

H-France Review Vol. 7 (October 2007), No. 119

Andrea L. Smith, *Colonial Memory and Postcolonial Europe: Maltese Settlers in Algeria and France*. Series "New Anthropologies of Europe." Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2006. xi + 269 pp. \$65.00 US (cl) ISBN: 0-253-21856-x; \$24.95 (pb) ISBN: 0-253-34762-9.

Reviewed by Ian Collier, University of Melbourne, Australia.

"Ça commence Malte!" the headlines of *Le Canard Enchaîné* shouted on May 9. Just one day after his victory in the French presidential election, Nicolas Sarkozy departed for a controversial three-day cruise on a multi-million-dollar yacht off the coast of Malta. For a few days, the Maltese tourism office posted the monumental nose pointing across a blue Mediterranean sky emblazoned with the slogan "Come and refresh yourself in Malta, like the President of the Republic."^[1] Toward the end of her book *Colonial Memory and Postcolonial Europe*, Andrea Smith recounts a quite different journey to Malta: one taken by a group of *pièdes noirs* (former colonists from Algeria) now living in southern France. The particularity of these tourists lies in the fact that they are descendants of Maltese immigrants to colonial Algeria. Although most had never visited Malta, they had already begun to claim the island as their homeland. This new-found sense of belonging presents a stark contrast to their outsider status in the cities of the Midi where they have lived since the early 1960s. Their story, as told with skill and sensitivity by Smith, has a great deal to say about the new France over which Nicolas Sarkozy-himself a French citizen of migrant origin-will preside for the next half-decade.

The central theme of Smith's book is the question of "Malteseness"--not as a national experience, but as a liminal identity existing in the margins of Algerian colonial society and contemporary France. But the book has just as much to say about the "Frenchness" against which this identity is articulated. Discovering the existence of a number of settler associations formed around the "Maltese" origin of their members, Smith asks why this particular ethnic identification should have acquired such valency, while other ethnicities present in colonial Algeria, such as Italian, Spanish or Sardinian, have not played any equivalent role. She approaches this question in ways informed by both anthropology and history, adding to the important recent work of Michael Herzfeld and Douglas Holmes, who have brought the techniques of ethnographic fieldwork to bear on European populations.^[3] Like Smith, these authors emphasize the role of movement and migration in the formation of local and national identities, in a dynamic relation to the ideological and mythological structuring of space and rootedness. This is crucial groundwork for the study of modern transnational and cosmopolitan societies, and Smith's book adds in significant ways to this larger project.

Colonial Memory and Postcolonial Europe traces the itinerary of what might at first seem a very limited sub-group of the population of modern France: the tens of thousands of former settlers of Maltese origin who left Algeria for the French mainland after independence in 1962. But in choosing this group precisely for their "liminality" both in colonial Algeria and contemporary France, Smith demonstrates that such a choice can offer new insights. The book illuminates aspects of Algerian and French social structure, opens up the study of identity in concrete and complex ways, and brings together sociological enquiry, life-stories and historical research in a novel and appealing synthesis. Smith began her enquiry by contacting families living in Aix-en-Provence and surrounding areas: over several years, she conducted extensive interviews, dined with her interviewees and attended social functions, and even accompanied a group on an organized trip to Malta. Her interviews and interactions with the elderly Maltese *pièdes noirs* and their families are analysed with sensitivity, and with a careful reflexivity toward her own role and impact in the encounter, rather than posing as a disengaged observer. Those whom

she interviewed were fully aware of her research interest, and they often sought to structure their responses in order to present their history and identity in particular ways. But Smith goes beyond the surface, to analyse the gaps, silences and conflicts in their discourse. She notes particularly the occlusion of the period of the Algerian independence struggle from 1958-62 from their personal histories: they refer only obliquely to “*les évènements*” (an expression which we might liken to “the troubles” in Northern Ireland) and avoid further elaboration. These conflicts indicate the suppression of painful aspects of memory, but also a need to idealize the lost homeland, which exists in an unexamined contradiction with the more ambivalent realities of past and present. It is here that the ethnic “Maltese” origin of the settlers Smith interviews is important. Their liminality produces dissonances in their memory, and opens new insights into the dynamics of the colony, challenging some of the “received truths” about the role of ethnicity and difference.

