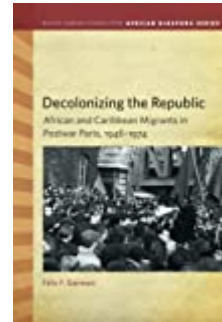


Félix F. Germain. *Decolonizing the Republic: African and Caribbean Migrants in Postwar Paris, 1946–1974.* East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2016. 256 pp. \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-61186-204-1.



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In 2005, a newly founded group of French activists of mainly Maghrebi origin called the Indigènes de la République published a manifesto calling to “decolonize the republic.”[1] Even though they did not quite define what “decolonizing the republic” meant, this idea gained a certain notoriety in France. It came to embody the state of a nascent political debate that tried to make sense of present-day race relations from the vantage point of colonial continuities. For scholars, this political climate has provided a powerful motivation to explore the gestation of postcolonial France. In this vein, Félix F. Germain seems to have borrowed from the Indigènes for the title of his monograph, *Decolonizing the Republic: African and Caribbean Migrants in Postwar Paris, 1946–1975*, the latest addition to a growing body of work about the way postcolonial immigration and immigrants have reshaped the French republican fabric. More specifically, Germain seeks to examine the growth of the Afro-Caribbean presence in Paris during the *Trente Glorieuses* (the Glorious Thirty, or the period of economic growth between 1945 and 1973) and with it the emergence of France’s postcolonial black identities.

Germain combines archival work with oral history interviews and analysis of popular culture. The result is a highly readable, multifaceted book that moves be-

tween historical and anthropological methodologies. He borrows from different disciplines to design an ambitious project: it is simultaneously a history of the creation of Europe’s largest black metropolis and a cultural analysis of the role of working-class immigrants from the Caribbean and sub-Saharan Africa in the articulation of postcolonial identities in France. Even the first of these two goals would be a substantial contribution to literature on both postcolonial immigration and the black diaspora in France. While works like the edited volume *Black France* or Pap Ndiaye’s *La condition noire* trace blackness in France with a broad brush, Germain’s local and temporal focus offers a valuable examination of a decisive moment in the development of Black Paris. Simultaneously, its examination of France’s black communities goes beyond Daniel Gordon’s excellent contribution to the understanding of the interrelations between left-wing activism and the politicization of immigrant communities in France.[2]

The book’s nine concise chapters follow various actors in an attempt to reconstruct the different facets of France’s black experience over a period of thirty years, while the last chapter hastily stretches the timeline to the present day. The chapters are written nearly independently from one another, as each one examines a dif-

ferent group through different clusters of sources. This is particularly visible in the first three chapters, which seek to provide the historical background for the book's main section. While chapter 1 outlines a history of Pan-African student activism in the 1950s through publications and oral history interviews, chapter 2 examines policies of the French state and the press towards African immigration while chapter 3 offers a cultural analysis of French documentaries about Africans. These rough transitions—from the voices and actions of immigrants to official policies to the analysis of cultural artifacts made by representatives of France's majority culture—mark the book. On the one hand, they offer the advantage of providing the reader with different perspectives. While chapter 1 introduces the roots of Pan-African activism in France before decolonization, the other two discuss the barriers of racism—both cultural and state-sanctioned—that largely defined the experiences of Afro-Caribbean immigrants to the French hexagon. On the other hand, however, the chapters sometimes struggle to coalesce into a single, more coherent voice.

