

## Book Review

### **Culture et immigration: de la question sociale à l'enjeu politique, 1958–2007**

ANGÉLINE ESCAFRÉ-DUBLET

Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2014  
259 pp., €20.00, pbk, ISBN: 978-2-75-353267-0

One of the reasons that immigration has become such a prominent political issue in recent years is that it has become intimately tied up with complex—and contradictory—notions of culture. Sometimes, the question of how migrants transform national cultures can appear fairly benign, say, in the elevation of chicken tikka masala to one of Britain's favourite dishes. But at other times the rhetoric is one of fear—above all, a fear that immigrants might 'reject' the culture of their host country and turn into deviants, protestors or terrorists.

The problem is that 'culture' remains difficult to define: it can refer to the artistic products of immigrant and ethnic-minority communities, the cultural policies of the state, and ideas of immigrant cultural heritage. Surprisingly, this ambitious book attempts to tackle all three of these at once—and largely succeeds. Over the course of six chapters, Angéline Escafré-Dublet paints a comprehensive picture of the myriad ways in which immigrants harnessed their own culture through art, literature and theatre, and the ways in which the French state tried to engage immigrants culturally through television, sponsored

festivals and the distribution of grant monies.

The long chronological span—which begins with the collapse of the French empire in the 1950s and ends in the febrile political environment of the mid-1990s—allows the reader to draw out a number of suggestive conclusions. One of these is that culture has played a crucial role in immigrant political activism and identity formation since 1968. Even when the French state has shied away from the political implications of immigrant cultural production, immigrants themselves have usually understood the importance of culture as a way of expressing their memories and frustrations.

The book also helps us understand changing attitudes towards ideas of diversity and difference under the Fifth Republic, from the neo-colonial desire to 'assimilate' in the 1960s, to the *droit à la différence* multicultural moment of the 1980s. Most recently, the French state has elaborated a strong idea of 'integration' and Escafré-Dublet is surely right when she says that this is yet another attempt to 'fix the relationship between culture and immigration' (225), this time within a nostalgic neo-republican framework.

Lastly, the book makes a powerful case for placing French policies within a global context. The most explicitly comparative chapter—which looks at cultural policies towards immigrants in

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the United States and France—is the weakest of the book and sits awkwardly within an otherwise Francocentric narrative. But Escafré-Dublet’s strong archival work and wide reading ensures that she engages vigorously with non-French historiographies and ideas. For anyone interested in the fragmentary interaction between the French state and

its immigrant populations in the 1970s and 1980s, this book is a welcome addition to an otherwise rather slim reading list.

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