H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Paul A. Silverstein. *Algeria in France: Transpolitics, Race, and Nation.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004. x + 298 pp. $23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-21712-7; $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34451-9.

Reviewed by Deborah Harrold (Department of Political Science, Bryn Mawr College)
Published on H-Gender-MidEast (September, 2006)

Colonial Categories in Postmodern Politics: Algerian Berbers in France

Anthropologist Paul Silverstein has written an impressive and engrossing account of the contemporary articulation and deployment of identity, turning on the postcolonial deployment of colonial categories in the metropole. The work is a valuable corrective to ubiquitous binaries: nation/globalization, citizen/immigrant, assimilation/cultural refusal. His accounts of individual trajectories, organizational strategies, and state policies contribute to a particularly fine understanding of the choices, strategies, and tactics available to global subalterns.

Silverstein's fieldwork in contemporary France examines the reinvestment in colonial categories of Berber identity and the redeployment of these identities as one strategy of identity for Kabyle Algerians in France. Berber identity, he suggests, is an Algerian and North African identity that is an alternate, parallel, or supplementary choice to Islamic identity, poised both against and with a French identity; a French identity that beckons, promises, rewards, threatens, and enables. In what Silverstein marks as "transpolitics," Kabyle activists mediate their relationship to both Algeria and France through elaboration of a particular Kabyle identity and the creation of activities and organizations around this identity. These identities are robust and highly articulated, advanced through neighborhood activism, marriage decisions, university language classes, after school cultural programs, the decoration and interpretation of domestic space, and through a variety of associations and affiliations of North Africans in France.

Algerians in France, Silverstein argues, are also part of "Algeria in France," sometimes affiliating with Algerian political parties (two of which may be considered Berber) and voting in Algerian elections. These are not merely Algerian identities played out in France, taking advantage of a second political space. They are deeply implicated in French state policy and the field of French politics generally, as Kabyles respond to possibilities and persecutions from the state and participate in French and European political life. What's striking is the state contribution to the contemporary political salience of Berber ethnicities in spite of Algeria's thirty years of one party authoritarian rule and generally unitary policies, and in spite of France's generally unitary policies towards North Africans. The colonial categories persist and have been given new life. Nineteenth-century ethnographers and colonial administrators devoted considerable effort to specifying and differentiating the Berber populations of colonial Algeria, arguing that the origins of the Berbers were European, Basque, Celtic, or Roman, or whatever, working to differentiate Berbers from Arabs. The ethnic character of the Berbers was understood as more sedentary, more democratic, less fanatical, and closer to France–above all, better than the Arabs. Swept up in the possibilities of purging a nation of troublesome Arab-Islamic identity, with its anti-colonialism, supposed combination of fanaticism and fatalism, and general hostility to European projects, colonial authorities confiscated the trust property that financed Islamic education and eventually declared Arabic a foreign language. What Algerian Arabs spoke was conceptually separated from Arabic, its ties to literary Arabic and other Arabic dialects obscured. More French schools were built in the Kabyle, and Berber language studies were established at the university level.

French expectations that Algerian ethnic and social fragmentation would prevent collective action were not upheld during the Algerian struggle for independence. Berbers participated in the struggle against French rule in their regions, in organizations in France, and in shared organizations in Algeria where they had a presence in leadership cadres. Their previous special status as the natural French subjects bought the Kabyle no special treatment in the war. Bourdieu's photographs of the Kabyle house and its iconic furnishings were made possible because the roofs of real houses had been bombed off,

which he noted years later when wondering how he took crisp black and white photos in these dark houses. But both the war of independence and post-independence politics were shaped by conflict over what would be the proclaimed cultural orientation of the new state. Algeria's new rulers moved sharply against those who wanted the Berber cultural heritage acknowledged and Berber languages recognized. The university contribution to Berber language studies was sharply curtailed and Kabyle intellectuals and activists faced severe persecution if they advocated linguistic recognition or more. In France, though, Berber intellectuals were able to draw on the metropolitan academic structure for resources and political space. Kabyle activists in Algeria and France today draw on the work done in France by exiled Berber intellectuals, who shaped a modern literary language from their spoken language. Reliance on a modified Latin script eased new literacy for francophones and cemented the ties between francophonie, Berber language development and scientific linguistics, modernity, and France. It is this language, Tamazight, which the Berber activists and intellectuals today have mobilized as a language of literature, of poetry, for protest songs and demonstrations, on the web, and in Algerian politics today. Welcome, then, to transpolitics.