Chapters 4 to 8 build the main body of the book's argument, as each focuses on the experiences of a specific group within 'Black Paris.' In each case, Africans and Antilleans arrived in a country that narrowly perceived them through the lens of colonial racism and only offered them a continuation of colonial hierarchies in terms of housing, employment, and social interactions. Simultaneously, African and Antillean communities developed different methods to overcome these barriers and articulate their identities in France. These, however, diverged from intellectual Pan-Africanism of the inter-war and immediate postwar period. Germain partly explains this fragmentation through the difference in status of Africans—who were citizens of newly independent countries—and Antilleans in possession of French citizenship. This difference influenced newcomers's expectations from the French Republic, their relations with republican institutions, and their opportunities for dissent. Here, the discussion of *foyers africains* as sites of politicization of African working-class communities in chapter 4 and the examination of experiences of Caribbean women in chapter 5 are extremely innovative and valuable. Moreover, the reflection over community organization and relations between black communities and the established French Left offered in chapter 7 is a substantial contribution to the field of immigration studies. In all these chapters, Germain includes different sources, whether interviews, an engagement with the press, or archival material. Even if the choice of sources can some-

times be debated, the consideration of such variety of voices imbues Germain's research with authority.

Chapter 8 ends in the early 1970s, before the realities of the oil crisis led to a change in French immigration policies and ended three decades of constant growth. Germain demonstrates that by the mid-1970s, Afro-Caribbean Paris was not 'black,' as communities had little to no contact with one another and—despite fears of the republican establishment—showed no signs of drifting towards Black Power movements that would emulate developments across the Atlantic. However, chapter 9, 'Music, le Pen and New Black Activism in Contemporary France, 1974-2005,' attempts to end on a different note by stretching the book's timeline into the 2000s to show that France's Afro-Caribbean community did eventually come together to invent a postcolonial black identity. The chapter seeks to do so through three seemingly unrelated sections: an analysis of how music, and especially a cross-culture of *zouk* and *mizik traditionnelle*, articulated a new kind of Afro-Antillean connection; a hasty outline of the rise of the Front national as a factor that made black communities in France aware of antiblack racism as a uniting force; and lastly, an examination of the founding of France's national black initiative, the Conseil représentatif des associations noires (CRAN), in 2005.

In this vein, chapter 9 epitomizes some of the methodological confusion that is otherwise visible throughout the work. Germain indeed warns the reader that his methodology 'may not fulfill the expectations of French historians, Caribbeanists or Africanists' (p. xxiv), but he never quite explains why. This exercise in signposting thus does not provide any clear rationale for the mixing and matching of voices and methods throughout the book. Even before chapter 9, the transitions between different sources and forms of analyses are often too rough and not properly articulated, while chapter 9's three focal points and the connections between them remain unclear. As the book seeks to examine immigration during the Trente Glorieuses, it may have been better to remain within its timeline and to use some of the chapter's reflections in a broader conclusion.

Notwithstanding, chapter 9 exposes an issue that historians are entitled to have with the book as a whole: it does not always acknowledge complexities demonstrated by existing research. The most apparent example is the introduction of the Front national's role in France, where Germain succumbs to a temptation of reducing the rise of the far Right over a period of twenty years to a side note,

a caricature of the inevitable result of French postcolonial racism. Yet, despite the—entirely understandable—normative desire not to engage too closely with the rise of Le Pen, its inclusion in the book should have invited a higher degree of engagement with some of the more recent works on the topic.[3] Similarly, though less glaringly, Germain often chooses to oversimplify the context in which his Afro-Caribbean protagonists act. While he takes time and effort to give a voice to his working-class black subjects, his analysis of metropolitan France—together with its nonblack immigrants—is reduced to very general remarks. Here, general immigration policy, political changes, the Algerian War of Independence, and May 1968 get stripped to marginal occurrences. This is problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, Afro-Caribbean immigration did not happen in a vacuum. It consisted in relatively small numbers compared to other European and colonial immigrants. As a result, Germain’s attempt to present French reactions to black immigration as somehow distinct raises unanswered questions about intersections between postcolonial immigration and other forms of immigration into France, both in terms of contacts between immigrant groups and immigration policies. Secondly, this simplification of French specificities allows Germain to transpose the Americanized notion of race and blackness to the French debate. The reader is under the constant impression that Germain is trying to analyze why black immigrants in France did not act more like African Americans rather than why they acted the way they did.

