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H-France Review Vol. 21 (November 2021), No. 211

Charlotte Ann Legg, *The New White Race: Settler Colonialism and the Press in French Algeria, 1860-1914*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2021. xii + 287 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$55.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-4962-0850-7; \$55.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-1-4962-2521-4.

Review by Dónal Hassett, University College Cork.

In the opening pages of *The New White Race*, Charlotte Ann Legg cites an assertion from the Algiers-based Franco-Spanish newspaper *El Patuét* that “a people’s stage of development is reflected in the press” (p.19). Throughout the book, Legg offers a rich analysis of the role of newspapers produced in Algeria in articulating shifting and competing conceptions of the “people” within this settler colonial society and their “development” under French colonial rule. She draws on an impressive range of sources across a number of languages to provide a detailed account of the ways journalists in the colony used the press to delineate, enforce, and, in some cases, contest the boundaries of nationality, race, and gender that underpinned the settler colonial system and the narratives of progress that legitimized it. While the potential of the book’s interventions in the fields of Algerian history and of media history are frustratingly sold short in places, it remains an insightful addition to the historiography.

Legg’s discursive analysis fleshes out and nuances existing histories of settler political culture in Algeria, asking readers to take seriously the alternative visions of the national, transnational, and imperial communities articulated in the Algerian press in this period and to interrogate their political implications. It also underlines the particularity of the press in Algeria in comparison to that of metropolitan France, demonstrating that, while the latter was a key agent in the homogenization of the national body, the former promoted rival concepts of diversity and difference in the hope of reshaping the imperial polity. These are valuable and original contributions to scholarship in the field.

The book’s first chapter demonstrates how the proliferation of newspapers created a discursive space in which settlers could elaborate and embody their visions of the “new white race” that had supposedly been forged in the arduous process of the conquest—military, agricultural, and cultural—of Algeria. It also illustrates how these visions were anchored in rival conceptions of the French imperial and trans-Mediterranean Latin community and how they were co-opted and are contested by female, Jewish, and Muslim journalists who offered their own alternative narratives of Algeria’s past, present, and future. In chapter two, Legg explores the evolution of gendered and racialized familial metaphors to describe the imperial polity amongst the different sections of the Algerian press. She effectively demonstrates how shifting attitudes towards the authority of the French government and its agents in the colony impacted the way both settler

and Muslim journalists represented their communities within the hierarchical metaphor of the imperial family.

Chapter three focuses on how the coverage of the notorious anti-Jewish movement of the 1890s in the Algerian press served to crystallize the idea of the emergence of a new, dynamic and hyper-masculine Latin race among Algeria's settlers. She also explores how this moment allowed for a limited and temporary relaxation of the racial and gendered hierarchies that defined the boundaries of the settlers' vision of an Algerian community, suggesting that women and Muslims might accede to membership of this community through anti-Jewish activism. Chapter four examines how the development of telecommunications technology broadened the imagined geographies of the settler press. Legg shows how attitudes towards French sovereignty in the colony were refracted through and shaped by engagement with the contemporary world, especially with other settler colonial contexts.

Finally, chapter five considers the politics of multilingualism in the Algerian press. Legg shows how bilingual publications served to reinforce cultural and political conceptions of the Latinity of Algeria's settler population while also allowing Jewish journalists to stage their community's assimilation to the French nation. For the small number of Muslim journalists, Franco-Arabic newspapers variously facilitated their integration into the French imperial community, their evasion of the strict censorship regime, and their articulation of anticolonial resistance.

An engaging and enlightening read, *The New White Race* has two primary strengths as a piece of scholarship. Firstly, it avoids a teleological reading of the evolution of the settler polity in Algeria. The book offers a detailed and nuanced account of the elaboration of a cultural and political vision of the settler community as transnational and Latin in origin, vital and virile in its constitution, and shifting in its attitude to French sovereignty in the colony. Legg's use of settler colonial theory allows her to interrogate the role the triangular relationship between the metropole, the *colons*, and the colonized played in shaping the politics and culture of the settler press and the community it served. Her deployment of this analytical framework does not prescribe an inevitable outcome to the settler colonial project. Instead, Legg uses the voices of settler journalists themselves to explain the alternative futures they imagined for the settler colonial polity, the reasons why these did not come to pass, and, perhaps most importantly, what this tells us about the specific settler colonial dynamics at play in Algeria. While Legg is not the first scholar to explore the significance of Latinist, separatist, and autonomist thought among Algerian settlers, this book offers the most detailed account of the articulation, dissemination, and evolution of these ideas and the identities they embodied in colonial Algeria.

