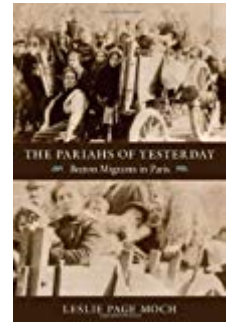


**Leslie Page Moch.** *The Pariahs of Yesterday: Breton Migrants in Paris*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012. xii + 255 pp. \$23.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8223-5183-2.



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Leslie Page Moch is a well-established scholar in the field of migration history, author of a seminal book on the mobility of Europeans in modern times (*Moving Europeans, Migration in Western Europe since 1650* [2003]). Her mastery of global and long-term issues sometimes obscures the fact that she is a specialist of nineteenth-century provincial France, to which she returns with this latest book. *The Pariahs of Yesterday* describes the life, travels, and work of the many Brittany-born people who flocked to Paris during the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. Armed with the tools of social historians—census reports, police archives, wedding certificates, and the press—Moch sketches the rough path taken by these migrants, often barely literate country folks, to the big city. Employed first as common workers in a city that grew very quickly, they found poor shelters in dilapidated parts of the city and new industrial suburbs sprouting on the outskirts, especially Saint-Denis, in the north of Paris. They are then considered—hence the title of the book—the pariahs of the city, ill-suited to city

life, pitied, or frowned upon because of their frequent ignorance of French, poor social status, and questionable morals, and symbolized by the prostitutes walking the streets around the Montparnasse railway station, door to the city for the migrants from Brittany. The strength of the vivid portrait drawn by Moch stems from the confrontation of these discourses, most of them produced by middle-class observers and would-be reformers, and from the discussion of what serial sources can teach us about the working and living condition of these migrants. If some did succumb to illness, poverty, and all the social ills afflicting a rapidly growing mid-nineteenth-century city, wedding certificates and census reports also show the resilience of these rural migrants, able to maintain efficient networks, to find niches in the city economy (quite often in their case in transportation and nursing), and to connect at times to the urban society they joined.

These findings allow Moch to insist on the migrants' diversity of positions and experiences, to a large extent deriving from the part of the city that

they settled in. The contrast between the fourteenth arrondissement, adjacent to the heart of the city, and the quite isolated and heavily industrial suburb of Saint-Denis is strong. She also concludes that the human capital brought by migrants to the city—knowledge of French, previous urban experience, or a valued set of skills—varied greatly and had a strong influence on the pattern of their Parisian lives.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, a sizable portion of the people from Brittany found ways to negotiate a better place in the socioeconomic structure of the city, an upward social mobility that was partly due to the fact that, as French citizens, they could access the public jobs that the city offered. The métropolitain and the railways offered many poorly paid and barely skilled, but stable, jobs, allowing efficient residential strategies or education of the next generation. During the interwar period, an “élite bretonne” could be found in Paris, made up of educated middle-class individuals, some of whom engaged in bitterly fought battles against prejudice and derogatory representations of people from Brittany. One of their archenemies, Bécassinne, is a cartoon character born at the beginning of the twentieth century for the amusement of the children of middle-class families whose prejudices she embodies. Ignorant, slow-witted, and clumsy, the simple country girl plays havoc in Madame la marquise de Bel air’s household, but because she has a heart of gold and is genuinely subservient, she is always generously forgiven. The character outlived the social circumstances that saw her birth and became an icon of popular culture. Her adventures are still in print today, making their way into advertising and the movie industry. In the interwar years, she was a thorn in the side of the champions of Breton respectability, and was treated as such.

These battles are treated by Moch as a sign that a Breton identity and social sphere endured in interwar Paris. She further shows that such was the case for several decades after the Second World

War. It was then that a booming and quickly diversifying economy attracted a last large cohort of Bretons who gave new life to aging Breton institutions, parishes, and associations. This golden age of Breton institutions is now past, the last *crêperie* closed its doors in Saint-Denis a while back and gone are the religious festivities that celebrated Breton life in Paris. One would be hard-pressed today to define people from Brittany as a specific section of the Parisian population.

Moch gives us a classic tale of assimilation of a marginalized and at first quite alien group into city life. Precise, vivid, clear, and pleasantly written, her book is useful for scholars working on Parisian populations and not in possession of a strong scholarly volume on the Breton experience in and around Paris. It is classic in its themes and techniques, even slightly outdated when it comes to crunching statistical data. Its historiographical significance, however, lies in the fact that the migrating population thus studied is made up of fellow nationals who do, from the start, benefit from the same set of rights as their Parisian counterparts and who cannot be denied their full citizenship. It therefore leads to a pertinent questioning of the significance of foreignness in the context of a Western city in the last two centuries and of the nature of migrant experience. For several decades, Bretons were urban villagers adapting as best as they could to a foreign environment. Their path to the city was fraught with dangers and hardships and met with prejudice and sometimes downright hostility. They used resources and strategies very similar to those any migrant group in a large Western city has used over the last two centuries. They also benefited from the presence of a sizable elite who could finance social activities and actively defend the standing of the group in the city. From the 1890s on especially, their French citizenship was an asset that incorporated socioeconomic rights favoring the social mobility of children and improving the conditions of entrance into the Paris job market of newcomers, who by the interwar years spoke French due to the development of free edu-

cation. The meaning and socioeconomic impact of citizenship on the migrant experience was thus largely dependent on time, which is clear from available data. This adds new depth to classical discussions of adaptation to the city and assimilation and therefore makes the book well worth a read.

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