One of the great strengths of Silverstein's book is its effort to historicize contemporary Kabyle identity and mobilization in France in terms of different generations, avoiding an anthropological present, as it identifies and examines associations and collective forms of identity articulation. These collective forms are tied to different immigration regimes, the space afforded by French law, and economic conditions of work and residence. Silverstein's emphasis on generation, with attention to the material conditions and possibilities, is again presented within the context of French politics. Not only state policies, but the mobilization of other political groups as opponents and allies, has affected the articulation of Berber organizational strategies. We see the politics and processes of Kayble identity expressed in neighborhood cultural associations, the Beur movement that brought together a new generation of North Africans in France, and the broader anti-racism movement and its shifts from an emphasis on citizenship and difference to an emphasis that difference need not exclude. The EU offers a new political umbrella for regionalism and Berber activists share conferences and web pages with activists on behalf of Occitan, Catalan, Basque, and other identities, seeking various levels of cultural recognition, autonomy, and independence. The Beur activists of yesterday look on appalled at the violence of today's *banlieue* youth, and the positions of the French state have gained the support of many Kabyle-identified Algerians. Kabyle identity in France is often posed against a politicized Islamic identity; headscarves are statistically rare among Algerian Muslims. Generation matters, and the demands of previous generation are not compelling or even meaningful to their younger brothers and sisters. Here, Silverstein makes use of individual accounts which offer counterpoint and nuance to the discussion of the trajectories of organizations. Is it a sell-out, to become successful immigrant? Is it inevitable that the activists of one generation are appalled by the generation that burns more cars in its demonstrations?

The narratives of identity that Silverstein analyzes reveal the choices and elisions that are part of politics, activism, and enacting identity. While being Kabyle may be difficult in Paris, far from the village, being a Kabyle activist is more possible in Paris for an educated woman, further from the husband and the in-laws with their views of traditional life that may be part of "a traditional and tribal" Kabylia, but are not to be part of her modern lived Berber identity in France. This is from an educated and articulate woman who is extremely conscious of the tensions between traditional Kabylia and what she wants to be (p. 214). We see the well-educated son of elite and employed immigrants fail to find work on two continents. He "drifts" into "Muslim orthopraxy" (p. 19). Whatever his own beliefs or future, he has entered a realm of generalized media hysteria, "Islamalgam," that is, "the amalgamation of mental categories of Islam and terrorism" (p. 130). There is, after all, no place for him in the first world he sought and he has renounced it for another. The successful son of Algerian immigrants alarms his family with his new commitments to Islam, but he prays at home and avoids the politicized public space of the mosque (p. 122). Many of the narratives, some coming from activists, are formalized accounts of how they came to their vision of identity; others are less self-conscious.

Silverstein's discussions of state polices, the development of organizations, generations, and individual trajectories narratives are accompanied by two very different kinds of commentary; an accounting of violence, and a discussion of literature and film. While the successive French laws and policies that enable or limit immigrants' choices are well laid out, Silverstein addresses a different kind of state practice, the episodic violence against these people, immigrants or born-there immigrants, citizens or newly arrived. Not only do we see the routine violence of policing and major violence deployed against demonstrations, but the .22 caliber shootings of young men by their [white] French neighbors and the arrest of

an older woman recently arrived from Algeria because she bought the wrong train ticket and is therefore on a train by fraud. Physical violence is part of state and social projects to control Algerians. With literature and film, though, these immigrants and citizens are authors as well as victims, francophone writers who have created the genre of the Beur novel with its autobiographical and political claims. In literary form, then, North Africans in France analyze and commodify their experience, making fun, teasing, mocking, gaining critical purchase and critical acclaim. The incorporation of a discussion of literature emphasizes the depth of this community, its reflexivity and historical consciousness. It includes hoodlums on the train and literati; literati reflecting on hoodlums and the state as the state and hoodlums confront each other; it is the unassimilated and the francophone, the woman on the train who does not know her way around and a graphic novelist of considerable cultural acumen and wicked irony.

