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Ian Coller, *Arab France: Islam and the Making of Modern Europe, 1798-1831*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011. xi + 288 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$60.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9780520260641; \$24.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9780520260658; \$20.00 U.S. (e-book). ISBN 9780520947542.

Response by Ian Coller, La Trobe University

History does not really exist until it is shared. It must be debated, argued over, rethought, pulled apart, and put back together. A fresh and unexamined subject is an irresistible opportunity, but it also presents the danger that one is arguing only with oneself. It is through the dialogue with other historians that a project comes to life, and I thank the editors of H-France and these four brilliant colleagues—Jennifer Heuer, Julia Landweber, Jennifer Sessions and Miranda Spieler—who have given of their time and their insight to take *Arab France* through this crucial rite of passage.

Naturally, given their various fields of interest, each reviewer found different elements of the book to praise, and I am heartened by their positive remarks. In contrast, the problems that they identified show some significant areas of overlap. The book tries to do a great deal, and its argument is in places very dense. It deals with French history but also with key aspects of history in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the eighteenth century, as well as the history of a particular community that emerged somewhere across the two. Moreover, it seeks to bring these different histories to speak with and sometimes against one another in quite a particular way. All four of these historians are transnational in their outlook—whether in the Mediterranean or the Atlantic spheres—and thus well placed to appreciate the aims and evaluate the success of the project.

Certain transnational approaches, such as comparative history, colonial history, and the history of migration, have established their own methodologies and historiographies. I would not identify my work very closely with any of these projects, although I have drawn in important ways on all of them. Instead, I consider my work very much as European history, as French history, but in a way different from the nationally or culturally bounded versions of that history that have predominated in the past. Frederick Cooper has called this project, with a nod to the seminal work of Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Provincializing France.” For me, *Arab France* is a small and very hesitant step in the dialectical project of both globalizing and provincializing French history.

There are very few individual points in any of the reviews with which I would take issue. Those that do arise are, I think on the whole, connected to the differences in the kinds of transnational and or global history that we practice. For example, Heuer’s issue with the subtitle demonstrates a difference in the way we view the very idea of “Europe”—as a self-evident phenomenon or as a construct. I argue that Europe has never been a geographical or cultural given and that the very construction of the idea of “Europe” in contradistinction to other “civilizations” was in process at this key moment. I believe that the experience of these former Ottoman subjects in France illuminates that process in important ways. I do not think there is any contradiction here: the book’s title makes it quite clear that this is principally a book about France. “Islam and the Making of Modern Europe” is a larger project to which the book is gesturing, a project I hope to continue with my current and future work.

Jennifer Sessions raises a concern about “the claim that expansionist nationalism fell into abeyance in France after 1815”, arguing that “if militarism was not a pillar of Bourbon ultraroyalism, it was certainly a core tenet of the Romantic Bonapartism that helped to bring it down in 1830.” Here, I need to clarify the nature of my argument. I would emphasize that my original statement made reference only to the regime of Louis XVIII—I considered the period from 1825 up to the Revolution of 1830 and the “turn to empire” separately and at considerably greater length. The main beef I raised in this context was with the widespread claim of a “fundamental continuity of expansionist nationalism across the postrevolutionary period” (p. 155) which depicts revolutionary expansion, Napoleonic Empire, and the beginnings of settler colonialism as part of a single line of development. I am a great admirer of Sessions’ work and her exciting new history of the French invasion of Algeria, but this is a point on which we may disagree.[1] I see no such continuity but rather an extended struggle over opposing versions of the postrevolutionary state and its place in the world (a struggle that has been illuminated, albeit in an intra-European context, by Marc Belissa).[2]

This question of continuities and discontinuities applies equally to some of the issues raised by Heuer and Spieler in regard to the so-called “Egyptian Expedition” of 1798. Heuer calls the French invasion of Egypt “a failed—if glorified—colonial enterprise,” feeling that this undermines my argument about the significance of the “colonial turn” in 1830. Spieler reminds us that the close French relationship with Ottoman Catholics stretches back far beyond the rupture of 1798. I would both acknowledge and challenge these arguments: first, that the invasion of Egypt was in any simple sense a “colonial” project (an argument I have made more fully in forthcoming work), and, second, that the fact of being Catholic brought Arabs necessarily any closer to the post-revolutionary French regime. More recent work on the complex religious and confessional politics of the Ottoman Empire seriously challenge Spieler’s assumption that it was France that “foment[ed] a religious schism among Melkite Christians” and suggest instead that it was incipient cultural Arabism that contributed most to the schism.[3] Spieler does appear to have missed some key elements in my argument on this issue, particularly in regard to figures such as Joseph Agoub, suggesting that “nowhere does this Levantine Christian refer to himself as an Arab.” In fact, Agoub never referred to himself as an *Egyptian* (he was the son of an Armenian and a Syrian Catholic). In a rare moment of self-reflection, however, he did indeed describe himself as an Arab (p. 152). This was true also in the Arabic correspondence, where I found no reference to Egyptians but a clear description of those receiving pensions as *abna-l’arab*, the “children of the Arabs” (p. 72).

With these minor points out of the way, I would like to focus on three larger questions—race, gender, and religion—raised by the reviewers, each of which is justly identified as an area in which the book might have gone further.

