

H-France Review Vol. 21 (March 2021), No. 38

Todd Shepard, *Sex, France, and Arab Men, 1962-1979*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. 317 pp. Figures, bibliography, and index. \$50.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9780226493275; \$36.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9780226790381.

Review by Arthur Asseraf, University of Cambridge.

In 1971, gay activists in France decided it was time to make themselves visible. The Front homosexuel d'action révolutionnaire (FHAR) proclaimed its existence with a bang, issuing the following manifesto: "We have been fucked in the ass by Arabs, we are proud of it and we will do it again" ("Nous nous sommes fait enculer par des Arabes. Nous en sommes fiers et nous recommencerons") (pp. 75-76). The reference to "Arabs" might seem surprising and out of place: why does an assertion of sexual behaviour have to be connected with race?

Todd Shepard's *Sex, France, and Arab Men* begins to answer this question. By tracking the figure of the "Arab man" in discussions about sex in France from the independence of Algeria in 1962 to the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Shepard shows us that discussions of race and sex were inseparable. From the feminists of the Mouvement de libération des femmes (MLF) to far-right critics of immigration, intellectuals trying to analyse domination, and abolitionists of prostitution, in the effervescent years of the sexual revolution everybody in France talked about Arabs when they talked about sex.

Shepard's study fills an important gap in an emerging literature on the intersection of race and sex between France and North Africa. While Judith Surkis's *Sex, Law, and Sovereignty in French Algeria* looks at the colonial period, and Mehammed Amadeus Mack's *Sexagon* deals with the more contemporary context, Shepard looks at what lies in the middle—decolonization and its aftermath.^[1] Indeed, this English edition follows on from the French one published by Payot in 2017, whose different title makes this all the more explicit: *Mâle décolonisation* ("male decolonization").^[2]

The story in *Sex, France, and Arab Men* in many ways picks up from Shepard's previous book, the influential *Invention of Decolonization*, which tracked the impact of the Algerian Revolution on the French metropole.^[3] Here, Shepard considers its aftermath, and how discussions of Algeria shaped a "post-Algerian history of France." The Algerian Revolution's successful struggle for independence entrenched the figure of the Arab man as an important model of masculinity in France, but one whose meaning was highly volatile and contested.

Discussions of Arab men were not limited to a particular political side or movement, and the strength of Shepard's work lies in tracking the many mutations of this figure across the political spectrum. He has an eye for the telling detail and moves through the thicket of dense and sometimes obscure allusions to show shifting meanings. Seen through this racial prism, strange bedfellows appear in which progressive and reactionary sides of the sexual revolution shared remarkably similar tropes.

Chapter one begins by tracking the far right's fascination with Arab virility in the aftermath of the loss of Algeria in 1962. Far-right commentators positioned Algerian men as potential invaders rather than victims of colonialism: immigrants were potential rapists. In chapter two, we continue with the far right's association of Arab men with sexual deviance, this time seeing how they connected Algerians with the "sissified" student demonstrators in May 1968. Chapter three looks at how emerging revolutionary homosexual movements embraced these associations in the aftermath of May 1968. Activists exalted Arab men as models of revolutionary activity, and thus provocatively emphasised how having sex with Arabs drew them closer to the revolution. In chapter four, Shepard shows how, at a time where the binary categories of hetero- and homosexual were stabilizing, the figure of a sexually fluid Arab man was the counterpoint to this binary.

The second half of the book changes tack, looking at wider discussions of prostitution and rape. Chapters five and six move back to 1945 and to a legal history of prostitution in the late colonial period to show how the regulation of prostitution was connected to the imaginary of Arabs as pimps. Chapter seven delves into how the specific practice of anal sex (*sodomie*) became a locus to discuss power and politics in the 1970s. Finally, chapters eight and nine re-examine the emergence of rape as a major public issue in the 1970s by showing the role of Arab men in feminist discussions of rape.

Overall, Shepard assembles a wide range of fascinating material, from films and novels to laws and political pamphlets, and a wide range of concerns, from immigration and labour to feminism, sexuality, and violence. The sheer amount of this evidence makes a powerful point. His work puts a solid nail in the coffin of the myth that France sunk into an amnesia about the Algerian War after 1962. Rather, Shepard shows that if you know where to look, talk of Algeria oozes out of every source.

While rewarding, this range can sometimes prove confusing, especially if the reader is not already familiar with debates in gender history in postwar France. Shepard's approach jumps between groups and contexts, and it is not always clear what weight we are to give to a small activist group, a police report, a popular film or an experimental one. While it makes it clear that talk of Arabs was omnipresent, it remains to be seen what we are to make of these different allusions. This is a dense book, rich in analytical insights which will undoubtedly lead to further research, so I would like to sketch out a few of the avenues that Shepard opens up.

The first, and major one, is to show that debates about sex were always already debates about race. There is a persistent tendency, in France and elsewhere, to write about race as a problem that appears *later* in an already-existing France. But as Shepard shows, it is not possible to write a history of feminism, the LGBT movement, or the sexual revolution more widely without entangling it within the history of decolonization, immigration, and empire. Immigrants did not arrive to disrupt an existing set of French attitudes to gender. Rather, transformations in gender

and sexuality were also transformations in citizenship and race. This allows us to contextualise more recent heated debates on the sexuality of North African men in France within a historical framework.

