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**Clifford Rosenberg**, *Policing Paris: the Origins of Modern Immigration Control between the Wars*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006. xvii + 241 pp. \$23.95 U.S. (pb.) Illustrations, figures, tables, bibliography and index. ISBN 0-8014-7315-2.

Review by Julian Wright, University of Durham.

This book about police bureaucracy is neither dry and Weberian nor, as its author puts it, darkly post-modern. It describes the French immigration police, but these men were neither the glowering crypto-tyrants of the Foucauldian power-state; nor were they the greyly progressive bureaucrats of the modern machine-state. The men who pursued the policies described here were in fact quite ordinary. Some of them were in dead-end jobs and thus relatively unmotivated by larger ideological concerns. Some were inclined to be swayed by humanitarian concerns. Others were prone to latent racism and anti-Semitism. In fact, and Rosenberg's silent conclusion resonates from his final pages, they were not especially different from the architects and functionaries of western immigration bureaucracies in the twenty-first century.

This is an eminently readable book. It locates its narrative within historiographical and political debates that are important now, and it does so subtly and clearly. It is also deeply, vitally empirical, and the smell of the archives is on it. There is nothing fusty about the book, however, (unlike the papers of the political police after they had been shipped out of Paris by canal in June 1940). Rather, it is clean, professional, and elegant. Its evidence is piled up tidily and carefully. The very nuanced nature of its conclusion points to a number of reflections for historians of modern France, all the more significant for their having been drawn from an empirical study of considerable depth.

In taking up the challenge posed by Rosenberg, to reflect in a more empirical way on French policy between the wars, it seems important to remark on the laudatory comments written by Hermann Lebovics which grace the back cover. Here, we are told that the book is a 'nuanced and sophisticated treatment of the *how and when of French racism* against people from the colonies [my emphasis].' There is a lot about race and racism in this book, and these topics are certainly examined with discernment and sophistication. However, the overwhelming impression this reader has received is that Rosenberg did not want his book to be primarily about racism. He does, to be fair, supply a lot of ammunition for scholars such as Lebovics who have set out to remind historians of their moral duty in assessing the complex roots of racism in modern democracies. There is, however, an equally significant amount of material that obliges us to reflect on the humanitarian concerns of many important actors in the bureaucracy of the interwar years. Indeed, as Rosenberg brilliantly shows, individual institutions such as the Franco-Muslim hospital could be seen in different ways; it was seen both as an element of an emerging segregationist tendency within the bureaucracy, and as a positive benefit for the North African community, who were, through this institution, being granted a specific range of benefits that were not yet available to all.

Pierre Godin, the driving force behind Paris' North African services, enraged many municipal councillors by spending more on services for the immigrants from Algeria; but equally, his officers were frequently guilty of discrimination and harassment in the way they arrested North Africans on trumped-up charges, for reasons of purely bureaucratic expediency. There were not enough checks and balances on the special units of the Paris police that dealt with these communities. This led Léon Blum himself to head a commission charged with assessing the treatment of these communities, which was anxious to

uncover any areas in which the police had acted over-zealously. That there were political interventions of this sort, even though they may not have been frequent, underlines the fact that it is not enough to tackle the story of policing in this period as part of a simple quest for racist acts and motivations. The spectrum of ideological and political influences that affected policing was broad; police bureaucracy was framed within a political context that stretched from the humanitarianism of Léon Blum to the right-wing instincts of the Paris municipal council.

These discussions of the treatment of North Africans come later in the book. This is significant. Rosenberg is quite clear that we cannot tackle racism, perceived or imaginary, without first understanding the context. Thus he gives us a sequence of lucid chapters on immigration from other European countries, all set up by very clear definitions of “foreignness” as this was understood in the early twentieth century. The term “étranger”, of course, did not mean “foreign to the national territory” until well into the twentieth century. Rosenberg goes on to remind us that the sorts of definition of race which Anglo-American historians may frequently have lurking at the back of their minds are simply inappropriate for dealing with the issues he faces. He shows convincingly that the “ethnic” distinction between French and Italians was not significantly different to the “racial” distinction between French and North Africans, and that the latter were indeed often classed as “white”, even into the 1930s (p. 119).

