

H-France Forum
Volume 16, Issue 6, #4

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 Elise Franklin, University of Louisville

As I write this review, French President Emmanuel Macron has found himself—yet again—in a diplomatic dispute of his own making over immigration. The government proffered “concerns” about failed negotiations over repatriation policies as justification for slashing the number of visas available to North Africans.[1] As another example of plus ça change immigration policy, this decision has—yet again—created a public debate around the place of immigrants in France in the lead up to the 2022 presidential election in which Macron will again face a member of the xenophobic far right in the second round. Historians of immigration have every reason to despair this decision as well as the myriad anti-immigrant policies and procedures crafted over the course of France’s history. Indeed, we have plumbed the depths of the French republican values that have lent themselves—obviously, covertly, unconsciously, intrinsically—to the exclusion of immigrants, colonial subjects, and former colonial subjects from across the globe.[2] Given this long arc of injustice, historians have documented anti-immigrant policies, sentiments, and discussions that have taken place in the public sphere, among bureaucrats and police, and in the halls of government.[3]

Nimisha Barton’s remarkable book paints a different picture of the place of immigrants in France’s past and suggests, perhaps, that our current political cul-de-sac need not always remain so. In *Reproductive Citizens: Gender, Immigration, and the State in Modern France, 1880-1945*, Barton argues that the interwar Third Republic’s populationist policies made it surprisingly accepting of immigrant families. The republic’s commitment to what she calls “reproductive citizenship” in the form of “disciplinary paternalism” and “supportive maternalism” worked in heterosexual tandem to form conjugal French couples and naturalized French citizens out of foreign and mixed families (p. 7). Reproductive citizenship grounded immigrant and mixed families in France and offered them social benefits that proved more important and long-lasting than some forms of political citizenship, especially in light of the denaturalization of French Jews under the collaborationist Vichy government.

In Barton’s analysis, reproductive citizenship prompts a more capacious understanding of citizenship itself, replete with possibilities for those who claimed it despite its potential use as a tool for the gendered regulation of families (p. 5). Even if the state’s populationism attempted to reduce women to their reproductive roles, immigrant women, in particular, “leveraged what little they had,” that is, their roles as mothers, to demand inclusion in the nation (p. 5). Reproductive citizenship is also suggestive of Barton’s method. Rather than conceive of citizenship as an “all-or-nothing” proposition, Barton’s study invites a rich analysis of immigrant women’s harnessing

of the state's populationist language toward their own ends (p. 6). As Barton puts it, when immigrant women adopted "the acceptable accents of heterosexual masculinity and femininity," the state's mandate to repopulate after the First World War enhanced immigrants' own families in service of the national one (p. 5).

Barton makes a considerable break with the existing scholarship, in which she invites a re-thinking of immigrants' place in the making of a multicultural France.[4] Rather than see immigrants as excluded, Barton offers immigrants' access to this array of social benefits as proof of their inclusion in the nation. Her careful social historical work chronicles the everyday lives of immigrants predominantly from southern and Eastern Europe, Turkey, and Russia who moved to Paris's immigrant working class neighborhood in the eleventh arrondissement. She draws out women's engagement with social services, local regulatory mechanisms like the police and the *mairie*, and mutual aid and private charity organizations to reveal how immigrant women navigated French bureaucracies on behalf of their families. In lively detail, Barton describes the populationist arguments immigrant women assumed to compel partners to pay spousal support, gain access to family benefits, and petition recalcitrant bureaucrats for naturalization. By making appeals to maternalism and their own dependency, they demanded action from paternalist bureaucrats to engage the state and exploit its inconsistencies.

