Arab France: Islam and the Making of Modern Europe, 1798-1831

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Coller’s study explores the Arab presence in France in the early 19th century. Through detailed attention to an eclectic source base, Coller reconstructs the movements, cultural expressions, and political possibilities of diverse communities of Egyptians who migrated to France after Napoleon’s attempted conquest of Egypt. Coller argues that the experiences and exchanges of these people helped make an ‘Arab France’, which he describes as a space of mobility, negotiation and shifting identities. While many recent studies of France and empire focus on the Maghreb region, Coller contributes a unique perspective on the cultural ties between France and Egypt. His study also complements existing scholarship on 20th- century immigration by detailing an earlier story of migration to France.

The first three chapters trace the movements of the people who travelled from Alexandria to France with the remnants of the Grande Armée in 1801. Rather than characterize this migration in homogeneous terms, Coller underscores the diversity of this group: many were Coptic Christians, others were Muslims. In addition to those from Egypt, some also came from Greece, Syria, the Sudan and Palestine. Their social origins were also diverse as many were soldiers, while others were domestic servants, merchants, and even priests. Although many did not practice Islam, they all came from the Arab world.

After leaving Egypt, most landed in Marseille, and were recognized as the ‘Egyptian refugees’ by the state. Many had also served France in Egypt and were therefore entitled to a pension. In order to qualify for state-allocated benefits, these recent migrants had to identify themselves as ‘Egyptian’ despite their diverse origins. Through his examination of pension records, Coller argues that a community or ‘Arab space’ began to take shape as recent migrants interacted with state institutions. From his examination of correspondence written in both French and Arabic, Coller also details the internal dynamics of this community.

Coller’s attention to the diversity within the Arab community is one of the strengths of this monograph. After landing in Marseille, many of these migrants made their way to Paris. Coller’s discussion of the Marseille and Paris ‘Egyptian’ communities underscores the sense of mobility and of the diverse networks of exchange that developed between these two cities, as well as between France and the Arab world. For example, Coller compares the Marseille Arab population, which arrived in a large convoy from Egypt, to the gradual accumulation of Arabs in Paris. The Marseille Arabs tended to settle together in neighborhoods and established comprehensive sub-economies, while the Paris Arabs were more scattered about the city and
therefore interacted more with other Parisians.

Coller also identifies many of the Paris Arabs in terms of an intellectual milieu of ‘Egypto-orientalists.’ His discussion of these intellectuals, their writings, as well as their exchanges with both French and Egyptian scholars forms the basis for the subsequent chapters of the book.

The chapter, ‘Policing orientalism,’ is where Coller most successfully articulates his notion of ‘Arab France’ as a dynamic space. Coller argues that after a decade in France, these Arab intellectuals had effectively become French. He discusses Orientalist debates about methods for studying the Arabic language and shows how Arab intellectuals carved a space for themselves as interpreters of the language and culture. He also shows how the political atmosphere in the final days of Napoleon’s rule placed constraints on what these ‘Egypto-orientalists’ could say. In particular, Coller examines orientalist debates about how Arabic should be taught, read, and understood. While many traditional French orientalists believed that Arabic was a dead yet sacred language that should be taught as such, several Arab intellectuals instead insisted on the importance of teaching Arabic as a living, spoken language. While traditional orientalists wanted to maintain Arabic in its classical form, the native Arabic speakers spoke of modernization.

Coller effectively demonstrates that these seemingly semantic debates about the future of Arabic had a deeper meaning and resonance beyond these orientalist milieus. In line with familiar arguments initially articulated by Edward Said, Coller shows how the dominant cultural elite in Paris contrasted the static nature of the Arabic language and decadence of the ‘orient,’ with the dynamism and progress of French civilization. In contrast, the Arab intellectuals in Paris emphasized the relationship between ‘Frenchmen and real Arabs in a reciprocal bond of respect that demanded communication and mutual knowledge’ (pp. 119). In other words, Arab intellectuals participated in Orientalist debates by offering a radical perspective on Arabic. In doing so, they also suggested the French and Arabic linguistic and cultural traditions were on equal footing.

In addition to Coller’s discussion of Arab intellectuals’ role in the cultural politics of the moment, he also underscores the fragility of their political situation. Coller describes how the very position of the Egyptian Arabs in France was tied to Napoleon. Their reason for being in France and for drawing state pensions was because of Napoleon’s failed efforts in Egypt. Some Egyptian former soldiers remained loyal to Napoleon, following him into exile, while others re-joined his army during the hundred days of his return to the continent. Other members of the Arab community sought to disassociate themselves from Napoleon by uttering strategic expressions of support for a constitutional monarchy. During the political turmoil of the hundred days and Napoleon’s final defeat at Waterloo, the Arab population was increasingly vulnerable. In 1815, many of the Marseille Arabs were massacred, targeted in a pogrom fueled by local anxieties about foreigners.

After Napoleon’s defeat and the return to a constitutional monarchy, Coller argues that ‘Arab France’ was unexpectedly realized during the period of the restoration. He describes how a return to universalist ideals of ‘civilization’ permitted geographical and Orientalist societies to flourish in which Parisian Arab intellectuals also participated. Through his attention to the published works of the most prominent of the Arab intellectuals, he also argues that ‘in this liberal cosmopolitan milieu, Arab intellectuals in Paris found their skills and contributions welcomed’ (pp. 181). These intellectuals also engaged with a convoy of Egyptian students who came to Paris at the behest of Muhammad ‘Ali. From these exchanges, Coller argues that Arab intellectuals in Paris began to identify themselves as both French and Arab. For Coller, an ‘Arab France’ emerged in these spaces of translation.