The period under investigation had its highs and lows in terms of police discrimination against minorities. Rosenberg shows how the problem of the massive populations of immigrants that had flooded into France for wartime work was unhappily resolved through heavy-handed tactics as the police attempted to repatriate large numbers of immigrants. The spate of high-profile assassinations in the early 1930s provided the spur for another bout of over-zealousness. In dealing with the small networks of communist or fascist sympathisers from Italy or Eastern Europe, the police were assiduous (“Round up the usual suspects” is the title of this chapter); but their efforts were often thwarted by a Republican bureaucracy that liked to have its formularies devised in such a way as to pay lip service to the libertarian values proclaimed by both conservatives and left-wingers. The police often grumbled about the difficulties of expelling those they saw as dangerous influences from outside.

Rosenberg’s whole argument leads us, as well it might, to some difficult and uncomfortable conclusions. The liberal academic consensus has frequently turned to the more blatantly genocidal and totalitarian regimes to provide stark warnings about slippery slopes, or reminders that we are supposed to have learnt the lessons of the past. In the French case, the history of the interwar years is often written in such a way as to develop these examples by showing that even democracies can be propelled down the slippery slope to reactionary racism. Indeed, Rosenberg is careful to stress that many of the practices that he has charted did have direct connections to those black moments in 1942 and 1961, when the underbelly of French racism was revealed in its vilest form.

In the final assessment, however, Rosenberg finds the narrative of a “slide towards Vichy” unconvincing, if not dangerously comforting.[1] It is after all quite easy to embark on the hunt for proto-collaborationists. The courageousness and subtlety of historians such as Lebovics and Noiriel is frequently diluted by the misconceptions that can be promoted on the back of their work: that France between the wars was an increasingly fraught, nasty and pro-right-wing sort of place, whose eventual espousal of all things Vichy should surprise no-one.[2] In *True France*, Lebovics wrote: “a paradigm of essentialist cultural identity dominated French cultural and political life from the second founding of the Third Republic...until the dissolution of Vichy rule.”[3] There is nothing quite so straightforward about the identities and definitions Rosenberg has uncovered in his archives. And while Lebovics himself has been more eager than the cautious Rosenberg to find disturbing parallels in late twentieth-century society for the disturbing things he analysed in the first half of the century, it is Rosenberg’s very caution that is more persuasive, and in the longer run more worrying as we reflect on our own times in the light of his work. For Rosenberg, it is not a matter of taking “essentialism” and tarring large

swathes of French culture and society with it. The things we need to reflect on stem rather from the very mundanity, the sheer ordinariness of his narrative. The meticulous keeping of card-indexes, the problem of the police bureaucrat in a dead-end job, the knee-jerks of police officers trying to deal with the aftermath of a crime of madness; such are the day-to-day experiences uncovered here. By refusing to dress these things up in the grand costumes of post-Foucauldian analysis, Rosenberg has accomplished two things which many have failed to: he has allowed the humanitarian aspect of his story to come through, with its limited but significant role unblemished; and he has pointed out the real danger, the real fear, which this period can instil in us.

In the British press this month (March 2007) we have heard stories of late-night round-ups of young African men, some of them well on the road to getting A-levels or a degree; stories which take us to clandestine *rendez-vous* at undisclosed airports (with misleading rumours put out to throw protestors off the scent by sending them to the wrong airport); followed by a return to countries whose description as “safe” is debateable to say the least; all this amid a general sense that the problems encountered by our Home Office in its implementation of an immigration policy that is the butt of the right-wing press are leading to greater injustice, because, after all, the bureaucrats need to try harder with meeting their targets.... Lebovics and Rosenberg, among the growing number of historians who have rightly taken up the challenge of analysing immigration policy in modern Europe, would agree that we need to widen our conversations to reflect on the ever-present problem of bureaucracy, police and international migration. It is Rosenberg, however, whose starkly empirical approach is more convincing. Of course, the institutions he describes could be said to be part of the “background” to the Vel d’Hiver. Through his very empiricism, however, Rosenberg both qualifies that connection, and widens it. These institutions and the men who staffed them were not good, but they were not especially nasty, or decadent, and nor was the decade in which they lived; if these things led to Vichy, they lead also to the burning of the *banlieues* in 2005, and to wider problems as they are encountered in Britain and America today. Twentieth-century French history is the richer for this very balanced reminder that we are, after all, studying times that were both bad and good, and thus close to our own in many disturbing ways.

## NOTES

[1] Gérard Noiriel’s *Les origines républicaines de Vichy* (Paris: Hachette, 1999) is frequently cited as a model Rosenberg wants to avoid.

[2] See Hermann Lebovics, *True France: The Wars over Cultural Identity* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992).

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 189.

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