Flipping the usual historical script invites debate. After uncovering the way immigrant men and women as well as French bureaucrats manipulated naturalization requirements in the early chapters, in the second half of the book, Barton explores the "vibrant and generous world of welfare" that opened to immigrant and mixed families adopting reproductive citizenship (p. 155). I will focus my comments on this world of welfare. Three questions arise. First, what of the obligations expected in exchange for these "generous" benefits? French family benefits were certainly ample when laid in comparison to other European welfare states, and European immigrants to France were not compelled to convert, achieve native levels of fluency, or give up ties to their home countries to become naturalized, at least in the 1920s. Barton shows that social services became a hub for socialization as much as socializing among women and mothers, especially. The reproductive logic of the state was not simply an amorphous concept, but a lived experience made possible by the proliferation of private and public services in Parisian neighborhoods. Immigrant women found themselves woven into the fabric of French welfare by virtue of their own claims on the state and the services they solicited. As I read, however, I found myself reflecting on Jean Beaman's work on cultural citizenship: receiving benefits and demanding—in the case of Barton's work—"reproductive citizenship" is not quite the same as belonging. To quote Beaman: "Simply being a French citizen is not a sufficient marker of who is seen as French and who is not." [5] That formal legal citizenship could be non-substantive is clear in Barton and Beaman's analyses, and yet Beaman's research suggests that the acculturation required by reproductive citizenship could function as a barrier to belonging. I see a certain consonance between their work, but I wonder how Barton would respond.

My second question builds from the first: how do we make sense of the relationships created through these interventions, whether with the police, social workers, or other missionaries of French ministries? Barton has excavated sources from Parisian court cases, naturalization records, and casework files of three social aid organizations that worked on behalf of French, mixed, and immigrant working-class families. Anonymous interactions become vivid in Barton's descriptions

as she uses police files and documentation of interventions to draw conclusions distinct from their authors' intentions. For example, Barton reads police records of petty theft to draw conclusions about the intimate nature of the relationships between tenants and the shared knowledge that circulated via thin walls and the ever-present building concierge in a creative section on "the moral economy of apartment life" (pp. 174-180).

In another instance, however, Barton reads the police files about an investigation into the Moroccan husband of Blanche Sadoun, a Tunisian Jew. Sadoun herself requested help, claiming to the Paris police and SAINA (Service des affaires indigènes nord-africaines) that her husband beat her. In the file, as Barton notes, the report mixed pronouns, allowing for an overlap in the officials' narration of the case and Sadoun's own testimony. The document reads: "*She* knew that *she* would be spared any danger only if the Service of Affaires Indigènes from whom *I* solicit protection, agrees to look after *me*" (p. 83, emphasis my own). This melding of archival author and subject demands a closer look. Since the archival turn, historians have scrutinized the conditions of documentary creation, asking questions of their sources' assumptions and demanding accounting of their purported subjects' erasure.[6] I wanted Barton to reveal more about her decisions when reading these documents. In Sadoun's case, might this intersubjective source speak to the overdetermined nature of welfarist intervention? Or could it be the messy power dynamics involved in soliciting aid and provisioning protection? The bureaucratic impulse to create paper trails even if no action was taken? In general, far from complicating her findings, attention to the archival grain could allow Barton to show just how deeply rooted the logic of reproductive citizenship was.

The clear mediation in the archives of the Paris police or social workers' case files brings me full circle to a third and final question: If—as I read them—these documents shed at least as much light on their authors' assumptions as the immigrants who solicited their help, then to what extent can we rely on their own narrativization of the expansive services that they offered? In other words, for whom was welfare generous? Barton's concept, disciplinary paternalism, helps here, as family benefits could be a gendered tool for shaping family life. Immigrant women frequently called on the police and naturalization officials to demand loyalty of their would-be husbands or, as in Sadoun's case, to demand protection from them. Yet the regulatory framework of conjugality, Barton suggests, outstripped concerns about the racial, ethnic, or national backgrounds of those requesting services. In her chapter on mothers and welfare, Barton notes that she found only one example of overt prejudice toward a family seeking social services (p. 124). State officials, for their part, also sided with populationism even as they created mixed-race families (p. 41).

Granted, I come to Barton's study from the perspective of the post-World War II period when racist attitudes toward "nonwhite" immigrants ossified. Barton makes clear that nonwhite colonial and Chinese men who found themselves in the metropole in the interwar (and they were usually men) met with more difficulty in assuring bureaucrats of their assimilation and making claims to welfare (p. 61). They faced harsher critiques in social work visits and encountered reticence in routine paperwork. What was their experience of welfare? We know from Barton's detailed analysis that intermarriages and mixed households of white Frenchwomen and North or West African men were relatively rare occurrences in the interwar period.[7] But these households still faced daily prejudice as well as structural racism, not least from the French welfare state's own conception of familialism. The very model of the conjugal family offered not just a blueprint but

created a quotidian disciplinary framework for mixed colonial families. The fact of being reproductive citizens may have offered them benefits, but the benefits were offered on white Eurocentric familialist terms.[8] The welfare state's emphasis on republican mothers and breadwinning fathers as well as the nuclear family excluded extended kinship ties common in colonial families. Even though families from the colonies rarely relocated to the metropole in this period, the welfare state was hardly established to accommodate them. It set a template for the normative family model that became all too exclusionary in the post-World War II and postcolonial years of increasing North and West African family migration to France.[9] Was the supposed expansiveness of the welfare state for southern and eastern Europeans in this period also reflective of the higher visibility of nonwhite colonial migration after the First World War?

