
H-France Review Vol. 8 (October 2008), No. 129

Tricia Danille Keaton, *Muslim Girls and the Other France: Race, Identity Politics and Social Exclusion*. Indiana University Press 2006. 223 pages, Bibliography, Index. \$22.95 (pb). ISBN 0 253 21834 9.

Review by Bronwyn Winter, Dept of French Studies, University of Sydney.

There is little that has gone on in France over the last five years—at least, until the election of Nicolas Sarkozy in 2007 and in particular his marriage to Carla Bruni and accompanying *pipolisation* of French politics—that has attracted international attention as much as the debate over the Islamic headscarf. Certainly no other issue has given rise to as much strident condemnation of the French state, both nationally and internationally. The hijab debate has become a framing mechanism for discussion in the Western English-speaking world about the politics of race, postcoloniality and Islam within France, with the overwhelming majority of the literature leaning towards some sort of critique of French secularism and a foregrounding of headscarved girls as somehow representative of French Muslim women.

To some extent, *Muslim Girls and the Other France* by Trica Danielle Keaton reinforces some of this prevailing discourse. At the same, however—and most refreshingly—it shifts the central focus to broader and to my mind more pressing issues. *Muslim Girls and the Other France* provides a detailed sociological study of socioeconomic exclusion and symbolic violence in France, notably within its education system, as well as of traditionalist male supremacist attitudes towards women within some minority communities that have largely gone unquestioned in any sort of constructive (i.e. non-sensationalist) way in wider French society.

Little work of this sort exists in English, although the field is not completely void (the work of Paul Silverstein and Alec Hargreaves springs readily to mind, although neither focus on women).^[1] Keaton's book is thus a timely contribution to scholarship in the area, and is in particular illuminating, for those unfamiliar with the area, of the realities and contradictions of ghetto life in France for young French women that Keaton describes as Muslim. I do, however, have a number of concerns about the way in which Keaton frames her analysis and argumentation, as I do more generally about a certain "US-ization" of politics and of social analysis in, and in relation to, France in this first decade of the third millennium. That is, post-9/11 political and social debates in the US have been superimposed on the French context, as a result, becoming a discursive framing mechanism for local debate. Inside France, the effect is that the US debate is decontextualized and a-historicized in its application to the local French context. From outside France, the converse effect is that France is interpreted by others according to US frames of reference, which means that the specificities of the French context and its history are ignored. I will return to this issue presently.

Keaton's study, which foregrounds the work of Bourdieu (in particular *Le Sens pratique*) and that of Bourdieu and Passeron (*Les Héritiers*), centres on the inner Parisian suburb of Pantin, located just outside the *périphérique* in the economically depressed and racially stigmatised North-Eastern suburban area.^[2] Participants in her study are female residents, of largely North and West African background, of a public housing project called Les Courtilières, and the teaching and ancillary staff at the middle schools and general and vocational high schools that these girls and young women attend.

The book is divided into five chapters. The first, “Unmixing French ‘National Identity,’” introduces us to the main participants in the study and raises the question of what “Frenchness” means in the context of their lives, and thus of French identity more broadly. Curiously, this chapter includes a section on forced marriages that might have more appropriately belonged in Chapter 5, in which male family and community violence towards women is treated more extensively. Chapter Two, titled “Structured Exclusion,” introduces readers to Pantin, the Département of Seine-St-Denis, and the history and contemporary state of Les Courtilières. In this chapter, the author offers not only a brief social history of an area whose fortunes have changed dramatically but also a disturbing account of a combination of neglect, ignorance and corruption in regional and local government and urban planning, that will surely be familiar to readers in many cities of the US and, indeed, elsewhere.

