Anyone who has consulted newspapers in their archival research on French North Africa will know first-hand the daunting task of reading through seemingly endless reams of paper or worse, microfilm; it is not for the faint-hearted. Charlotte Ann Legg’s recent book is thus a commendable feat. While the research is thorough, Legg’s ability to synthesize and organize the variety and range of political views is even more remarkable. As Legg shows, the “news” was not just about reportage. Journalists were not reporters, but opinion makers of the day. The significance of such work will not be lost on anyone witnessing the impact of mass media on popular opinion today. In this book, Legg argues that newspapers, whatever their political color might be, were the primary media through which French Algeria’s mainly European, but also Jewish and a small number of Muslim readers, conceived of their respective relationships with one another, as well as with France and the wider imperial world. Legg’s argument is bold. In her account, journalists, who were mainly European, but also Jewish and Muslim North Africans, and each of whom had vastly different political views from one group to another with diverse perspective within each group, imagined a settler colonial and imperial world that ultimately “transform[ed] the nature of empire” (1). Legg shows great sensitivity in her analysis, as she uses more modest phrases along the way, such as “helped shape” and “contribute to the reimagination of,” relaying the complex and gradated impact that the press had on the evolution of settler colonial perspectives in the decades leading up to World War I (229).

Dissatisfied with recent binary depictions of French Algeria as a world divided between European colonists and colonized subjects by historians, Legg draws on the settler colonial theory proposed by historian Lorenzo Veracini and his tripartite analysis of the settler colonial system’s dynamic relations between European settlers, the “indigenous others,” and not least, the metropole. For Legg, newspapers were a potent instrument wielded by journalists in order to give clear expressions to these respective positions and were consequently an epistemic filter and public forum for their readers. Legg thus views newspapers as an immediate window onto the popular consciousness in French Algeria. More so than any other form of written text in the settler colony, printed newspapers remained an integral part of everyday conversation for their consumers, and as such, solidified opinions, fomented excitement, and even inspired and stirred up political reactions. Legg also skillfully lifts out the processes by which “news,” with its constant presence and repetition, diffused and popularized ideas about race, civilization, and progress that were first conceived and debated among the educated elite. Medical, demographic, or legislative thinking might have remained confined to debates among experts had it not been for journalists who were keen to popularize and make public such ideas, and always through racial and gendered language (20). As Legg shows, journalists were the

---

1 See the introduction to Lorenzo Veracini’s *Settler Colonialism, A Theoretical Overview* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
gatekeepers, pundits, and opinion makers who built up images of the colony in ways that made them the self-designated “guarantors of progress” in the settler colony.

As the book’s title suggests, the key themes that drove the evolution of settler colonial thinking and journalism during these decades were centered around the notion of “a new white race born” of a Latin and Mediterranean heritage (18). Jewish journalists formed their own press, while Muslim journalists, who were unsurprisingly excluded from joining their European counterparts in an active press culture, nevertheless attempted to print their own views about the settler colony, and interestingly to endorse French principles of equality. Legg gives voice to these marginalized groups, and shows how Muslim journalists, prior to the nationalist movement, were deeply affected by French ideas and principles even as they faced racism and oppression. The book as a whole allows us to better understand the way race was understood by the popular classes in French Algeria prior to World War I. Race was not a function of skin color, but an amalgamation of qualities, which a diverse community of Europeans made up of French, Spanish, Italian and Maltese migrants, shared in shaping into a Latin and Mediterranean identity. Legg’s use of Veracini’s settler colonial theory works well here as she shows how actively newspapers cleaved to an otherwise undifferentiated notion of whiteness to express their diversity as settlers of multinational origins, at times French or at times distinctly Algerian.

The chapters are divided along themes that were the most important to the European journalists from 1860 to 1914. And while Jewish and Muslim press accounts are skillfully analyzed within each chapter, Legg gives prominence to the European journalistic voices, for it is they who most benefited from the press, and who most actively participated in creating a new racial and gendered identity for themselves and in a variety of guises. Chapter 1 opens with a key quotation, which alludes to the European settler colonial conception of the press as a measure of development and civilization. As Legg shows, colonial journalists, whatever their political leanings, saw a linear progression from their work in the press to the making of colonial policy for Algeria as a whole: “the press forms public opinion; public opinion forms the legislator; the legislator forms the law,” as one Franco-Spanish journalist wrote (19).

Journalistic writing was profoundly gendered, and idealized the model settler at every turn. Manliness and youth were key tropes for articulating the meaning of civilization and progress while women were relegated to supportive roles in domestic and professional settings. Muslim Algerians, meanwhile, were always deemed inferior when measured against standards of European masculinity. The racialization of Muslim Algerians featured prominently in the press also whenever it served European interests, as seen in the propagation of the Kabyle myth favoring Berbers over Arabs, an idea first put forth by ethnographers who were affiliated with the Arab bureaus. When Arab valiance was mentioned, it was meant to denigrate Jews at a time when metropolitan policy sought to assimilate Jews into the French body politic.

Chapter 2 explains European colonial expressions of Algeria’s relationship to the metropole, and is centered on the imaginary of a family romance, which promoted the colonists’ doubled role as offspring to the

---


3 See Patricia Lorcin’s discussion of the Arab Bureaus and the making of the Kabyle myth about the “good” Kabyle and “bad” Arab in Imperial Identities.
imperial center and their superior position as virile and virtuous pioneers within the colony. Journalists did not simply denigrate Muslims and raise up the Europeans for the sake of entertaining readers. There was a clear and eminent objective, which was to engage with the metropolitan government—the Second Empire (1851-1870) in this case—and to challenge and overturn the metropolitan imperial conception of Algeria as an Arab kingdom. Journalists carefully couched their views with deference to the empire while positing an alternative vision in which civilians, who were the real builders of progress rather than the military, would take charge, and where Muslims and Arab resistors would remain squarely outside the polity of a French Algeria.

