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Amelia H. Lyons, *The Civilizing Mission in the Metropole: Algerian Families and the French Welfare State during Decolonization*. Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2013. xiii + 344 pp. Tables, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$65.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8047-8421-4.

Review by Emile Chabal, University of Edinburgh.

At a time when social safety nets in Europe are under threat from the combined power of neo-liberal politics and austerity economics, relatively few people have taken the time to reflect on the actual origins of the welfare state. This is probably a good thing since the story is not necessarily a very edifying one. Historians of twentieth-century Europe have mobilised considerable evidence to show that the elaboration of the welfare state in the first half of the twentieth century was intimately tied up with pro-natalism, eugenics and an obsession with racial ‘decadence.’ Keeping populations healthy was vital in order to secure the greatness of a nation and ensure a steady supply of effective soldiers, not to mention the fact that social security was a sure way of dampening working-class enthusiasm for socialist and communist movements.

It is somewhat ironic, then, that the welfare state should now be overwhelmingly associated with an egalitarian and redistributive left-wing agenda. Part of this can be explained by the fact that left-wing movements—most famously, the Popular Front in France and the post-war Labour government in the UK—appropriated it for their own purposes in an attempt to woo a working-class electorate. But part of it also has to do with the fact that it is simply no longer possible to talk unquestioningly about the ideas of class and racial superiority that underpinned its creation. Even for the right, it is easier to denounce the welfare state as an unwieldy distortion of market principles than it is to raise questions about why it exists in the first place.

Such questions are unusually awkward in France, where the problematic legacy of early twentieth-century state paternalism lingered long into the 1960s and 1970s. In Britain and most Eastern European countries, 1945 was a natural break; the political reorientations of the postwar period brought to the fore the more recognisably ‘progressive’ connotations of the welfare state. But in 1945 the newly-liberated French state was caught in a bind. It too wanted to build a stronger welfare system that would secure the country’s reconstruction, but at the same time it was determined to cling tightly to its colonies—the last remaining symbol of French geopolitical power. This meant extending some of the benefits of the postwar welfare compromise to the colonies. But how? On what terms? For whom? The challenge was even starker in the case of Algeria, which was formally part of France. Here the multiple—and conflicting—logics of the French state were laid bare. What was citizenship for Algerians? What rights and responsibilities did it entail? What was the French state’s duty to the *Français musulmans d’Algérie*? It is these questions that form the heart of Amelia Lyons’s stimulating and persuasive book.

At its most basic, Lyons’s argument is relatively straightforward. She maintains that most of the efforts made by the French state to extend welfare provision to Algerians living in metropolitan France before 1962—including housing, family benefits and social services—were a failure. Although Algerians who migrated to the metropole were French nationals, they were treated, at best like second-class citizens and, at worst, like dangerous foreigners. The repeated efforts to tie Algeria more closely to metropolitan

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France under the Fourth and early Fifth Republic, policies that were usually wrapped in the rhetoric of 'integration,' in fact concealed a myriad of different paternalistic and discriminatory practices. These ensured that, whether or not Algerians were technically eligible for welfare benefits, in practice such provisions were denied to them.

In and of itself, this would not be an especially original argument. It is the rich evidence and new perspectives that make this book special. Lyons takes seriously France's postwar civilising mission and marshals a wide range of archival material to show exactly how this expressed itself in the case of Algerians living in metropolitan France. She also sheds light on the complex and interlocking systems of governance that were deployed to protect, educate, improve and monitor Algerians. Above all, she offers a wealth of new insights into how the French state tried to remake Algerians in the image of a tarnished Republic.

The book's six chapters each deal with a particular aspect of this story. The first chapter provides an overview of the origins of the civilising mission in Algeria and the history of Algerians in metropolitan France. This provides the necessary background for the discussion of social service provision in the second and third chapters. The focus here is mostly on the small group of influential 'experts' who formulated social policy towards Algerians in France in the 1950s and early 1960s. Lyons shows how their colonial, pro-natalist and racial preconceptions influenced an array of didactic radio programmes and educational curriculums that were explicitly designed to 'raise' Algerians to the cultural and intellectual level of their (white) metropolitan counterparts. This went alongside a discriminatory family benefit system that was designed to discourage Algerian procreation while simultaneously making Algerian women the key conduit for French values.

The remaining three chapters all tackle the thorny issue of housing. The problem of where to house the growing numbers of Algerians living in metropolitan France in the 1950s led to the creation of several governmental and semi-governmental organisations that were designed to encourage and subsidize social housing projects. But, as the war in Algeria became ever more violent and polarised, these supposedly apolitical agencies became part of an intensive proxy war effort. Dormitories and social service offices were placed under close surveillance; visits from social workers became as much about monitoring *bidonvilles* (slums) and housing projects as they were about providing assistance; and educational projects turned into propaganda exercises that were designed to tempt migrants away from Algerian nationalism. By 1962, the welfare system had become a veritable third front in the fight against anti-colonialism.

The independence of Algeria put an abrupt end to the special treatment that Algerians had received in metropolitan France. Within a few years, they had become foreigners like any other non-French population. The elaborate social security services that had been built in their name were rebranded--most famously, the Algerian workers' housing authority, which became the SONACOTRA (the Société nationale de construction de logements pour les travailleurs) in 1963--and government attention shifted to the integration of the million or so *pièdes-noirs* who had fled Algeria. In an effort to forget the Algerian calamity, the French state quietly dismantled a welfare structure that had seemed essential to national security only a few years earlier.