As others have observed, the story I set out to tell was a very complicated one, drawing upon historiographies that were very different and unlikely to be familiar to all my readers. A certain narrowing was necessary therefore at the outset in order to keep a handle on the subject. In examining Arabs, I made a choice not to pursue those trails which seemed connected to other categories such as “gens de couleur” or Jews. The Arab population was often implicated with these groups by language or statute, yet they were also quite distinct from one another. In a provisional sense this narrowness of focus was necessary. But at a certain point, the question of race and racialization of Arabs called for a larger contextualization and drew me toward a more sophisticated thinking-through of these questions. Indeed, a closer attention to these adjacent categories actually enriched the nature of my argument. While still arguing that the “Egyptian refugees” came to identify themselves as Arabs, I felt that the conditions under which these identifications were made needed more careful examination. The murderous attack on the “Egyptians” of Marseille in 1815 had hitherto been considered exclusively as a political settling of scores: violence was visited upon the Egyptians because of their close political connection to the Bonapartist regime. An attention to race uncovered a murkier story, with roots stretching back to the racial politics of the ancien regime, the re-establishment of slavery and the corporate status of Jews, and even the struggles over municipal and prefectural power in the postrevolutionary state. I was struck by Miranda Spieler’s excellent observation on “the imprudence of studying the history of the French Atlantic in isolation from the broader geopolitics of empire and its representations”—a principle which should equally be applied in the study of Europe and the Mediterranean. Jennifer Heuer’s fascinating recent study of

interracial marriage reminds us how much more there is to say on this rich subject of race in early nineteenth-century France.[4]

Heuer's comments, along with Sessions', also point to a more significant gap in the book, a category that is not adjacent or overlapping but central to the Arab population. There is little doubt that women became a focus in the 1815 episode of racial violence, and I sought to trace that association, or rather the intersection between race and gender, back to Napoleonic policies of a decade earlier. That discussion--necessarily brief given the span of the book--gave me an opportunity to include the small amount of information I had managed to collect on the women among the "Egyptian refugees" in Marseille. As both Heuer and Sessions suggest, this material deserves more than an anecdotal development and should be part of a greater attention to the role of gender, particularly of marriage and the family, among the Arab community, the other groups around them, and the official "French" society in which they functioned. The changing legal structures of marriage, inheritance and divorce, the return of the church, and questions of licit and illicit sexuality are important questions that I left undeveloped in the book, and they deserve careful historical analysis of the kind Heuer has attempted to undertake.

The book's subtitle certainly foregrounds Islam, but I explained in the introduction that I did not intend to undertake at this point a study of Islam as a religion but rather as a transnational space like that of "Europe" against which it is contrasted. The changing relationship between these spaces is crucial to the developments charted in the book, and if the subtitle is provocative as a spur to thinking about such questions, I do not regret this. On the other hand, I would acknowledge that the religious question of Islam (as of Christianity) and its relationship to these developments takes a secondary position in the book, in part because the majority of the Arabs discussed here were Christian (but originating from and maintaining close links with an Islamic society) but also because of the near total absence of evidence regarding the religious practice of those Muslims among the emigration. I was primarily interested in the relationship of these people to one another and to the state, and I perhaps allowed the secularist prism of much modern historiography to shape my choices. This is a question worth pursuing. I have written elsewhere about Islam and Muslims in the emigration and attempted to analyse the meaning of this absence, and my current projects will do what they can to respond further to this question.[5]

Lastly, I was conscious, in choosing to write a chronological and narrative history, how many of the stories we choose to tell in the world today, particularly those dealing with identity, are constructed in this way. I wanted to speak to and within those narratives to show that they can be told differently. As Julia Landweber in particular observed, this is a book that does intend to speak to the challenges of multiculturalism facing almost all societies today, to the questions of identity dogging politics and the social sciences, and to the rhetoric of irreducible cultural and religious differences that emerged particularly after 2001. The project was shaped by that historical context, and it is certainly a plea to think differently about our common past, even as it tries to avoid simplistic resorts to the comparison between "republican" and "multicultural" systems, easy condemnations of "Jacobin centralisation," or acerbic Gallic references to a putative "système anglo-saxon." Unexpectedly, just as the book came out, peoples across the Arab world were rising with great courage to defy the stories they had been told by kleptocrat dictators and the international system that coddled them. Egypt has emerged once again as a key crossroad of the modern world, in ways the Arabs of early nineteenth-century France would have understood. But these revolutions, sweeping from one Arab state to the next, also demonstrate the continuing significance of a pan-Arab identity. Ideas, technologies, and even revolution continue to spread through the medium of the Arabic language and the shared forms of societies which are shaped by Islam but composed of many religions and confessions. In this sense, Sessions picks up on an important, if perhaps too briefly elaborated, element of my argument. While paying close attention to the seminal and salutary intervention of Frederick Cooper and Rogers Brubaker, "identity" cannot be so readily eliminated from our analytical vocabulary. I argued in the book that identity must be understood as a *project* rather than as a fixed or stable category, something more than belonging, more than classification, more even than privileges or rights--a *place* in which people can feel at home, in which they can quite naturally move, in which they can respect others and be respected themselves. Those structural questions such as race, gender, and religion so rightly posed by the reviewers must be

central in examining every such project because they form the horizon within which it can be articulated.

NOTES

[1] Jennifer Sessions, *By Sword and Plow: France and the Conquest of Algeria* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).

[2] Marc Belissa, *Repenser l'ordre européen, 1795-1802 : de la société des rois aux droits des nations* (Paris: Kimé, 2006).

[3] Thomas Philipp, *The Syrians in Egypt, 1725-1975* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1985); and Bruce Masters, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The Roots of Sectarianism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 112.

[4] Jennifer Heuer, "The One-Drop Rule in Reverse? Interracial Marriages in Napoleonic and Restoration France," *Law and History Review* 27 (2009): 515-548.

[5] Ian Coller, "Les Musulmans français et les politiques d'Islam dans l'Europe post-révolutionnaire," in Jocelyne Dakhlia and Bernard Vincent, eds., *Les Musulmans dans l'histoire de l'Europe*, vol. 1: *Une intégration invisible* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2011), pp. 101-142.

Ian Coller
La Trobe University
I.Coller@latrobe.edu.au

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