More importantly, this raises questions about Germain’s broader analysis. Notably, the book’s main argument seeks to show that Afro-Caribbean immigrants were met with colonial racism, while their presence and acts of resistance redefined their relationship with the republic and essentially “decolonized” 1970s France. Yet instead of questioning the complexities of racism and colonial continuities, Germain uses terms like “racist” and “colonial” so freely that they lose their meaning. To a large extent, this is an issue of language. It is doubtful whether the sources used for this book—especially interviews with African and Caribbean immigrants—contained words like “colonial relations” and “black bodies” that appear all too often to describe any kind of situation. Using the sources’ vocabulary would have helped give an insight into the protagonists’ experiences without the standardization of jargon. Simultaneously, more specific language would go a long way toward exploring what “colonial relations” actually mean. In this vein, Germain overstretches his analysis in one last point, most

notably his claim that diverse forms of working-class Afro-Antillean activism “decolonized” the republic (and just as in the *Indigènes de la République*, beyond a rallying cry, it never becomes clear what “decolonizing the republic” means). The work outlines the development of black communities in Paris through struggles with the harshness of immigration and the particularities of French racism. What it does not do, however, is show how acts of resistance by these new arrivals changed France’s “colonial mentalities,” often because the book does not have the scope to examine changes in nonblack France.

Nonetheless, even if the book does not always deliver on all its promises, it is still a fresh, worthwhile piece of research that uncovers many different layers in the emergence of “Black Paris.” Its main strength lies with the multitude of stories it tells, the various sources it incorporates, and the many different voices it covers. Germain succeeds in combining interviews with important members of France’s Afro-Caribbean intelligentsia with less privileged actors. He brings together stories as diverse as the trajectory of the internationally acclaimed novelist Maryse Condé, the foundation of the vocational school for Caribbean women in Crouy-sur-Ourcq, and the struggles of African workers in foyers. In so doing, Germain highlights the sheer heterogeneity of Afro-Caribbean communities and actors in Paris during the Trente Glorieuses. This not only offers various inroads into the lived experiences of Afro-Caribbean individuals in Paris, but the history that emerges provides an important alternative to other histories of the period. Notably, Germain’s protagonists engage with the French Republic on their own terms. The book’s focus on their reactions to political developments, and May 1968 in particular, offers a refreshing alternative timeline that does not follow the usual French chronology.

Ultimately, *Decolonizing the Republic* is a welcome contribution to the French intersection between immigration studies and African diaspora studies, as it is the first work to examine the emergence of Europe’s largest “chocolate region” (p. xxiv) in detail. Even with its blank spots, the book offers a fascinating insight into the specificities of Afro-Caribbean immigration to France and provides a well-needed corrective to a field that has not given enough attention to the process in which Black Paris had come into being.

Notes

[1]. For the *Indigènes*’ manifesto, see: <http://indigenes-republique.fr/le->

p-i-r/appe1-des-indigenes-de-la-republique/ (last accessed January 8, 2017). For research about the group, see J  my Robine, "Les indig  nes de la R  publique : nation et question postcoloniale, Territoires des enfants de l'immigration et rivalit   de pouvoir," *H  rodote* 1, no. 120 (2006): 118-148; and Itay Lotem, "Anti-Racist Activism and the Memory of Colonialism: Race as Republican Critique after 2005," *Modern and Contemporary France* 24, no. 3 (2016): 283-298.

[2]. Trica Keaton, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, and

Tyler Stovall, eds., *Black France/France Noire: The History and Politics of Blackness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Pap Ndiaye, *La Condition noire: Essai sur une minorit   fran  saise* (Paris: Calmann-L  vy, 2008); and Daniel Gordon, *Immigrants and Intellectuals: May '68 and the Rise of Anti-racism in France* (Pontypool: Merlin Press, 2012).

[3]. For the newest and most comprehensive research, see Dominique Albertini and David Doucet, *Histoire du Front national* (Paris: Broch  , 2013).

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