During the French colonial rule of North Africa, successive governments sought to make of Algeria a *colonie de peuplement* in the way that British colonies in America, Africa and Australia had developed. In this sense Algeria was unique in the French empire: by the 1950s, more than a million French citizens were living alongside some 9 million Muslim Algerians, whose status remained with few exceptions that of indigenous non-citizens. Yet the official image of a “successful” French settler society masked a more complex picture. By the end of the nineteenth century, as Smith explains in her early chapters, French colonial authorities had abandoned their long-held dream of peopling Algeria with French settlers from the mainland. Despite the relocation of “troublesome” populations from France to Algeria after 1848, and the arrival of French refugees from Alsace and Lorraine after 1870, the majority of the settlers who took up residence in Algeria were not from the French mainland, but rather Spanish, Italians, Corsicans, Maltese and others fleeing economic hardship. When encouraged to naturalize themselves as French citizens, relatively few took up the offer. Finally, in 1889, an act of mass naturalization automatically naturalized all children born on French soil (including Algeria, which had the status of province rather than colony). This act had deep social consequences in Algerian settler society, long structured by hierarchies of privilege between “French” and “foreign” as well as between “European” and “Arab.” The “new French” populations were to be transformed by French language, culture and patriotic feeling, erasing all previous ethnic distinctions. But the reality, Smith suggests, was quite different.

Smith shows that many historians of Algerian society have failed to question certain basic assumptions about the “Algerian Melting Pot.” In failing to recognize the perpetuation of existing codes of privilege and distinction, ongoing differences of class and social activity have then been read as “natural” outcomes of the national character of different groups. Smith finely demonstrates the contradictory ways in which the former settlers themselves describe one another as “Maltese,” “Italian,” “French” while simultaneously claiming that these distinctions no longer had validity, that all ethnic identities had been “fused” or “melted” into a single form of belonging. David Prochaska has explored the hierarchical structures of colonial society in his excellent historical study of Bône (today Annaba),^[4] but here Smith employs a different technique, one informed more fully by life-histories which can at moments extend or challenge assumptions we may take from the archival record. Her interviewees offer anecdotes which often illuminate collective memories about hierarchies of status and social practices: a priest tells her a joke in which Jesus Christ, exhausted and faced with an Arab and a Jew whose heads have been cut off, replaces the heads on the wrong bodies, so creating the first Maltese. Elsewhere, an elderly man tells of his grandfather pretending not to be the proprietor of his own farm, embarrassed by his poor French and his menial labour alongside his Arab workers.

The central contribution of Smith’s book to postcolonial studies is her emphasis on the role of liminal populations in the colonial setting. If the dynamic of colonial domination finally led to the consolidation of the colonizers through mass naturalization, the Maltese remained a group, like the Jews, whose liminal status created constant problems. The Jews-naturalized long before other Europeans by the Décret Crémieux in 1870-posed a problem because they were not “settlers,” many having lived in North Africa for centuries. The Maltese, despite arriving as settlers, spoke a language mutually

comprehensible with North African Arabic; and their willingness to accept low-paid and menial work brought them naturally closer to the indigenous population. Smith suggests that this liminality continued to undermine the status of Maltese long after their naturalization as French citizens, and was often expressed as a dislike of their “flashy” way of dressing, their avarice, their lack of “French” cultural values. This troubling liminality, however, also drove many Maltese to distinguish themselves sharply from indigenous groups, both Arab and Jewish, through aggressive racist and anti-Semitic positions. The interviews and experiences recounted in the book suggest that these attitudes have persisted beyond repatriation to the mainland, and even into the next generation. This, ironically, has functioned for the “French of France” as a justification for their dislike or prejudice toward *pieds noirs*, who have often been blamed for the rise of extreme right-wing and racist politics, particularly in southern France.[5]

