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Nimisha Barton, *Reproductive Citizens: Gender, Immigration, and the State in Modern France, 1880-1945*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020. Xii, 284 pp. Figures, Tables, Bibliography, and Index. \$54.95 ISBN 9781501749636.

Review Essay by Clifford Rosenberg, City College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York

I recall reading Gerard Noiriel's classic book, *The French Melting Pot*, as a graduate student and thinking that immigration would surely make a marvelous dissertation topic.[1] A subject long ignored in France for ideological reasons, with archives filled to overflowing, immigration would make my own background as an American an added benefit. But when I got to France and began looking for those archives, they were nowhere to be found, or, at least, they turned out to be stubbornly difficult to use, organized along different lines, which made a general approach to immigrants and immigrant communities difficult. I was hardly the first or the only person to struggle with this challenge. Early landmark books dealt with it, either by privileging national policy, or by focusing on single ethno-national groups: Janine Ponty on Poles, Pierre Milza on Italians, Benjamin Stora on Algerians, Nancy Green on the Jews of Paris. In his thesis, Noiriel had studied class formation in Longwy, a center of heavy industry that depended on immigrant labor. More recently, historians have concentrated on archival series that have centered on questions of migration and citizenship, whether Patrick Weil on nationality, Mary Lewis on expulsion files, or Claire Zalc on denaturalization.[2] In her book, *Reproductive Citizens: Gender, Immigration, and the State in Modern France, 1880-1945*, Nimisha Barton has taken a different tack, combining national sources with a range of others, drawn from a pair of immigrant neighborhoods in the eleventh arrondissement of Paris, Sainte Marguerite and La Roquette, which stand out for their diversity, home to a range of craft industries. Doing so enables Barton to draw on a variety of sources to show how powerfully gendered local residential and labor networks helped immigrants settle in. Rather than concentrate on the multiple exclusions and indignities immigrants endured, as much of the literature has done over the past generation, the emphasis here is on what once was the core concept of immigration studies: assimilation.

In early chapters on marriage, divorce, and naturalization, Barton shows how patronizing, patriarchal views on the part of French officials created opportunity for immigrants and French-born women. Historians have long recognized the depth of anxiety the Republican elite felt over declines in the French birthrate.[3] Barton, building on Zalc's work on denaturalization during Vichy and echoing Patrick Weil's work on demographer Alfred Sauvy, shows that those fears, reinforced by a conventional bourgeois sexual morality, often overrode xenophobia and other biases when officials had to evaluate the applications of immigrants with many children born in France, schooled in France, especially those with sons ready to perform military service.[4] Foreigners who settled in France and who established stable, heterosexual relationships and "respectable" families fared well and got naturalized. Marriage rates among naturalized citizens far exceeded those of French-born or foreign populations in France between 1921 and 1936:

fluctuating between 60 to 85 percent—with a peak of almost 90 percent immediately after the war—for naturalized French citizens as compared to 40 to 50 percent of the native born and immigrant populations (pp. 42-44). Bureaucrats at the Bureau du Sceau went beyond recognizing domestic arrangements they approved of. They intervened directly in many cases, requiring applicants they deemed promising candidates to marry partners as a precondition of naturalizing them.

The active manipulation of domestic arrangements applied not only to European migrants but to colonial workers as well. While interracial unions alarmed French officials, and the government did everything in its power to deport as many colonial soldiers and workers as possible after the Armistice, when faced with the reality of interracial unions during the interwar years, officials not only accepted marriages between French women and colonial men, they often encouraged them. They preferred what they viewed as stable relationships and guarantees of support for French women and their children, allowing them to remain on the French mainland rather than forcing them to relocate to colonial settings. In many cases, pronatalism trumped the manifest racism of French officialdom. As Barton puts it: “[M]arriage really solved three interrelated problems at once: it provided women with breadwinners, it provisioned children with fathers, and it sufficiently assimilated even colonial men” (p. 64).

Divorce, like marriage, created opportunity. French and foreign women turned to the government when their marriages fell apart, appealing to the same set of gendered assumptions about separate spheres and financial obligation, hoping to win child support (*pensions alimentaires*) to feed themselves and their children. The unmarried could also bring paternity suits, calling on French courts to compel wayward fathers to help support their children. Working-class women, Barton shows, found ready allies in the middle-class male officials who made up the expanding police and judicial systems, wielding stereotypes of “vulnerable women” and often appealing to a colonialist inclination to support white Frenchwomen, if the men in question could be fit into prevailing racist stereotypes. While most of the examples conform to and confirm those expected stereotypes, there are notable exceptions. Barton presents the case of an Algerian man, a Muslim immigrant named Abdallah Ghersa. When social workers intervened in Ghersa’s domestic dispute with his French-born wife, Angèle Lebrun, they were inclined to believe Lebrun, but the neighborhood rallied to Ghersa’s support: from their concierge to neighbors and acquaintances, the community supported Ghersa and accused Lebrun of erratic behavior. The social workers backed off (pp. 124, 210).

The richest, most satisfying sections of the book provide a street-level view of vibrant, multicultural communities and interactions between working-class French and foreign women and middle-class French organizations like those who intervened in the dispute between Ghersa and Lebrun. Although public assistance originated at the national level, it was distributed at local welfare offices throughout the country. When national support largely dried up for foreign families during the 1930s, many turned to a range of private, mostly pronatalist, organizations in the capital, what Barton calls the “parastate level” (p. 8). Groups like the Foyer Français served as advocates, taking on the cases they deemed worthy—typically, large families and young men on the verge of military service and marriage with French women—providing language classes, helping them navigate the welfare bureaucracy, and apply for naturalization. The League for the Protection of Abandoned Mothers helped women track down husbands and lovers and file claims for support; it

also helped with job placement, residence permits, and naturalization requests. A handful of other organizations actively sent social workers out to working-class families and intervened in cases of abuse and abandonment, inserting themselves into the lives of families.

