
H-France Review Vol. 14 (March 2014), No. 56

Ellen J. Amster, *Medicine and the Saints: Science, Islam, and the Colonial Encounter in Morocco, 1877-1956*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013. xiv + 334 pp. Maps, tables, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$60.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-292-74544-5.

Review by William Gallois, University of Exeter.

This is a book with a hinterland. While the dates in its title would seem to suggest that it offers a study of the place of medicine in the encounter between Europeans and Moroccans in the immediate pre-colonial and colonial periods, the book's surtitle—*Medicine and the Saints*—hints at some of the ways in which it escapes its central chronology. This escape is certainly apparent in the range of sources which are deployed as lenses through which to think through the Protectorate and its afterlife, ranging from readings of classic works from the medieval Islamic canon through to oral histories of health encounters in twenty-first century Fes.

Throughout, the book draws on a broad diet of evidence, ranging from the documentary to the cultural, the political to the personal and, given the breadth of its aspirations, it is sensibly structured around chapters which tackle quite distinct topics (whilst also establishing some chronological order to the work). These include studies of the development of French sociological thinking in the nineteenth century and its practical import in the health cultures of empire, the roles played by hygienist and public health discourses in Morocco, and two important gender-inflected chapters which look at the complex relationships between women, tradition, modernity, biopolitics and the nation.

In terms of its theoretical and scholarly orientation, Amster's text is very much in the tradition of the social history of medicine, especially its colonial exponents, such as Shula Marks and David Arnold. Indeed, its conceptual value would seem to emerge in the way in which it draws its moral and theoretical inspiration as much from Morocco as it does from the western academy and, as is the case with Arnold's subaltern writings on health in India, Amster's work is possessed of methodological, as well as descriptive and analytic value.

Given the richness of this text and the manner in which distinct arguments are run in, around and over each other (one suspects that Amster's narrative style might not have been uninfluenced by the urban design of Fes, one of the great heroes of her story), I would imagine that different readers will have quite different experiences of the work. That said, two of the text's key arguments do merit being wrenched from the whole so as to subject them to interrogation.

The first falls quite distinctly into the field of the history of medicine: Amster's contention is that the project of medical imperialism was far less successful in Morocco than has commonly been supposed. The details and the fabric of Amster's story reveal the ways in which Lyautey's notion that medicine would serve as the vanguard of imperialism failed on the ground, and, what is more, that the selection of medicine as the ideal locus of the colonial encounter in fact engendered great resistance to French rule. As she puts it, "Lyautey expected colonial medicine to generate a Franco-Moroccan civic culture, but colonial medicine produced instead state dysfunction and ultimately popular nationalism. Because a state not a republic provided health care to a patient who was not a citizen, Moroccans fought the imposed

French medical state and hygienists treated Moroccans as a disease environment rather than a public to protect” (p. 13).

This argument is certainly of value both to historians of medicine and to scholars of Morocco. Its piecing apart of a generally accepted truth is to be welcomed, though there is a slight sense of frustration that the book does not seem wholly alive to the ways in which this Moroccan experience replayed the early, neighbouring failures of the medical civilizing mission in Algeria. There too, of course, one finds the great gap between the idealization of medicine and the realities of “state dysfunction” and the engendering of “popular nationalism.” Given Amster’s interest in the embodied colonial subject, it seems unusual that Fanon is not referenced—especially given the fact that his theories of subjectivity emerged in the North African colonial medical state—nor Yvonne Turin’s *Affrontements culturels dans l’Algérie coloniale: écoles, médecines, religion*.^[1]

Amster’s second key argument is really a meta-claim which sits above and through the whole work. This posits that histories of Morocco, especially those oriented towards politics, have underestimated the role of saints, and popular Sufi practices more generally, in the history of the country. As Amster puts it, “...sainthood was the essence of premodern Moroccan social reality, yet contemporary historians seldom include Islamic saints in the narrative of Moroccan history” (p. 18). Medicine plays an important role in this story because the history of the health of Moroccan subjects is partly one of the distinct manner in which biomedical and (plural) Islamic forms of medical knowledge and practice became intertwined in modern Morocco. Crucially, this process was initiated in the pre-colonial period of Sultan ‘Abd al-Hafiz, while “[f]ighting saints disappeared in the twentieth century, to be replaced by self-styled modern and nationalist bourgeoisies who embraced Western political philosophy, industrialization and the nation-state” (p. 12).

Choosing how one might evaluate this argument which spans politics, society, religion, medicine and the nation is far from easy. To some extent I think conventional academic judgement may not suffice, because in Amster’s book this argument is essayed with considerable moral and emotional force to make bold claims regarding the character and quality of the lives of Moroccans in the present, as well as the past. As she writes on Fes, “[w]ith the collapse of the City of God as a body politic [Fes], there remained only the City of God of the human body, as a last refuge for knowing Him, receiving healing from Him, and obtaining the worldly guidance of His saintly friends” (p. 50).

It is plain that this version of Moroccan history will not appeal to all. Indeed, its recuperation of a heritage which has faded from the pages of academic texts poses Moroccans, and those who study Morocco, a series of hard questions relating to national and religious identity. The value of Amster’s book comes not, then, in the sense that it is ‘right’ in every respect, but because it is a rare text which is based on the deepest kinds of thinking and which challenges its readers to think hard about questions which are simply not apparent in much of the literature on these subjects. It is a work of great intellectual ambition, a set of important arguments and a book whose ideas will linger long in the minds of its readers.

NOTE

[1] See Frantz Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre* (Paris: François Maspéro, 1961); Fanon, *Pour la révolution africaine: écrits politiques* (Paris: François Maspéro, 1964); Fanon, *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1965); and Yvonne Turin, *Affrontements culturels dans l’Algérie coloniale: écoles, médecines, religion, 1830–1880* (Paris: François Maspéro, 1971).

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ISSN 1553-9172