It is here that Smith’s book is less satisfying: while we learn much about the social and family lives of the settlers, we learn very little about their political views and activities. An obvious and important question is how the absorption of a million *rapatriés* has shaped contemporary France and French politics, but this political frame of reference is largely absent from the book. Smith draws on Holmes’s analysis of “integralist” politics in Europe: her interviewees would seem to offer a perfect opportunity to better understand the dynamics driving this politics. The few responses they do make on these questions are surprising. Smith reports: “Many told me how stunned they were by the strangely provincial outlook of many French. This was not at all what they had expected of France, a place they had learned to revere in school. The settlers had grown up in a multicultural, multiethnic, and multireligious world...They were cosmopolitan, and they often highlighted the contrasting provincialism of the French” (p. 186). This is a fascinating observation that deserves closer study, raising important questions about the relationship between imperialism and cosmopolitanism.

The ethnographic approach of friendly and intimate relationship with individual informants is mostly a strength, but at times the analytic framework seems to reproduce the segregation of the settlers themselves.[6] On occasion we hear the responses of French people born in France toward the *pieds noirs*, but this is rarely complemented by the responses of Muslim Algerians, either in terms of colonial Algeria or in contemporary France.[7] However, the strength of Smith’s ethnographic methodology comes to the fore in her discussion of the experience of *nostalgérie*, the passionate, unresolved, and largely unspoken yearning of the *pieds noirs* for the colonial Algeria in which they grew up, and from which they were severed in traumatic circumstances. In her final chapter, Smith skilfully recounts the experience of the members of the Franco-Maltese society in their trip to Malta. They consistently read the names, landscape, foods, and inhabitants of the island as a double for an Algeria long past, which they refer to as “*là-bas*” (over there). But, as Smith points out, they treat the local Maltese as doubles for the Arabs who occupied a subaltern place in their colonial hierarchy, thus placing themselves higher in the scale. In this we see the limitations of the “cosmopolitanism” to which these colonials—even in their more liminal position—lay claim, its links to forms of imperial imagining.

The settlers look at Malta and see Algeria, refigured as the colonial “paradise” it had never been, located in a past where *pays* and *patrie* were one. What did Nicolas Sarkozy see in this tiny island? A *lieu de mémoire* or a stepping-stone to the future? The President has begun to canvass the creation of a Mediterranean Union in which France could presumably play the leading role she has lost in Europe. Meanwhile, as bodies of clandestine immigrants wash up on Malta’s rocks, M. Sarkozy has proposed a “Ministry of Immigration and National Identity” to reassert both the physical and the cultural boundaries of Frenchness. In this new and troubling climate, the complicating insights of Smith’s book into past and present will be all the more valuable.

NOTES

[1] *Le Canard Enchaîné*, 9 May 2007.

[2] Benjamin Stora has explored the profound and continuing impact of war and decolonisation on French and Algerian political life in *La Gangrène et l'oubli: La mémoire de la guerre d'Algérie* (Paris: La Découverte, 1992).

[3] Michael Herzfeld, *Anthropology Through the Looking-Glass: Critical Ethnography in the Margins of Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Douglas R. Holmes, *Cultural Disenchantments: Worker Peasantries in Northeast Italy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989).

[4] David Prochaska, *Making Algeria French: Colonialism in Bône, 1870-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[6] For example, Smith makes much of a joke repeated by one interviewee: “Les Algérois sont des rois, les Algériens sont des riens” (The Algerois [ie. inhabitants of Algiers] are kings, the Algerians [ie. all the rest] are nothing). She interprets this as evidence of the ethnic division in colonial Algeria between French (from Algiers) and non-French (living largely outside the capital). However, I have heard exactly the same joke repeated by Arab residents of Algiers boastfully celebrating their superiority over the “provincials”, suggesting that it is *locality* rather than *ethnicity* that forms the central dimension of identification here.

[7] For a study which takes the reverse approach, looking at French citizens of Algerian background in France, see Paul Silverstein, *Algeria in France: Transpolitics, Race and Nation* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004).

Ian Collier University of Melbourne icollier@unimelb.edu.au

Copyright © 2007 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Review Vol. 7 (October 2007), No. 119

ISSN 1553-9172