The point is not to ask which was more important to citizenship, race or gender (the answer is clearly both!), but rather to highlight that Barton's work is contributing to the growing literature on the whiteness of European welfare. Creating a white national body out of supposedly "assimilable" immigrant families makes clear that race was central to interwar French familialism, even if it remained largely unspoken or filtered through the idiom of "culture," to invoke Beaman again. If the conflagration over immigration since the 1980s has taught us anything, it's that France's welfare state was constructed on behalf of white heterosexual families who were initially made white through the processes of acculturation constitutive of welfare and made more obviously white in supposed contrast to the rise in nonwhite family migration from France's former colonies. I would argue that Barton's social historical work makes this process legible.

Barton's prize-winning book gives historians of welfare, immigration, and citizenship much to discuss, and I am grateful to the H-France Forum organizers for the invitation to take part. Her reconsideration of welfare from the perspective of immigrants—and especially immigrant women—who mastered its scripts is a vital contribution to the literature. I do not want to close this commentary without *also* mentioning the generosity of this monograph: it is clear in its argumentation, precise in its analysis, lively in its prose, and, crucially, assignable in sum and in part to students at many levels. Composed of seven succinct chapters, the book and its accompanying appendices published on Barton's website make it an excellent tool for teaching students the unromantic process of how the historical sausage gets made. During Covid and years of reduced or non-existent university travel funding, it provides a vital source base for students who cannot travel to France but who want to work with unpublished sources that allow them to push the boundaries of French history. Through these efforts, Barton has paid it forward. She has expanded students' possibilities for research on immigrant communities in France, a priceless contribution.

NOTES

[1] "Anger as France slashes visas for Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia," BBC News Online, September 29, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-58740365>.

[2] As Barton notes, the literature on republican values and immigration is vast. See especially Patrick Weil, *Qu'est-ce qu'un Français?: Histoire de la Nationalité Française depuis la Révolution* (Paris: Grasset, 2002), Gérard Noiriel, *The French Melting Pot: Immigration*,

Citizenship, and National Identity (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996). On republicanism as a tool for racializing and gendering immigration in the interwar, see Elisa Camiscioli, *Reproducing the French Race: Immigration, Intimacy, and Embodiment in the Early Twentieth Century* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2009).

[3] For example, see Clifford Rosenberg, *Policing Paris: The Origin of Modern Immigration Control Between the Wars* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006) or Alexis Spire, *Etrangers à la carte: L'administration de l'immigration en France (1945-1975)* (Paris: Grasset, 2005).

[4] Minayo Nasiali's work on social citizenship in postwar Marseille is an important exception: *Native to the Republic: Empire, Social Citizenship, and Everyday Life in Marseille since 1985* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016).

[5] Jean Beaman, "Citizenship as Cultural: Towards a Theory of Cultural Citizenship," *Sociology Compass* 10 (2016): 854, and Beaman, *Citizen Outsider: Children of North African Immigrants in France* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017).

[6] One important example is Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

[7] On mixed-race relationships, see Jennifer Anne Boittin, *Colonial Metropolis: The Urban Grounds of Anti-Imperialism and Feminism in Interwar Paris* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010). For Barton's statistics, see <https://www.drnimishabarton.com/appendices>.

[8] On Frenchness and whiteness, consider Jean Beaman, "Are French People White?: Towards an Understanding of Whiteness in Republican France," *Identities* 26.5 (2019): 546-562 and during the interwar, Camiscioli, *Reproducing the French Race*, chap. 3.

[9] Amelia Lyons, *The Civilizing Mission in the Metropole: Algerian Families and the French Welfare State during Decolonization* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).

Elise Franklin
University of Louisville
elise.franklin@louisville.edu

Copyright © 2021 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 Forum
Volume 16, Issue 6, #4