Again, Legg emphasizes the variety of voices within the European community, including some that contemplated settler autonomy. First and foremost, however, the emphasis was on the “progress” made in the colony, which was always attended by fears of the Arab menace and the threat this posed to European civilization. Gendered expressions abounded, as colonists depicted Algeria as a dutiful virtuous daughter to an endearing paternal empire so as to draw the image of a close-knit family whose ties might be cut by the dangers stemming from the Jewish and Muslim existence. Here, Legg shows that Muslim journalists, too, expressed aspirations to join in the community on equal terms, demonstrating the persistence of pre-nationalist conceptions of imperial belonging.

Chapter 3 studies the Antijuif movement in journalism, a largely consensual challenge to metropolitan attempts at Jewish assimilation. Here, journalism churned out articles which continually emphasized the Jewish threat to settler colonial supremacy and stability that took a strong line against the Crémieux Decree of 1870, which had conferred French citizenship on Algerian Jews. Again, the language was deliberate and studied, never simply a description for the purpose of informing, but always politically purposeful, with the clear intent to contest the metropolitan assumption that Jews would be French. A racially charged and gendered language was used to draw a clear contrast between the virtuous European and the corrupt Jews whose vices threatened the very survival of the European community. Bacterial metaphors and the “animalizing” of the Jews were reminders that Algeria was an epicenter of antisemitism, no less virulent than that of the Nazi Germany in the 1930s (43, 65, 99, 123, 281).

It is, however, chapters 4 and 5 that bring out Legg’s most innovative research and the largely unstudied dimension of French Algeria’s journalism. Chapter 4 speaks to the Europeans’ perspective on the world and their place within it. Legg argues that the telegraph, for example, often hailed as the most advanced technology in the colonies did not bring the metropole closer to the French in Algeria. The diminished coverage of the metropole in fact had the opposite effect. Meanwhile, places such as South Africa, New Zealand, and the United States were the ones that captured the Europeans’ imagination. Alternately, settlers looked inward, increasingly conscious of Algeria’s internal diversity in terms of economic needs, productivity, progress, and politics. Legg sheds light on individual settlers whose interests became more locally focused, and consequently distanced, from metropolitan connections. Questions about how to associate Algeria with metropolitan France became more complex for settlers than has been previously imagined, and French republican values only served to implant ideas about a new and distinctive Algerian identity and polity, according to Legg. International events received attention also, with such events as the 1899 Boer victory against the British instilling in the minds of journalists and news readers fresh thinking about the roads taken by settlers against the imperial center. Likewise, various anti-imperial victories in Cuba, Eritrea, and the Philippines reinforced journalistic commitments to a “Latin solidarity” while raising awareness of a Germano-Saxon aggression against Latin solidarity (175).

Chapter 5 brings our attention to the multilingual condition of settler press culture in French Algeria. While historians are fully aware of the diverse ethno-linguistic backgrounds of settlers and the uneven usages of

---

French, Spanish, Italian, and Arabic in French Algeria, not many studies exist in relation to the ways in which settlers dealt with and reconciled this diversity. Here, Legg explains that settlers actively pursued multilingual publications with the aim of conditioning French Algeria’s culture as adhering to a Latin diversity. In essence, *Latinité* itself was conceived as a multi-cultural and multi-national concept, and French Algeria a multi-lingual entity. “Language politics,” were key, as Legg argues, as journalists instrumentalized the various European languages in their representation of a “transnational Latin civilization” that remained distinct from a homogeneous national French identity (186). Bilingual and trilingual publications were widely circulated prior to World War I to demonstrate that French citizens in Algeria, while sharing a legal status, nevertheless were cognizant of the local diversity that could coexist in a Latin-based “diversity in unity.” (188, 205). While all of this would ended when World War I erupted, as Legg argues, the consciousness of a multilingual and multicultural Algeria left definitive traces in the post-World War I imaginary.

Legg concludes that French Algeria from 1860 to 1914 was a period rich with cultural experimentation which contributed to the emboldened sense of a Latin solidarity among European migrants and settlers. Journalists were the vanguard of a society that sensed its novelty and colonial ascent, not unlike the American colonists, though Legg herself does not argue for analogies. This work defies any attempt to reduce European society in Algeria to one of a submissive and dependent settler community seeking approval from the metropole. Far from it, the decades before World War I saw the French in Algeria actively promoting difference, and debating the very terms by which they saw themselves as a part of greater France, if at all, and as part of a larger inter-imperial network. Legg also warns against hasty arguments about Algeria’s colonial stability. Europeans were always and ever mindful of the precarity of their existence, not least because they were witness to colonial uprisings elsewhere in the nineteenth century. Legg’s work is foundational for anyone trying to understand the *pieds noirs* and their persistent argument about the poor understanding that metropolitan had of their North African counterparts and their distinct ways of life, even as they insisted upon their French status and belonging. This is a must-read for anyone who wishes to understand the true nature of French Algeria’s European society, the making of a French Algerian culture, and the historical legacy of a settler colony that pushed the boundaries of what it meant to be French beyond the metropole in the colonial period.

**Sung Eun Choi** is Associate Professor in History at Bentley University in Waltham, MA. She is the author of *The French of Algeria and Decolonization: Bringing the Settler Colony Home* (Palgrave, 2016).

---