In addition to his discussion about Arab intellectuals in Paris, Coller also describes, somewhat less convincingly, how the massacre of the Marseille Arabs in 1815 created a greater solidarity among the recent migrants. While Coller can draw from a much broader source base in his examination of Arab intellectuals in Paris, he is limited, in his analysis of the massacre in Marseille, to one or two brief letters.

Coller describes the Parisian intellectual milieu in terms of a ‘cultural Arabism’ that focused on expressions
and interpretations of poetry, culture, and language (pp. 187). The final substantive chapter in the book focuses on the possibilities for a ‘politically’ Arab identity in France’ (pp. 190). Coller explores the potential political dimensions of an ‘Arab France’ through the figure of Joanny Pharaon. Pharaon was not just an active participant in the 1830 revolution, but he also wrote extensively on the political climate in both France and the ‘orient.’ For example, he was the first, according to Coller, to condemn the massacre of Arabs in Marseille in 1815. In 1829, a year before the overthrow of the French constitutional monarchy, he also published a text on the reforms in Turkey, praising the progressive efforts of the Muslim leader. For Coller, the figure of Pharaon is significant because of his ‘liberal critique of French absolutist rule’ as well as his refusal to ‘project despotism onto the figure of the “Oriental” ruler (pp. 191).

While Coller argues convincingly for a multiplicity of ‘Arab Frances’, he also asserts that Joanny Pharaon represented the first ‘truly French Arab’ because of his fluency in both languages, as well as his ability to traverse the cultural and political spaces of France and the Arab world (pp. 193). In line with the chronological sequencing of the book, Coller wants to be able to show a distinct moment when ‘Arab France’ crystallized. One of the strengths of the book, however, is precisely Coller’s attention to the dynamic, shifting identities of these migrants. Coller’s account of this diversity does more to complement existing literatures on identity and categories of belonging articulated by scholars like Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall. (1)

In keeping with the chronological arc of the book, Coller also describes the period between Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798 and the colonization of Algeria in 1830 as a moment of possibility in which ‘Arab France’ was momentarily realized, and then forgotten. The final chapter ‘The cathedral and the mosque’ discusses what Coller calls the ‘unmaking’ or ‘forgetting of Arab France’ with the invasion of Algeria. With this new, aggressive phase of imperialism, he argues that it was no longer possible to be both French and Arab. He also notes that many Arabs left Paris for new lives in Algeria, where they had more of a place.

While Coller’s compelling description of the making of an Arab France takes shape nicely throughout his chapters, the ‘unmaking’ of this space is less clear. Since Algeria – as has been much discussed – will become ‘part of France,’ could not the period after 1830 also be considered a new phase of ‘Arab France’? Mobility is central to Coller’s notion of community. Therefore, could not the movement of French Arabs to Algeria also characterize a new space of ‘Arab France’?

The trope of ‘unmaking’ or ‘forgetting’ is also tied to his discussion about the lack-of-a-trace of a record of Arabs in France. For example, in the chapter ‘Cosmopolitanism and confusion’, Coller begins by discussing the problem of writing a history about a group that left little trace of itself. He follows with a compelling discussion of visual sources that show seemingly ‘Arab’ figures as part of the landscape of everyday Parisian life. Aside from these fleeting glimpses that suggest an Arab presence in Paris, Coller argues that they ‘left nothing beyond a few scattered phrases, that might serve to record the memory of the shifts and transformations they had collectively lived’ (pp. 140). In the second half of this chapter, Coller transitions to close readings of the works of Arab intellectuals in Paris. He describes their works as ‘numerous, varied, and rich – a whole series of published books and pamphlets, in addition to unpublished sources in Arabic and French’ (pp. 159). Coller’s tendency to juxtapose the trope of ‘silence’ or the ‘lack-of-a-trace of Arabs in France’ alongside his examination of a seemingly rich array of sources begs further discussion.

While the title of Coller’s monograph suggests the importance of ‘Islam’ in the making of modern Europe, he is less clear about the actual role of Islam in his story. Many of the historical figures that Coller argues were part of the making of Arab France were Coptic Christians or other non-Muslims. Given that the terms ‘Arab’ and ‘Islam’ have become so conflated in today’s discourse, the fact that these categories were not stand-ins for each other in the early 19th century merits further exploration.

Through his close reading of visual sources, published works, and letters – in both French and Arabic – Coller situates the Arab community in France within networks between Paris and Marseille, as well as in relation to the larger Arab world. While the field of migration studies often focuses on the 20th century, his
study details an earlier history of migrants. Coller also contributes to the field of new imperial studies particularly the collection of work in *Tensions of Empire.*(2) Moreover, Coller’s study does not just focus on the dynamics of empire in-itself, but makes the experience of imperial migration central to his story. From the richness – and messiness – of these voices, Coller shows how questions about migration, race, and belonging have a deeper history in France.

**Notes**

2. *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World,* ed. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (Berkeley, CA, 1997). [Back to (2)]

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