Lyons's narrative is compelling. By putting Algeria (and Algerian migrants) at the heart of metropolitan politics in the 1950s and 1960s, her book complements the work of scholars like Todd Shepard who argue that the Algerian war was not simply a disastrous conflict for the hundreds of thousands of Algerians who perished at the hands of the French army and Algerian nationalists.[1] It also precipitated an intense crisis of citizenship and a reorientation of state priorities. As Lyons demonstrates, the civilising mission was more than a chimera: it informed the actions and responses of almost all state actors involved with the Algerian population in France. It is easy today to judge these actors harshly for their racist and culturalist prejudices--and Lyons sometimes struggles to conceal her

contempt for their opinions—but her sources nevertheless indicate how hard they tried to “do the right thing.” With the spectre of the Nazi occupation still looming over France, academic experts and policymakers repeatedly stressed that their view of Algerian backwardness was not racist. Similarly, many social workers genuinely believed that, by bringing culture and civilised behaviour to Algerian families living in France, they were contributing to their emancipation. Hindsight allows us to dismiss many of these ideas, but they were profoundly influential.

In addition to restoring texture to the contradictions of France’s colonial civilising mission, this book makes two other vital contributions to the existing literature. The first is to illustrate just how complex the French state had become by the 1950s. Lyons’s analysis of welfare provision gives the lie to simplistic ideas about the persistence of the Jacobin model and the emergence of a monolithic post-war technocratic state. On the contrary, what emerges from the book is a multi-layered system, made up a number of governmental, semi-governmental and private actors. The latter have been poorly treated in the literature on French politics, which has paid far too little attention to the decisive intermediary role of private enterprises and civil society organisations in the formation of the postwar French state. While policy directions often came from a restricted group of experts at the very upper echelons of the French state, the implementation (or otherwise) of a specific policy relied on an extended range of state and non-state actors, ranging from social Catholic aid organisations to unscrupulous housing developers. These individuals and groups were crucial in translating the French state’s values into concrete practices.

Of course, Lyons’s top-down approach does leave us wondering exactly how Algerian migrants themselves responded to the state’s attempts to ‘educate’ them. There are moments where she speculates that patterns of non-cooperation with social workers represented a concerted act of resistance against state authority but her sources do not allow her to prove this. Nor can she say much about how French republican values were manipulated by Algerian migrants to draw concessions from the state. The only example of this is when she refers to letters written by Algerian men and women complaining of discrimination with regard to the non-payment of social security payments (pp. 161-162). Surprisingly, these complaints did not fall on deaf ears. The local officials who handled the requests processed them promptly and, in one case, even provided additional compensation for late payment. This raises a further issue, namely the importance of local politics. Lyons briefly mentions differences in welfare provision between Paris, Lyon and Marseille, and discusses local opposition to social housing for Algerians, but I think there is more to be said about this question. In particular, recent work on Marseille and Montpellier suggests that there was a tension between the paternalistic goals of welfare provision and the clientelistic policies of municipal administrations. In these contexts, the distribution of social housing was a form of electoral patronage that was used to placate specific communities.<sup>[2]</sup> Or, to put it another way, what Lyons calls the civilising mission in the metropole was as subservient to local priorities as it was to an over-arching colonial—or, after 1962, neo-colonial—logic.

The second major contribution of this book is to our understanding of family and female migration. Right from the start, Lyons insists that Algerian migrant women were vital focal points for welfare services. This challenges the dominant historiography and popular perception of French immigration, which argues that family migration only became a major concern with the rise of settled migration and the implementation of family regroupment policies in the 1970s. In fact, policymakers, administrators and social workers were acutely aware of the growing presence of Algerian women through the 1950s and 1960s—and they sincerely believed that women held the key to transforming an unruly and uncivilised Algerian household into a clean and efficient French household. Drawing on a fascinating range of evidence—from home economics textbooks to floorplans for community centres—Lyons makes a powerful case for the key role of women in welfare provision. They were to be the vectors of French culture and the embodiment of the civilising mission.

Again, there is not quite enough sense of how Algerian migrant women responded to the state's propaganda machine. What did they make of this concerted attempt to convert them? What were the long-term consequences of their interaction with welfare services? As most scholars of immigration have emphasised, the vast majority of post-war migrants from Algeria—and elsewhere in North Africa—have respected and tried to comply with the basic tenets of the French republican model.<sup>[3]</sup> Can this be explained by proactive state paternalism or do the reasons for this lie elsewhere? Obviously, such questions are outside the scope of this book, but Lyons's suggestive analysis of Algerian migrant women opens up the field to more nuanced and gendered analyses of these (still very topical) issues.

More generally, Lyons's book demonstrates the absolute centrality of the colonial project and decolonisation to the history of postwar French politics. Given the deluge of new research on the French empire in the Anglo-American academy, this may seem like an obvious point, but there is still surprisingly little good empirical work on the impact of colonialism on metropolitan France in the postwar period. We do not have more than a handful of studies on vital phenomenon such as the *pièdes-noirs*, the *harkis* or the anti-racism movements of the 1970s and 1980s—and we have next to nothing on the workings of postcolonial identity politics. By raising questions about the relationship between the postwar French state and the politics of (post-)colonialism, Lyons has filled in one important gap in the literature. And she has done so with great originality and authority.

## NOTES

[1] Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Cornell, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2008). On the subject of the metropolitan impact of colonialism and decolonisation, see also the work of Benjamin Stora, Raphaëlle Branche and the ACHAC collective.

[2] See, for instance, Ed Naylor, “Un âne dans l'ascenseur’: late colonial welfare services and social housing in Marseille after decolonization” *French History* 27/3(2013): 422-447 and Emile Chabal, “Managing the postcolony: minority politics in Montpellier, c.1960-c.2010” *Contemporary European History* 23/2(2014): 237-258.

[3] Most notably, Gérard Noiriel, who has repeatedly emphasised the integrative power of the French state and immigrants' gradual acceptance of its values, even when faced with discrimination, hostility and exclusion.

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