Secondly, the book places the questions of race and gender at the center of its argument, not confining them to specific chapters, but rather weaving them throughout its analysis. Legg challenges narrow binary conceptions of race, showing that while a shared whiteness with the metropolitan French was central to the settlers' claim to equality within the imperial polity, this did not preclude them from asserting their racial specificity as "Latin" or "Algerian" to justify demands for political power in the colony. She also demonstrates how both Jewish and Muslim journalists sought to reshape the way their racial identities were constituted in the colony to benefit their communities. The discussion of gender underlines how masculinity was intrinsically linked to power in the political imaginaries of the colonial press and how the very existence of female journalists unsettled this. Here she exposes the complex ways in which journalists mobilized concepts of virility, femininity, and the patriarchal family to stake claims to power

within the press and within society more broadly. The close attention to how both racial and gendered differences were constructed, embodied, and enforced in the pages of the colonial press complicates our understanding of the “grammars of difference”<sup>[1]</sup> that shaped politics, high and low, in this settler colony.

While the book offers a detailed and nuanced account of settler colonial imaginaries in the Algeria of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, it is less illuminating on how these interacted with and impacted lived experiences in the colony. At points, the book seems to conceive of Algeria as primarily a discursive space, rather than as a society in which access to the press and to political power were dictated, in large part, by the oppressive structures of the settler colonial state. The absence of a detailed analysis of the circulation, readership, and reception of the various publications cited in the text makes it difficult to adjudicate their relevance to political life within and between the colony’s different communities. This is particularly acute when it comes to the book’s engagement with Muslim journalists and Franco-Arabic publications, whose relationship to the community they come from and claim to speak for is underexplored. In the introduction, Legg suggests that she agrees with Arthur Asseraf’s assertion, in his recent book *Electric News*,<sup>[2]</sup> that newspapers had little influence on the Muslim population (p. 9). And yet, she does not return to this claim in her analysis or explain how it shapes her interpretation of these publications. It is perhaps understandable that Legg undersells the important divergences in analysis between her book and Asseraf’s monograph, given the short time frame between the release of both publications. It would, however, have really enhanced the book had the author positioned herself more clearly in the ongoing debates within the field of Algerian history over how we conceptualize the public sphere(s) of a coercive settler colonial society. The history of the Algerian press is crucial to answering questions about if, how, and where spaces of contact and conflict were opened within and beyond the racially segregated communities of the settler colonial polity. One would imagine that these same questions should also be crucial to writing a history of the press in Algeria.

Where the book sits in broader histories of the press and media is also not made entirely clear to the reader. Legg acknowledges the critiques of Benedict Anderson’s concept of “imagined communities” as overly narrow and Eurocentric but does not explain if and how they have influenced her approach, simply stating “the contribution of the newspaper to the historical process of imagining is widely recognized” (p. 5). Here, the book, which does engage with a wide range of scholarship on the colonial press, would benefit from a clearer articulation of its understanding of the newspaper as a medium and as a piece of material culture within the context of this settler colonial society. Likewise, the position of the newspaper within the broader news ecosystem of Algerian society merits a deeper exploration. This is not to suggest that the book’s argument that the exclusion of Algeria from studies of the press in France is anachronistic and symptomatic of a colonial blind spot is not persuasive. It is. However, the underdeveloped conceptualization of the newspaper’s role in society limits and thus undersells the book’s potential implications for the history of the press and the media more generally beyond the Franco-Algerian context and in the broader colonial Mediterranean and/or in other settler colonial contexts.

*The New White Race* is a rewarding read. At its strongest, it complicates and nuances our understanding of identity and politics within the settler colonial polity of Algeria, rejecting historical determinism in the colony and underlining the centrality of discourses of race and gender to the constitution of its political communities. Even its weaknesses raise interesting and

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generative questions about how we write histories of a settler colonial society like Algeria and how Algeria slots into broader regional, colonial, and global histories. Legg should be commended for producing this engaging piece of scholarship, especially in the challenging context of the Covid19 pandemic. Her book is a welcome addition to the expanding historiography on colonialism in Algeria in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

#### NOTES

[1] Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, “Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda” in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, ed. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 3-4.

[2] Arthur Asseraf, *Electric News in Colonial Algeria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

Dónal Hassett  
University College Cork  
[donal.hassett@ucc.ie](mailto:donal.hassett@ucc.ie)

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ISSN 1553-9172