Chapter Three, titled “Transmitting a ‘Common Culture,” provides a critique of the ideological function and culturally homogenising curricula in the French education system: Keaton looks in particular at the literature and history curricula. The first has for some years been criticised by many in France as excluding Francophone authors and perspectives. It is also repeatedly denounced by feminists as being a sort of *galerie des absentes* (to borrow the title of Rachida Titah’s book critiquing masculinist perspectives in Algerian colonial and postcolonial culture), as far as literature by women is concerned.[3] As concerns the history curriculum, Keaton picks up the longstanding French critique that it remains silent on most of the history of colonization, slavery and decolonization. This criticism was also picked up in the 2003 Stasi Commission Report on the “Application of Secularism,” forming the basis of one of its many recommendations, and made very public at that time and thereafter. (Unfortunately, the only recommendation that was immediately and publicly picked up by the government became the 2004 law outlawing conspicuous religious insignia in French schools.)

The fourth chapter of the book is titled “Counterforces,” and looks at the real battle teenage girls from Les Courtilières face at school, where social inequalities are reproduced despite some efforts to redress them—and sometimes even because of them. For example, the principal of the Henri III high school refused the categorization of the school as being in a ZEP, or priority education zone, because of the stigmatizing impact of this label, which he feared would exacerbate the problems; his refusal also, however, deprived the school of much-needed funding. Other examples include lack of understanding of the reasons for which students underperform, that are not all about inadequate written expression skills but also about lack of cultural resonance for them at school and lack of adequate conditions for study at home, among them, overcrowding, heavy domestic labour sometimes extending to slavery, and ideological objections of parents to some aspects of curricula. The workload of teachers and the inadequacy of training and support for them is also mentioned. This chapter is a major strength of the book and I would have liked much more discussion of the multiple contradictions with which both students and staff are faced in attempting to redress a difficult situation that is not of their making but is systemic and structural, and where both students and teachers, with the best will in the world, deal with almost permanent stress, overwork, and a battle to stave off a gnawing sense of hopelessness.

The final chapter, titled “Beyond identity,” looks at the double battle girls wage against male supremacist attitudes and constant policing within their families and communities and what the author sees as religious intolerance at school (she focuses in particular on the hijab issue). The consequences of the former range from constant negotiation of the day-to-day, often through strategic lying, to serious violence and even death in some extreme cases, the last of which, I venture to add, are usually the only ones picked up routinely by the French press. The consequences of the latter include confusion and often quite varied attitudes about the meaning of *laïcité*.

I found myself, on reading this book, both excited by its potential as well as supportive of its aims in documenting gendered socioeconomic exclusion and racism in France. At the same time, some of the tacit and sometimes explicit assumptions on which it is based give cause for concern, as do some significant omissions, which are as likely to obfuscate and foster misreadings as the other aspects of the

book are to illuminate readers on how the politics and culture of one of the most serious issues of social injustice in today's Western cities play out in France.

The first concern is the label "Muslim." While it is true that since the first headscarf affair in 1989 (and possibly even a little before), there is relatively constant public debate about Islam in France that ranges from the serious and informed to the ridiculous and sensationalist, talk of "Muslims" in France is largely a post-9/11, post 2002-3 headscarf-debate phenomenon. Before, racialized minorities of Muslim culture were referred to more by national/ethnic background (or as "immigrants [of the second generation]") than by a religiously-connotated cultural one. This "Muslimization" of race politics in France has multiple sources. The media and the State have played their role, certainly, but so has the increasing US-ization of world politics in general and French politics in particular. Another political source of this Muslimization (including, oddly, among Sub-Saharan African-background girls, some of whom are now putting on hijabs at the same time as North African-background girls are tending to remove them), is the political manoeuvring of Islamist groups in France. The Islamist presence is something Keaton dismisses as mere State propaganda and media hype. While I agree that State and media responses have been unhelpful, this does not mean that there is no problem, as many feminists from a range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds and national locations have argued at some length and for some decades. Whatever the personal motivation of headscarf-wearing girls, for example, there is considerable evidence that the hijab issue has been used by others to serve their own political ends. The racist French state is one of these, but so are Islamist lobbies with more or less direct connections to some avatar of the Muslim Brotherhood. They are using the hijab to create wedge politics and Islamicize a debate that has always been, and still is, about race and socioeconomic exclusion, as Keaton argues forcefully elsewhere in her book.

