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Paul A. Silverstein, *Postcolonial France: Race, Islam, and the Future of the Republic*. London: Pluto Press, 2018. xiii + 206 pp. Notes, references, and index. \$99.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780745337753; \$27.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9780745337746; \$27.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781786802972.

Review by Melissa K. Byrnes, Southwestern University.

Paul Silverstein opens *Postcolonial France: Race, Islam, and the Future of the Republic* with the November 1934 far-right riots that threatened to drive France into the fascism of its neighbors. Remarkably, it is this interwar lens into developing national ideologies that sets up the case for the book's contemporary relevance. Silverstein connects the present moment to the 1930s through parallel "crises of capitalism," border anxieties, and the emergence of "new demagogic populisms that similarly speak in the name of the nation against the various internal and external others" (p. 9). Following a list of developments that appear to be "as in the 1930s" (pp. 9-10), Silverstein highlights the important lesson that "the descent to further violence and fascism is not inevitable" (p. 10). Indeed, the rest of the book invokes the work—political, artistic, and otherwise—of French men and women of color that offers models for combatting these forces through solidarity, creativity, embodied activism, and the cultivation of revolutionary love.

Silverstein is careful to emphasize that the "postcolonial France" of his title is not a place where colonialism is over or its effects superseded; rather, colonialism "remains written into the French landscape through the very structures and institutions forged in imperial times" (p. 2). The book's core purpose is to examine "how various, differently racialized men and women in contemporary France endure, express, engage, and ultimately enlist such postcolonial duress in charting a future beyond racist denials, assimilationist policies, discriminatory structures, and national frontiers" (p. 3). The latter chapters in particular call attention to "the modes of self-representation and popular cultural and embodied forms through which French men and women of color take voice, assert their presence, and seek to become the managers—and not merely the managed—of a multiracial, postcolonial France" (p. 11). Silverstein offers adept and approachable discussions of French political anxieties, secular practices, race, and the content of citizenship; yet he is at his best when delving into lived experience. This book is a model for analyzing bodily practices, engaging the senses, and incorporating these into broader conversations about social structures and cultural ideologies.

Silverstein lays out his main theoretical framework in chapter one, "Mobile Subjects." Throughout the book, postcoloniality is heavily marked as both transnational and local. Migrants (and their descendants) live within an "everyday transnationalism," "the mundane, banal, postcolonial experience of living simultaneously within and beyond the nation-state" (p. 31).

Renewed border anxieties, recast in security terms (p. 23), mean that, for many French men and women of color, “their history of family mobility continues to haunt their performance of belonging within France” (p. 24) despite their often successful entrance into the middle class.[1] This rich web of communication and community is viewed with suspicion, and yet these individuals feel themselves to be “resolutely French” (p. 38) even while being “French *and* Muslim (and/or African or Asian or Caribbean)” (pp. 30-31).

This tension becomes more acute as French public rhetoric creates “a moral panic” (p. 44) around Islam and immigration. Chapter two outlines the dimensions of this “crisis” and contextualizes contemporary anxieties within a longer history of French Islam (p. 46). Silverstein offers a useful discussion of the complexities and contradictions of *laïcité*, which in its latest form “misrecognizes” key features of its own development, not least its colonial influences (pp. 49 and 55).[2] At the same time that French society attempts to reject (and racialize) Muslimness, for French men and women of color, “Islam has become increasingly the language through which social injustice, economic marginalization, political stagnation, and cultural racism is being explicitly challenged by men and women of color within France” (p. 59). The real crisis, then, is “about secular citizenship failing to live up to its own promise to recognize and pay forward all the work done by generations of Muslim French and other French men and women of color to make France what it is today and what it might become in the future” (p. 62). Silverstein is careful to distinguish this critique from one that would “jettison liberalism altogether or give up its persistent critique of structural inequality enabled by a discourse of rights and freedoms,” insisting that we also note *laïcité*’s “blind spots and hypocrisies, its cultural assumptions and privileging of certain kinds of subjects over others” (p. 55).

Chapters three and four on the relationship between French Jews and Muslims—and anti-Semitism and Islamophobia—are particularly strong. Silverstein contributes here to a vital and growing discussion about the interplay between Jews and Muslims, and the discrimination and hatred both can face.[3] He pointedly avoids pitting the two against each other (p. 66), asserting that anti-Semitism and Islamophobia in contemporary France are “interlaced and co-constitutive” (p. 67). Ironically, where Jewish communities were once perceived as national threats because of their “seeming capacity to seamlessly integrate (indeed assimilate) into urbane social and professional life,” it is now French Muslims’ refusal to cede their public identities and visible differences that marks them as threats to the Republic (p. 66). Silverstein explores the ways in which tension has been fostered within a French system where “Islam comes off as a danger to the future of France,” but “French Jewishness...is projected as the primary object and victim of this threat, in need of protection by the secular republican state”—even while French Jewish citizenship continues to “feel tenuous and vulnerable” (p. 65). He draws parallels between perceptions that Jews today have access to rights and benefits Muslims do not feel they can claim and French colonial practices of elevating Jews over Muslims (pp. 68-73), acknowledging that this narrative ignores the history of French violence against Jewish communities (p. 77).

