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Jonathan K. Gosnell, *The Politics of Frenchness in Colonial Algeria 1930-1954*. Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2002. xiii + 234 pp. Map, illustrations, and index. \$75.00 U.S. (cl.). ISBN 1-58046-105-0.

Review by Patricia M. E. Lorcin, Texas Tech University.

Jonathan K. Gosnell's *The Politics of Frenchness* forms part of the growing literature on the creation, significance, and politics of French identity in colonial Algeria (1830-1962).^[1] In line with recent historiography on French colonialism, Gosnell stresses the importance of the overseas territories to France's evolving sense of self, but he also seeks to uncover whether the settlers in Algeria articulated alternative definitions of French identity to those of the "Hexagon." The ethnic complexity of colonial society in Algeria meant that "Frenchness," or the desire to achieve it, was governed by a variety of factors ranging from allegiance to metropolitan values to self-interest. If the majority of the settlers wanted Algeria to become French, most Arabs and Berbers were indifferent or did not. The pivotal question for Gosnell, and the one around which he builds his arguments, is: just how French did this disparate population want Algeria to become?

Colonial society in Algeria was multi-cultural, comprising Arabs, Berbers, and Jews, who were native to Algeria, and European settlers, the bulk of whom were not originally French but were nationals of the countries lying along the northern shores of the Mediterranean. French citizenship, and its acquisition, was an important factor in acquiring a perception of "Frenchness." One of the aims of this work is to explore the link between citizenship and identity in order to gauge its importance in creating a sense of belonging.

A sense of belonging is a mental state and participation in events or institutional activities are important to its formation. In this regard, Gosnell pays special attention to the two World Wars, the 1930 centenary celebrations, the impact of military service, and the role of French education, all of which served to draw the different groups together. If these factors helped to endorse the colonial rhetoric of inclusiveness, others highlighted the incoherence of assimilation as a colonial policy and the divisiveness of identity politics. The naturalization laws of 1870 and 1889, both of which excluded the Arabs and Berbers, and the 1881 *Code d'indigénat*, a judicial code specific to the Arabs and Berbers, served to create a two-tier society of citizens and "subjects."^[2] Time did nothing to improve matters, as the settlers, fearful of losing their political hegemony, adamantly refused to make concessions to the Arabs and Berbers. Demographic concerns shaped attitudes towards citizenship. The relative absence of French citizens among the settlers, Gosnell argues, prompted the naturalization decrees of 1870 and 1889, just as the disparity between the size of the settler presence and the majority Arab and Berbers population induced settlers systematically to block attempts to redress the two-tier system.^[3] In each case the fear was of a diminishing or diminished French presence, and hence influence.

More often than not colonial discourse and practice were at variance, and Gosnell does a fine job of highlighting the ambiguities and inconsistencies of French attempts at imposing their cultural and

political presence on the colony. The book is organized into six chapters dealing with the discourses and institutions that contributed to the creation of a sense of identity among the different groups of Algeria.

Gosnell begins with a chapter on the significance of the term *l'Algérie française*. Using a wide array of sources from fiction to official documents, he demonstrates the limits of its spatial organization and the complexity of its cultural and demographic make-up. French Algeria, essentially the areas along and immediately behind the coast, consisted of about 10 percent of the surface area of the country. The southern hinterland was devoid of a meaningful French presence and hence was outside the sphere of French influence. If it remained isolated from French influence, it nonetheless was incorporated into the mythology of French exoticism. It was the "foreign and mysterious" space that so inspired nineteenth-century travel writers and novelists (p.17). Its metaphorical qualities fostered the artistic dimension of French Orientalism.

The second chapter focuses on the importance of the French educational system in the colony. It was in the wake of the Ferry laws that an extensive schooling system was established in Algeria. Although school textbooks helped to introduce unknown aspects of French culture to a body of students largely unfamiliar with France, thus contributing to identification with the Hexagon, the rhetoric of inclusiveness was belied by the development of a two-tier system of education. Until 1949, when major reforms were introduced, most Arab and Berber children attended "indigenous" schools, which emphasized practical over intellectual knowledge. They were thus excluded from the mainstream acculturation process. Furthermore, until the post-World War I period, most Arabs and Berbers were reluctant to send their children to French schools. Even then attendance remained very low, relatively speaking. In 1936, 8.9 percent of Arab and Berber children attended school; in 1954 it was still only 15.4 percent (p. 48). French language was, of course, the mainstay of French acculturation for its acquisition was intended to instill a certain degree of Frenchness in all members of the colony's population, regardless of their legal status.

The importance of the French-language press in the colony is the subject of the next two chapters. It was, Gosnell suggests, a "powerful educational tool" in that it informed its readers of who they were and defined the boundaries of the local and national space they inhabited (p.73). The particularity of the colony's press was that it encouraged the French sensibilities of some, while informing others of the distance that separated them from ever being fully accepted into the French fold. This was due to the presence of two separate presses, the settler press and the "indigenous" press. Whereas the settler press was France-oriented, focusing on political and national events of importance to them as an extension of metropolitan France, the "indigenous" press, according to Gosnell, subscribed to both indigenous and French norms.