Yet, despite all these influences that have served to recast these ethnic populations as "Muslim," it is, even today, still odd in France to conceptualize those of North African background and those of Sub-Saharan African background in the same terms and even odder to conceptualize them all as "Muslim" (even if most of them are). Their histories are different (even among the three countries of the Maghreb, there are significant nuances to be made), their experience is different and the ways in which they are racialized are different. The Muslimization of both North African and Sub-Saharan African-background identities in France serves to obscure the colonial and postcolonial histories of these populations in class, culture and political terms (even as Keaton takes pains to foreground this history). Moreover, most available data indicates that most Muslims in France today are non-practising or rarely practising, and the proportion of headscarf-wearing girls and women would be extremely generously estimated at 2 percent of the total female Muslim population in France.

Keaton also brings French citizens of Antillean background into her general discussion of the politics of race and national identity, which compounds the confusion; as anyone in France (and first of all Africans) will instantly report, Antilleans and Africans in France are not racialized in the same way and indeed, Antilleans are far less severely racialized than those of North African background. Keaton mentions this distinction at one point but then loses sight of it.

The second concern is that, even though Keaton's book focuses on girls and contains a great deal of feminist-inspired analysis, she quotes few women (Camille Lacoste-Dujardin, Catherine Quiminal, Catherine Rassiguier, Catherine Withol de Wenden, Nawal El Saadawi, Fatima Mernissi, Amina Wadud and Bell Hooks being exceptions) and even fewer feminists, and practically none from the ethnic groups she is studying.[4] Yet there is a vast feminist literature on gender, class and race in France, including by women who have been ripped off by Bourdieu, for example.[5] The analysis of race that Keaton attributes to Bourdieu on p. 98 was actually developed in the late 1960s by Colette Guillaumin.[6] Such omissions and misrepresentations are bad enough, but more worrying is the almost total silence on numerous and long-existing studies and commentary by Francophone feminists of North African and Sub-Saharan African background concerning the very masculinist family and community violence that Keaton rightly denounces. If one is to engage in serious feminist analysis of the intersection of gender,

class and race in the perpetuation of both community- and State-sanctioned violence against racialized women, then surely this enterprise also involves paying attention to the work of explicitly feminist scholars (and activists) of such background. These scholars face serious institutional discrimination in France, as, for that matter, do any explicitly feminist scholars in France, a veritable bastion of intellectual misogyny.

Keaton also situates herself within, and in relation to, this study, to the extent that as an African-American who speaks fluent French, both her own background and her experience in France brought her closer to the lived experience of the participants in her study. She even explicitly states that “this study is as much about my journey, my observations, and my participation in a familiar yet foreign country as it is about the Muslim girls” (p. 24). This is an honest statement, as such involvement is unavoidable, especially given the long-term and in-depth nature of Keaton’s fieldwork in Pantin. It is also, however, a problematic one, in that I sense a certain US-centrism in Keaton’s assumptions and argumentation. For example, in criticizing the ideological function of the French education system (which does indeed play an unusually strong role in the forming of citizenship and ideas of belonging), she fails to emphasize that national education systems, anywhere in the world, serve this ideological function to greater or lesser degrees and in different ways. This is, in fact, one of their main *raison d’être*.

When her participants praise the values of this system or of French society more generally, Keaton seems to assume that this is proof of successful ideological inculcation by the French State (see for example p. 104). She makes no similar assumption concerning Khadija, her only headscarved participant who, others report, engages in sustained religious proselytism in the school. There is no reason to assume that the “pro-secular” young women have any less *libre-arbitre* than Khadija, or than Sylvie (a Jewish-born convert to Islam). There is also nothing intrinsically “wrong” with aspiring to acquire the sort of cultural capital that defines citizenship—a capital that does, whether one likes it or not, pass first and foremost via the acquisition of linguistic fluency within formal registers; this is as true in the US as it is in France. Even as one is highly critical of what the French elite call *une bonne culture* (Keaton’s study of the history and literature curricula speaks eloquently to this point), the irony that faces anyone on the left intelligentsia is that to be able to engage in such critique, one must first enter the realm that one wishes to critique. As I have written myself, Beauvoir was not an illiterate immigrant woman, Marx was not a factory worker and Césaire was not a slave.[7] Keaton refers briefly to her own background; my own father did not finish high school and my mother was raised by a sole parent who took in sewing. Yet here we both are, part of the very elite we would critique, and many of the participants in Keaton’s study aspire, albeit ambiguously, to be part of that same elite, as Keaton more or less points out herself.