Chapter four then situates the differential reactions to *Charlie Hebdo*’s satire and Dieudonné Mbala Mbala’s performances within this broader relationship. Silverstein’s analysis here proves balanced and effective, connecting both bodies of work to deeply French traditions that question “the privilege of those who determine the bounds of liberal toleration” (p. 94). He emphasizes the individual agency not only of the creative producers, but also of those who committed the acts of violence in January 2015 (p. 90). Ultimately, Silverstein finds that the notion that “Islamophobia is simply more acceptable in contemporary French society than anti-Semitism” is “unsatisfying”

because it “demands that those presently excluded simply be patient and wait for more enlightened times” (pp. 96-97). It is not enough to point out hypocrisy; there must be some viable paths forward.

Such paths are explored in the following three chapters on football, parkour, and hip-hop, which amplify Muslim and other voices and emphasize creation as a vital part of individual agency. Silverstein insists that we consider embodied practice as a significant form of expression. Chapter five concisely walks through a series of moments of heightened national “anxiety” played out on the football pitch, from the 1998 World Cup victory through Nicolas Anelka’s controversial 2013 *quenelle* (a Nazi-like salute popularized by Dieudonné).^[4] National football stars occupy an uncomfortable and highly visible position, expected to “serve as representatives of multicultural quiescence” (p. 99) and “to hypercorrect the supposed deficits of belonging with which they were saddled by their postcolonial background” (p. 114). At the other end of the emotional scale, however, parkour practitioners find the freedom to engage in “exuberant, creative acts of self-making” (p. 117). French men and women of color use parkour to transform “the racialized, dilapidated built landscapes of the *cités* into a home in which they can flourish both psychically and materially” (p. 117) and “construct meaningful, flourishing lives under conditions of economic privation and police harassment” (p. 123). Hip-hop provides a similar venue for rewriting community and belonging in a way that invokes solidarity both at a “micro-local” and a transnational level (pp. 132 and 135). Silverstein considers both hardcore rap artists, whose work emphasizes violence—often sexual violence—“not as a frivolous expression of a generation of youth in revolt, but as part of a larger, embedded structure of historical marginalization and decolonizing resistance” (pp. 136-137) and an Islamic, often Sufi-inflected, “hip-hop project that has emphasized love and hope over hatred and despair” (p. 133). Like the parkour practitioners, artists like Abd al Malik position “themselves and their audiences of color as agents of change and voices for a future society that is spiritually and politically connected well beyond the strictures of its *banlieue* walls, its secular republican norms, and its Islamophobic anxieties” (p. 146).

This emphasis on creation and creativity leads Silverstein to a concluding discussion on the role of love in postcolonial politics and practice. The “activists, artists, athletes, and authors of color” featured in the book accept that the French Republic is “always already racialized” (p. 148), marked by colonialism and postcolonialism. Their acts of creation, however, refuse a fatalist response; “they call for—indeed project themselves into—a future postcolonial France defined as much by Muslimness and blackness as whiteness” (p. 148). In earlier sections, Silverstein lauds the various ways that activists and artists model a new, pragmatic spirit of *vivre ensemble*, “living together” (pp. 80-83 and 139). At the end, he seems to support moving further, not just away from hatred and suspicion, but towards a deeper form of love: “Invoking love as the affective ally of peace and the response to war and hatred constitutes a powerful critique of institutional racism and social injustice, a critique grounded in Islam but with wide postcolonial resonances” (p. 154).

This book takes on a large swathe of the salient issues facing contemporary French society; at no point, though, is it overwhelmed by its ambitions. Silverstein’s writing is clear, concise, and compelling. The book is accessible and engaging, able to speak to a broader public audience and certainly of considerable use in both graduate and undergraduate classrooms. It would be fantastic to have an accompanying playlist—or a multi-media platform that gathered music, film clips, artwork, and perhaps even activist posters and speeches (this could be an excellent class assignment). In addition to the major topics outlined above, the book includes some shorter

informative sections on major French figures including Albert Memmi (pp. 13-18), Abdelmalek Sayad (pp. 38-40), Fadela Amara (pp. 59-62), and Zinedine Zidane (pp. 108-111).

For future scholarship, the book suggests a number of fruitful comparative approaches, most obviously with other European nations grappling with populism in its Islamophobic and anti-Semitic guises. It also offers some intriguing parallels with discussions of race in the US; Silverstein makes the intriguing observation that the slogan “Je suis Ahmed,” which emerged in the wake of the January 2015 attacks, represents a hybrid of “Muslim Lives Matter” and “Blue Lives Matter” (pp. 88-89). France, with its lengthy imperial history and its rich postcolonial diversity, seems to be on the leading edge of major social and political transformations. Overall, Silverstein’s definition of postcolonialism and its deep resonance with local and transnational phenomena should prove a useful framework for thinking through issues of race, religion, citizenship, and belonging in the twenty-first century.

NOTES

[1] For a closer look at upwardly mobile North African French and their continued cultural marginalization, see Jean Beaman, *Citizen Outsider: Children of North African Immigrants in France* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2017).

[2] Naomi Davidson provides the basis for understanding secularizing Islam within France as an extension of colonial logic. Naomi Davidson, *Only Muslim: Embodying Islam in Twentieth-Century France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012).

[3] See the recent special issue of *Jewish History* (32:1 [2018]) on “Judeophobia and Islamophobia in France Before and After Charlie Hebdo and Hyper Cacher” edited by Jonathan Judaken and Ethan B. Katz, and, of course, Katz’s work on historical relations between the groups: Ethan B. Katz, *The Burdens of Brotherhood: Jews and Muslims from North Africa to France* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

[4] For more on football and post-imperial France, see Laurent Dubois, *Soccer Empire: The World Cup and the Future of France* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010).

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