as a rather uniform population with a one-dimensional agenda, land acquisition. No discussion is found here of either the 1848-9 deportations of urban workers, for example, or the utter failure of the communities they populated.[3] On a related note, contemporary metropolitan debates about military brutality, both toward Algerians and toward French soldiers, debates that reinforced antipathy toward military rule, receive no mention here.[4] The kind of subtlety and nuance that the author brought to the military men of the *Arab Bureaux* would have greatly enriched our understanding of the colonists’ position[s], and would likewise have reinforced the author’s larger agenda of rooting post-1870 republican institutions in their “monarchical,” “military and colonial antecedents” (p. 7).

Another notable oversight of the book is the treatment of Saint Simonianism as a metropolitan doctrine and, more generally, of July Monarchy France itself. This omission is evident in several ways. Importantly, Abi-Mershed engages virtually not at all with the scholarship on early socialist ideas and schools, a scholarship that reaches beyond the study of the Saint Simonians and that is critical to understanding the worldview of the men whose agenda he chronicles. To the extent that past scholarship on the Saint Simonians is addressed, it is at time oversimplified, for example when the rich and varied works of the *Société des études saint-simoniennes* (*Société des amis d’Ismayl Urbain* 1987-1998) are lumped in with “several recent studies” [unattributed] that seek to rehabilitate the empire (p. 11). Similarly, Saint Simon’s ideas are inaccurately conflated with those of his former secretary Auguste Comte, and the contrast between Fourierism and Saint Simonianism, particularly in relation to the colony at Sig in Algeria, goes unacknowledged (p. 125), as does the difference between republicanism and socialism during these years.[5]

The shortchanging of metropolitan socialism produces one of the few conceptual lacunae in the book, found in the way the ideological construct of association is defined and contextualized.

Although central to discussions of the mode of colonial rule in the later nineteenth century, a historiography that Abi-Mershed attends to with great care, the term was of key importance to the first generation of socialists, among whom the Saint Simonians were key players.[6] Although this connection is acknowledged in passing (p. 30), because the dual usage of the term is not problematized, the author has missed an opportunity to connect the metropolitan agenda of early socialists to the mechanisms and ideology of imperialism. Finally, it should be noted that, although the book was published in 2010, it engages relatively little with recent, relevant works on the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s.[7]

Abi-Mershed's account of the complexities and contradictions, both in motivation and in result, of the first decades of French colonial rule in Algeria is thought-provoking and highly relevant not only to the specific instance of Algeria, but more broadly to the entire ideological construct of the civilizing mission and its implementation. Indeed, it is a fascinating and at times startlingly human glimpse of the lived realities of assimilation and association as they were intertwined in French colonial governance prior to the Third Republic. Abi-Mershed's illumination of the often-unintended consequences that civilizational arrogance produced in this specific context effectively nuances prior characterizations of French imperialism in Algeria, both triumphalist and denunciatory.

#### NOTES

[1] Marcel Emerit, *Les saint-simoniens en Algérie* (Paris: Les Belles lettres, 1941).

[2] This is changing, however. Three current examples are Benjamin Claude Brower, *A Desert Named Peace: The Violence of France's Empire in the Algerian Sahara, 1844-1902* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Sarah Curtis, *Civilizing Habits: Women Missionaries and the Revival of French Empire* (New York: Oxford, 2010); Jennifer E. Sessions, *Empire of Virtue: Colonialism and Political Culture in Nineteenth-Century France and Algeria*, (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, forthcoming), all of which cover in detail the process of colonization and colonial policy-making beginning in the early nineteenth century.

[3] Claire Salinas, "Colonies without colonists: colonial emigration, Algeria, and liberal politics in France, 1848-1870" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Stanford University, 2005).

[4] See for example the press response to news of the massacre at Dahra in 1845 reproduced in Etienne Cabet's *Le Populaire de 1841*, August 1845.

[5] On the Fourierist community at Saint-Denis de Sig, see Michèle Madonna-Desbazeille "L'Union agricole d'Afrique. Une communauté fouriériste à Saint-Denis du Sig, Algérie," *Cahiers Charles Fourier*, 16 (December 2005): 51-63 and Bernard Desmars, "Projet phalanstérien, oeuvre philanthropique ou entreprise capitaliste?" *Cahiers Charles Fourier*, 16 (December 2005): 39-50.

[6] William H. Sewell, Jr., *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Maurice Tournier, "Quand un mot en cache d'autres: le vocabulaire de «l'Association» en 1848," *Prévenir* (1986): 113-126.

[7] In addition to those cited above I would note, for example, Patricia Lorcin, "Rome and France in Africa: Recovering Colonial Algeria's Latin Past," *French Historical Studies* 25/2 (2002):295-329.

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