

H-France Forum
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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.

Response by Nimisha Barton, University of California, Irvine

I remember reading H-France Forum essays when I was a graduate student. I never dreamed I might have one of my own someday. Needless to say, I am humbled by this honor, and I am deeply grateful to the H-France Forum organizers, including Hélène Billis, Venita Datta, and Lynne Taylor, who made this possible. I have also been fortunate in that each of my brilliant and generous reviewers has done a wonderful job summarizing the book's arguments, structure, and contributions. As such, they have left me with the rather pleasant task of engaging them in conversation around a few critical questions *Reproductive Citizens* raises.

Both Elinor Accampo and Elise Franklin ask important questions about immigrants', and especially immigrant women's, subjectivity in my book. When analyzing the interactions between immigrant women, on the one hand, and naturalization bureaucrats, police officials, and social workers, on the other, I argue that immigrants placed heavy emphasis on their reproductive contributions—past, present, and future. Consequently, I argue that they harnessed deep-seated beliefs in French society about the virtues of republican motherhood in order to make themselves both legible and desirable as potential French citizens.

But Accampo points out that “it is difficult to imagine that these women thought of themselves as bearing children in service to the nation,” surmising “that any authentic sense of what ‘reproductive citizenship’ meant to these women subjectively is likely out of historians’ reach.” I couldn't agree more. To take it a step further, I strongly doubt immigrants imagined themselves as reproductive citizens at all. But I have enough evidence to suggest that they knew that if they presented themselves as mothers and fathers, husbands and wives, they were more likely to get what they wanted from state officials. Was it an “authentic” self they presented? Probably not. But it was a successful survival strategy.

Similarly, Franklin puts *Reproductive Citizens* in conversation with Jean Beaman's excellent book *Citizen Outsider* to pose questions about cultural belonging.[1] Did these foreign-born reproductive citizens, she asks, really experience *French* cultural belonging? In the early stages of this project, I had certainly hoped to put forward such an argument. But I changed my mind after looking at social history sources that spoke to mixed patterns of sociability and solidarity between and among French and immigrant men and women. I wondered, then, if so-called French culture was actually more expansive, more multicultural than we have been led to believe, even in the notoriously xenophobic 1930s. This multiculturalism was perhaps more accentuated in poor and working-class neighborhoods, given the degree of mutual aid daily life required. But overall, I

have come to believe that a purist notion of Frenchness (and even, dare I say, whiteness) did not quite match the realities of life under the Third Republic, in spite of the bold assertions made by pontificating politicians and other elites.

In the final chapter, I demonstrate how multicultural solidarities that French and foreign residents built amongst themselves played an important role during the Vichy years. As Clifford Rosenberg discusses in his review, these networks were critical to Jewish survival during the Occupation. Rosenberg is absolutely correct that Jacques Semelin's work on Jewish survival deeply influenced my own, and he is probably right that this is what accounts for the book's "optimism."^[2] I do not deny that Chapter Seven offers readers a tale of neighborhood redemption. And I agree with Rosenberg's other assertion: in order to truly know whether Parisian Jewry fared better than foreign-born Jews in other occupied European cities during the war, historians will need a better understanding of German policy and they will need to devote more comparative attention to continental migration patterns.

Finally, Tyler Stovall and Elise Franklin raise what I see as the most challenging question for *Reproductive Citizens*: does this book sufficiently acknowledge the wider white supremacist framework in which the entire story unfolds? As Stovall points out, "In general, both the natality and immigration policies of the interwar French state conceived of the growth and vitality of France in racial terms." In hindsight, I wonder what this book would have looked like if I had taken white supremacy as the starting point. I likely would have wound up with a very different sort of project, the likes of which a younger generation of historians is presently undertaking.

Franklin is one such scholar, and she suggests precisely how the framework of white supremacy might influence our understanding of the pre-World War II French welfare state in-the-making. Franklin points out that (white) French bureaucrats understood families through a nuclear, conjugal model and as such "[welfare] benefits were offered on white Eurocentric familialist terms." She further observes, "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." This is a critical observation. She is generous enough to suggest that *Reproductive Citizens* may offer a prehistory to the postwar story of the construction of a white postcolonial French welfare state. I certainly hope that is the case.

My greatest hope for this book was to prompt questions and conversations precisely like these, and, if I'm honest, perhaps overturn an orthodoxy or two along the way. Above all, though, I wanted to gesture at where I believe the future of the field lies. I do not know if I have succeeded. Only time will tell.

NOTES

[1] Jean Beaman, *Citizen Outsider: Children of North African Immigrants in France* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017).

[2] Jacques Semelin, *Persécutions et entraides dans la France occupée: Comment 75% des juifs en France ont échappé à la mort* (Paris: Editions des Arènes, 2013).

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