The chapter on the settler press is useful for the historical and political background it provides, but it is the chapter on the "indigenous" press that is the most innovative of the book. The primary readership of "indigenous" press was narrow, being restricted mainly to the Muslim elite, but in spite of this it was instrumental in disseminating a different North African reality than that of the settler press. From its inception, the main concern of the "indigenous" journalists was the process of cultural assimilation, examining in detail the degree to which privileged social groups achieved it and how the Muslim population could attain it. Gosnell traces the development of this press, examining the constituencies of the various papers involved and explaining the objectives of each. Common to them all was the desire to eradicate biases and close the real and imagined gaps that separated the European from the "indigenous" populations. There was considerable ambivalence among the Muslim elites about ever attaining the coveted status of French citizen, and as time progressed this ambivalence mutated into desires for autonomy and, eventually, independence. As Gosnell rightly points out, these journalists left "a fascinating record of the evolution of Muslim sentiment in colonial Algeria" (p.134).

The last two chapters of the book address the complexities of identity in colonial Algeria by examining the colonial hierarchy of Frenchness and, finally, the emergence of a non-French colonial identity. At the bottom of the scale in the hierarchy were the Arabs and Berbers, followed by the Jews, then the settlers of non-French origin, or neo-French as they were sometimes called. At the top were the settler of French origin and the recently arrived French. Although these chapters are essentially a synthesis of existing literature, Gosnell does a fine job of demonstrating the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in the quest for Frenchness and its uneven acquisition throughout the settler and “indigenous” populations. Gender, class, ethnicity, or generation conditioned the attainment of French identity, which was, Gosnell declares, a battlefield where rival, and unequal, social groups constantly clashed. During the last three decades of colonial rule both the settler and “indigenous” populations moved away from the idea of Frenchness. The settlers formulated their own sense of identity as *Algérianité*, a concept that excluded the Arabs and Berbers but bound together the disparate groups of Europeans. The Muslim elites, on the other hand, endlessly frustrated in their attempts to redress the inequalities to which they were subjected, started to view the emerging nationalist movements as a better means of attaining their goals and hence their identity.

Overall the book is well researched and the material well presented. Every now and then, however, there are some surprising aberrations from the general professionalism of the work. Why, for example, has Gosnell translated “pris entre l’enclume et le marteau” as “caught between a rock and a hard place” (p.116), when the correct, and more elegant translation, is “caught between the anvil and the hammer?” Similarly jarring is the following factual error, namely that the 1871 rebellion was a Muslim insurrection led by Abd-el-Kader (p.153). Abd-el-Kader spent the period from 1852 to his death in 1883 in exile, first in France and then in Damascus, and at the time of the rebellion was benefiting from a French pension. The rebellion was a Kabyle insurrection led by al-Muqrani (Mokrani). Gosnell also states that the insurrection was probably the result of dissatisfaction over the 1870 Crémieux law naturalizing the Jews, citing as his source the 1897 work of Louis Forest. In fact Forest’s thesis was the exact opposite. He argues that the law had little to do with setting off the rebellion, there being no Jews in Kabylia and a significant time lag between the two events.[4] He was one of several authors who refuted the Crémieux thesis, current in the immediate aftermath of the insurrection. Furthermore, the leader of the revolt, al-Muqrani, did not oppose naturalization of the Jews, whereas he did oppose that of the Muslims, believing that obtaining French citizenship was inferior to adhering to the Islamic faith.[5] A more likely reason for the uprising was the Prussian victory over France and the subsequent discrediting in Algeria of the military and its administrative displacement by the civilians. But nineteenth-century Algeria is not Gosnell’s focus, which may account for such slips and the fact that background information on the nineteenth-century is so perfunctory (pp.15-17).

In spite of these lapses, Gosnell’s work is essential reading for anyone interested in colonial Algeria and the way in which identity politics shape and are shaped by a multi-ethnic society.

NOTES

[1] David Prochaska, *Making Algeria French, Colonialism in Bône, 1870-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Patricia M.E. Lorcin, *Imperial Identities* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1995); James Le Sueur, *Uncivil War, Intellectuals and Identity Politics during the Decolonization of Algeria* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

[2] The 1870 Crémieux Law naturalized all Jews and the 1889 law granted Algerian born children of non-French European immigrants automatic citizenship.

[3] To become French citizens Arabs and Berbers had to renounce their personal status as Muslims, an act that amounted to apostasy for the devout.

[4] Louis Forest, *La Naturalisation des Juifs algériens et l'insurrection de 1871* (Paris: Société française d'imprimerie et de librairie, 1897), p. 55.

[5] *Annie Rey-Goldzeiguer*, "La France Coloniale de 1830-1870," vol 1. in Jean Meyer, Jacques Thobie et al., eds., *Histoire de la France Coloniale*, 2 vols. (Paris: Armand Colin, 1990-1991), p. 542.

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