One of Silverstein's most interesting chapters concerns the domestic production of Kabyle identity, as the Kabyle house made famous by Bourdieu is now lovingly reproduced in a low-cost Parisian apartment as cultural identity. Parts of the Kabyle house have been thankfully dropped out; the dichotomies of light and dark, dry and the moist, male and female, have given way to an emphasis on things; the sheepskin, the grinding stone, a collection of storage jugs. Not all of the material culture is specifically Kabyle. The water pipe, for example, has become so "Middle East" that it may be a feature of Israeli cultural events on U.S. college campuses. The ceramic mosque is probably a product of Tunisia. But these are domestic formulations of identity, deploying material culture to appropriate and enact the colonial category of Kabyle, a process Silverstein calls "structural nostalgia."

Silverstein's treatment of gender issues in *Algeria in France* is particularly interesting because he avoids new reifications, emphasizing instead tensions and individual strategies. His discussion of the headscarf debates marks out the wide variety of positions and the polysemy of headscarves. His real strength, though, for gender issues, comes from the richness of examples, what I will call "snapshots" of gender strategies. His descriptions show us moments, trajectories, and efforts, from gendered performances. Silverstein spent time in the weight room of the neighborhood gym, a prime site for the enactment of male identity and we see neighborhood struggles over locking up and using the gym. Elsewhere in the text we see a set of weights in a young man's bedroom, marking masculinity and the enactment of an individual commitment to athleticism; he has eschewed collective sports in their statist or rebellious modes. Silverstein tells us he got mugged, an event presenting a particular age-specific masculinity and apparently accomplished in the uniform. The muggers wore the baseball cap and brand-name sports apparel of North African *banlieue* youth and signaled their intentions with a hand signal of a pointed gun. Silverstein notes that the *baba cool*, the defiant young Beur of the 1980s "rodeos" of protest and car-burning, and *la fugueuse*, the female runaway who flees patriarchal authority, are twin identities for male and female Kabyle youth in protest against "both French and Algerian domestic mores" (p. 167). The Beur and Berber associations of the 1980s offered shelter to runaway girls, in recognition of a general social problem. It's not clear that *la fugueuse* protests French mores for young women; the construction of Kabyle identity for a younger generation seems to be expelling or evading patriarchy generally.

The Italian *copine* (long-term girlfriend) and the foreign wife may be male strategies for evading Kabyle traditionalism. In the construction of Kayble domesticity, is the foreign girlfriend an escape from Kabyle patriarchy? An escape from patriarchal authority or an escape from some of the obligations of its enactment? We see escape more than attack in the gendered strategies for independence and identity articulation that Silverstein documents in these pages, showing us diverse efforts to "create space for individual expression" (p. 167).

Paul Silverstein's *Algeria in France* offers enormous empirical richness and invaluable theoretical contributions. "Transpolitics" is a particularly important contribution because it offers a dynamic concept of connection while consistently refusing a binary assessment of globalization or nation. The focus of the work is France while the place of Algeria is marked with precision in the voices and projects of his informants; a place of investment, a place to send kids in the summer, a place that must be left, the location of parties whose stakes may or may not interest, a place whose politics produces bombs in France and surveillance of immigrants. The narratives of individual trajectories, discussion of generational change, and different emigration cohorts show us aporia and losses as well as new terrains that permit and force new possibilities for identity. "Structural nostalgia" is another valuable concept, drawing our attention to the consumption and political deployment of historically produced definitions in a radically different context. The book is a great contribution to scholars of modern Europe and North Africa as well as those concerned with identity, liberalism and specificities of globalization. Silverstein's discussion of state policies and practices, and emphasis on organizations, makes this anthropological work of special interest to political scientists.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Deborah Harrold. Review of Silverstein, Paul A., *Algeria in France: Transpolitics, Race, and Nation.* H-Gender-MidEast, H-Net Reviews. September, 2006.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12247

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.