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Charlotte Ann Legg’s study of the colonial press in Algeria during the late Second Empire and early Third Republic shows how newspapers provided a forum for European settlers to assert an identity distinctive for its ambivalent attitudes about Algeria’s relationship with France, and about colonial Algeria’s relationship with other settler societies. This ambivalence produced a “new white race,” a phrase coined in 1870 by René Ricoux, a demographer for the Algerian colonial government (p. 13). This meant a population prizeing the hypermasculinity of “Latin” settlers from France, Spain, and Italy—more hardy, because of their frontier experience, than Europeans in Europe; craving respect, but not independence, from the metropole; and denying space in the public sphere to women, and, with some exceptions, Muslims and Jews. Thus the book, with its survey of various newspapers, effectively interrogates David Prochaska’s argument about rigid racial organization in the settler-colonial city of Bône, showing that construction of the settler “race” was episodic and nonlinear.[1]

Chapter 1 of *The New White Race* lays out the overall argument indicated above, while showing instances where women, Jews, and Muslims “made incursions into the colonial press” to articulate how they each imagined a more inclusive Algerian community (p. 60). The chapter describes the fascinating, competing discourses of real Muslim journalists who, assisted by European patrons, published calls for colonial reform, and French writers who, using Arab pseudonyms, wrote stories both affirming and attacking French authority. The latter genre was a part of long tradition of Euro-Americans adopting oriental voices to write from “behind the veil” in order to eroticize the Muslim world, or, alternatively, to disguise criticism of a “barbaric” Western institution.

Chapters 2 and 3 focus on particular events that prompted settler journalists to reimagine French Algeria, exploring how the colonial public sphere took shape partly through exercises in excluding Muslim and Jewish peoples from it. Describing reactions to visits by Napoleon III in 1865 and President Emile Loubet in 1903, chapter 2 shows how the press framed the visits of French leaders as occasions for settlers, as adult “children,” to welcome their “political fathers” to their new home in hopes of receiving a blessing (p. 70). Both occasions proved frustrating, however. In staged ceremonies Napoleon treated European (“white”) and Arab children with the same benevolence, rather than differentiating between “civ-
ilized” whites and “savage” natives. And Loubet’s visit was overshadowed by the metropolitan press’s accusations of settler cruelty toward natives as the cause of a 1901 attack by Muslims on the settlement of Margueritte. Loubet’s visit also exposed tension among Muslim journalists: the El Misbah newspaper asserted that the Algerian “family” should acknowledge compliant Muslims as diverse siblings, while El Hack emphasized that Arabs in the colony were ostracized orphans.

Chapter 3 then studies the “Antijuif movement”—anti-Jewish riots—that peaked during the Dreyfus Affair of 1894-1906 (p. 109). Initially, settler antisemites invited male and female Muslims to join efforts to overturn the 1870 Cremieux Decree, to boycott Jewish products, and even to denounce the discriminatory indigénat legal code. Mapping in Algeria the findings of Christopher Forth about the Dreyfus Affair’s exposure of a “crisis of French manhood,” Legg emphasizes newspapers’ caricature of Jews as the antithesis of hypermasculine pioneer settlers—lazy, wealthy, and conniving.[2] But when metropolitan legislators denounced Antijuif violence as a threat to the French race, French, Italian, and Spanish settlers rallied together, reasserted anti-Muslim boundaries, and embraced economist Paul Leroy-Beaulieu’s vision of an Algerian “neo-Latin people,” a more distinctive multicultural, racialized community than present a generation earlier (p. 145).

Chapters 4 and 5, which emphasize the settler press’s transnational perspective available through extension of global communication networks, further show the discourse of an imagined, ideal “neo-Latin race,” the phrase of the newspaper L’Union latine (p. 221). In an intriguing insight in chapter 5, Legg suggests that, to an extent, the borders of this constructed “race” were porous before World War I. Arab and Jewish journalists joined European ideologues in invoking the French Revolution’s legacies of liberty, equality, and fraternity: the centralized administration of President Félix Faure was coined, for example, “a new Bastille” (p. 165). And the colonial press even intermittently appraised American independence from the British Empire as a worthy goal of Algeria: to be “Algerian,” not “French,” threatened to confound metropolitan pronatalists’ vision, as Margaret Cook Andersen has shown, to regenerate France through colonial settlement.[3] But colonial violence around the turn of the twentieth century in the Philippines, Cuba, Eritrea, and South Africa dampened settlers’ appetite for autonomy. Perhaps as a unique aspect of Algeria at this time, The New White Race emphasizes settlers’ residual preference for “protection of the French state” (p. 179).

Notes


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