Branching out from the papers of these welfarist groups at the departmental archives in Paris, Barton makes particularly good use of *mains courantes*, the police blotters of Sainte Marguerite and La Roquette. Organized chronologically, day to day, these handwritten sources are difficult to use, only feasible for a local study of this sort. Here we see foreigners and French men and women coming together, under admittedly tense circumstances, but unlike naturalization, expulsion, or residence permits, these files include issues related to immigration without privileging them. From these sources emerges a rich portrait of working-class Paris, open, tolerant, and filled with petty crime. Murder was exceptionally rare, petty theft ubiquitous. Fraud of various kinds, vagrancy, and drunken and disorderly conduct filled the large registers. A general culture of mistrust opposed foreign, often male workers, on the one hand, against their landlords and the police on the other. Amidst this contentious atmosphere, Barton also identifies powerful networks of solidarity. Concierges helped their lodgers manage stormy domestic lives and intervened to connect them, whether French or foreign, with help, either from the police or advocacy groups. We see French and foreign women who came to care deeply about one another, providing counsel and support, banding together to protect themselves against abusive partners. “To be a mother in interwar Paris,” Barton writes in a telling phrase, “was to become, quite simply, French” (p. 179).

The networks and solidarities built during the interwar years survived the Occupation. While Vichy turned starkly away from the open immigration and naturalization policies of the interwar years, and its own, home-grown anti-Semitism dominated domestic policy, Vichy held onto pronatalism as a core value. In this final chapter, we see Barton’s optimism at its strongest, working in the same vein as Jacques Semelin, who has stressed the relative French success in sheltering Jews from deportation.[5] Many of the middle-class advocacy groups continued to work during the Occupation. They continued helping with paperwork, connecting working-class families with assistance and jobs. With very rare exception—Barton identified a lone, solitary case—Vichy did not use public assistance records to identify and arrest Jews (p. 205). If earlier chapters present a conflict between pronatalism and racism, here the contradictions become vastly more dramatic. Vichy deported breadwinners and loved ones and then provided assistance to those left behind. Naturalized Jewish women benefited from a status created for “war widows” or mothers of POWs (p. 206). Others kept body and soul together with the help of family allocations and military pensions.

Local Parisian and even French national sources are not enough to distinguish the fate of Parisian Jewry from those of Brussels, Amsterdam, and Antwerp, among other cities. To explain why roughly 70 percent of Parisian Jews survived when only roughly 30 percent did in those other cities, we would have to turn first and foremost to German policy and then to broader contextual differences and immigration patterns.[6] But powerful neighborhood solidarities certainly played a fundamental role, all the more so given the longstanding experience of migration in eastern Paris, compared to those other cities.

Barton’s attention to solidarity and the forces that shaped immigrants’ opportunities and everyday experiences provides an enormously valuable contribution to a literature that has tended to stress

exclusion and discrimination. We are all too aware of the walls, cages, and charters rich states use today to police their boundaries. National states in general and France in particular have long been powerful agents of social closure. But at the same time, they also exert powerful forces of integration and assimilation. In these pages, we see the state working in tandem with civic groups and more informal neighborhood networks to provide a home for generations of men and women, looking for a better life for themselves and their children.

#### NOTES:

[1] Noiriel, *Le creuset français : L'histoire de l'immigration, 19<sup>e</sup>-20<sup>ème</sup> siècles* (Paris : Seuil, 1988).

[2] Ponty, *Polonais méconnus : Histoire des travailleurs immigrés en France* (Paris : Publications de la Sorbonne, 1988) ; Pierre Milza, *Voyage en Ritalie* (Paris : Payot, 1993) ; Stora, *Ils venaient d'algérie : L'immigration algérienne en France, 1912-1992* (Paris : Fayard, 1992) ; Green, *The Pletzl of Paris: Jewish Immigrant Workers in the Belle Epoque* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1986) ; Noiriel, *Longwy, immigrés et prolétaires* (Paris : Puf, 1984) ; Weil, *Qu'est-ce-qu'un français ? Histoire de la nationalité française depuis la Révolution* (Paris : Grasset, 2002) ; Lewis, *The Boundaries of the Republic: Migrant Rights and the Limits of Universalism in France, 1918-1940* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007) ; Zalc, *Dénaturalisés : Les rétrahés de nationalité sous Vichy* (Paris : Seuil, 2016).

[3] Karen Offen, "Depopulation, Nationalism, and Feminism in Fin-de-Siècle France," *American Historical Review* 89, no. 3 (June, 1984): 648-76.

[4] Zalc, *Dénaturalisés*; and Weil, "Racisme et discrimination dans la politique française de l'immigration, 1938-1945 et 1974-1995," *Vingtième siècle : Revue d'histoire* (July-September 1995) : 77-102. Sauvy shared many of the prejudices of his day: He would have preferred that immigrants come from neighboring Catholic countries, but, with France's anemic birthrate, he preferred immigration from all over, no matter the ethno-religious background of the immigrants, to no immigration at all.

[5] Semelin, *La survie des juifs en France, 1940-1944* (Paris : Cnrs, 2018).

[6] Michael R. Marrus and Robert O. Paxton, "The Nazis and the Jews in Occupied Western Europe, 1940," *The Journal of Modern History* 54, no. 4 (December 1982): 687-714.

Clifford Rosenberg

City College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York

[croseberg@ccny.cuny.edu](mailto:croseberg@ccny.cuny.edu)

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