The fourth concern is that the development of secularism is not fully historicized within this book. It did not start with Jules Ferry or even with the French Revolution. The seeds for the development of Western secularism began with the battle for religious freedom within Western Christianity during the Reformation. Such scholars as Mohammed Arkoun and Albert Hourani, among many others, have noted similar debates over religious freedom within Islam, that were being carried on long before the development of Islamic modernism in Egypt in the late nineteenth century.[8] If one is truly to understand why secularism is such an institution, albeit constantly contested within France, one has to understand how much violence was waged over centuries to fight both for and against religious freedom in France. That battle has been more or less resolved through strict religious neutrality of the public sphere (although one can never consider such things resolved forever, as the current case of Turkey eloquently demonstrates). Keaton argues that this strict neutrality works *against* religious freedom as individuals are not allowed to express their religion in schools. This is a debate that can be waged, certainly, and indeed it is, in France as elsewhere. Historical experience in France, however, as well as in most Muslim countries today—not to mention in Bush’s re-evangelicized United States—has demonstrated that the more religion mixes itself up with the public sphere, the worse this is for women.

Despite these serious reservations, I nonetheless recommend this book for what, in fact, makes up its core: a careful sociological study of teenage girls and young women locked into educational exclusion and failure in a depressed area of inner-suburban Paris. As such, it is a worthy contribution to discussion of the politics of race, gender and class in contemporary France.

NOTES

[1] Alec Hargreaves, *Multi-Ethnic France: Immigration, Politics, Culture and Society* (New York & London: Routledge, 2007); Paul A. Silverstein, *Algeria in France: Transpolitics, Race and Nation* (Bloomington, Indiana Univ. Press, 2004).

[2] Pierre Bourdieu, *Le sens pratique* (Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1980); Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Les Héritiers: Les étudiants et la culture* (Paris : Éditions de Minuit, 1984).

[3] Rachida Tita, *La galerie des absentes: La femme algérienne dans l'imaginaire masculin* (La Tour d'Aigues : Éditions de l'Aube, 1996).

[4] Bell Hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York : Routledge, 1994); Nawal El-Saadawi, "Women and Islam" (*Women's Studies International Forum* 5[2], 193-206); Camille Lacoste-Dujardin et al, *Yasmina et les autres de Nanterre et ailleurs: Filles de parents maghrébins en France* (Paris : La Découverte, 1992); Fatima Mernissi, 1992, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (New York : Perseus, 1992); Catherine Quiminal et al, *Les jeunes filles d'origine africaine en France: Parcours scolaires, accès au travail et destin social* (Paris : Association pour la promotion de la langue et de la culture soninké, 1997); Catherine Rassiguier, *Becoming Women, ecoming Workers: Identity Formations in a French Vocational School* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994); Amina Wadud, *Quran and Women: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1992); Catherine Wihtol de Wenden, *L'immigration en Europe* (Paris : La Documentation Française, 1999).

[5] Nicole-Claude Mathieu, "Bourdieu ou le pouvoir auto-hypnotique de la domination masculine" (*Les Temps Modernes* 604, 1999).

[6] Colette Guillaumin, *L'Idéologie raciste* (La Hague : Mouton, 1972).

[7] Bronwyn Winter, "L'essentialisation de l'Altérité et l'invisibilisation de l'oppression: l'histoire bizarre mais vraie de la déformation d'un concept" *Nouvelles Questions Féministes* 20/4(1999): 75-102.

[8] Mohamed Arkoun, *Humanisme et Islam : Combats et propositions* (Paris : Librairie Philosophique Vrin, 2005); Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1962).

Bronwyn Winter
University of Sydney
bronwyn.winter@usyd.edu.au

Copyright © 2008 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of

more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172