Another major contribution is Shepard's distinctive chronology. Rather than the traditional and rather stale dates of political history, here French life moves to the rhythm of events in North Africa in the Middle East. Shepard describes a moment when for many French activists, the truly revolutionary forces lay beyond Europe. This era of revolutionary possibility opened up with the end of colonialism in Algeria, and seemed to close with the events in Iran that deeply puzzled French observers. After 1979, the Iranian revolution would focus observers' attention on religion, and on the category of "Muslims" rather than "Arabs." This choice leads us to reassess postwar French history: the events of May 1968, for instance, are usefully located squarely in the middle of other revolutions in the Third World. One hopes that further research will probe deeper into 1979 and the role of the Iranian Revolution in a broader realignment of the French political economy in the 1970s that we are only beginning to properly assess historically.

However, locating the French sexual revolution transnationally opens up questions that are not entirely answered in this account. What was distinctively French about these debates? Shepard argues that discussions of Arab men are what made the transnational debates of the sexual revolution specifically French (p.8). Yet this begs the question of how the figure of the Arab man relates to other racialised and sexualised figures. Black men, for instance, are remarkably absent in this book. As many works have shown, black men have been figures of dense "sex talk" in many contexts, including France. There are good reasons to focus on the figure of the Arab man, but one wonders if further comparative analysis would have helped flesh out what is distinctive about Shepard's argument.

A consideration of blackness, for instance, might elucidate the overlap with the United States. As in many books by Anglophone academics, the implicit comparative referent of Shepard's story of French uniqueness is the USA (and not, say, other European countries). Regrettably, the English-language publisher chose not to include the French edition's important preface which located Shepard's particular position as an American scholar of French sexuality. This is not just a way of saying that there were also black men in France at the time (which is fairly obvious), but more that one wonders how Shepard positions himself with regard to the extensive analytical literature on blackness and sexuality.

Similarly, one wonders to what extent this story is exclusively about Algeria. As Shepard points out, much French writing conflated "Arabs" with "Algerians." Yet occasionally he mentions examples that show that, by 1973 for instance "Arab" on the left was likely to evoke Palestinians as much as Algerians. Other figures like the Vietnamese, whose importance was huge in the imaginary at the time, flicker briefly but disappear from the analysis of Shepard's "history of the present." Clearly, Shepard shows how discussions of Algerians were especially dense in meaning, but one wishes occasionally that he would have clarified the distinction between his own analytical choices and those of his sources. He demonstrates the existence of a particular cluster of concerns between sex, France, and Arab men, but how this cluster relates to other constellations remains to be seen.

Another further avenue of inquiry that Shepard opens up is his rejection of "vanilla history." This is an intriguing phrase: Shepard defines it as a historiography prudishly devoid of explicit,

graphic sex, and people of colour. Shepard wants to move beyond a history of sex and gender in generic terms; for instance, when discussing anal sex, he insists that “particular sex acts have a history.” But what would a kinkier history look like? It is one thing to trace, as Shepard does, the “sex talk” that people engaged in around sex in the 1960s and 70s, but a kinky history of anal sex may have to go beyond the discursive. Is moving away from vanilla history just filling our books with titillating references to sex that does not involve vaginal missionary intercourse between a married cisgender heterosexual couple? Or is there, methodologically, something deeper at stake? In essence, is a history vanilla because of the content or the method? After all, this is a book about talk, and few things are more vanilla than talking about sex and not fucking. I found myself wondering what it would look like to write a history that recaptured the bodies, the lived experiences, the activism, migration, and border-crossing, that took place in those years. To put it differently, is there anything more vanilla in 2018 than cultural history? This is but one of the exciting questions that Shepard’s work raises. It will thus be interesting to see how this book gets read and its insights furthered within the wider transnational field of queer history.

Shepard’s work is best seen as a distinctive and fresh reading of texts, which has the huge benefit of getting us to reassess figures like Foucault, Deleuze, or Renaud Camus from a different perspective. He puts his finger on the dense interconnections of sex, gender, and race, giving an incredibly stimulating, thought-provoking read. Much like his previous book, *Sex, France, and Arab Men* generates rich questions and will no doubt launch further avenues of research. We can only hope that his call to write less vanilla histories of France will not go unheeded.

NOTES

[1] Judith Surkis, *Sex, Law, and Sovereignty in French Algeria, 1830-1930* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2019); Mehammed Amadeus Mack, *Sexagon: Muslims, France, and the Sexualization of National Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).

[2] Todd Shepard, *Mâle décolonisation : l’“homme arabe” et la France, de l’indépendance algérienne à la révolution iranienne, 1962-1979*, trans. Clément Baude (Paris: Payot, 2017).

[3] Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006).

Arthur Asseraf
University of Cambridge
aa504@cam.ac.uk

Copyright © 2021 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views

posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172