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978-1-107-07305-0 - Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism

Michael Goebel

Excerpt

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Introduction

Within a few years after the end of the Great War, a tiny stretch around the Place d'Italie in Paris housed two men who later made twentieth-century history. The famous Vietnamese revolutionary Ho Chi Minh, then known as Nguyen Ai Quoc (“Nguyen the Patriot”), lived at number 6 Villa des Gobelins from 1919 to 1921. As he moved across town to take up a job as a photo retoucher in the seventeenth *arrondissement*, the future Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai set up camp a mere thousand feet away on the other side of the Place d'Italie, at number 17 rue Godefroy (see figure 1). Both Ho and Zhou ran globe-spanning political networks out of their small Parisian apartments, where revolutionaries including the 19-year-old Deng Xiaoping came and went on a daily basis. Biographers of both Ho and Zhou have since taken for granted that the two met in Paris.¹ Even if hard evidence for this particular encounter is flimsy, the two did mingle in an extraordinarily cosmopolitan scene. Interwar Paris teemed with “seeking wandering ones [...] from all the world,” as the African American poet Langston Hughes recalled later. Providing a window on to that world, the city of lights helped them discover themselves, as the later Senegalese President Léopold Sédar Senghor remembered about “the spirit of Paris.”² In the process, so goes the story told in this book, the seeking wandering ones, from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, chalked out a new post-imperial world order that later took on the contours of the “Third World” or the “Global South.”

In retelling this story, I am not the first to note the exhilarating cosmopolitanism of Paris’s intellectual life, nor the city’s role as one of the world’s

¹ E.g. Wilson, *Chou*, 69; Gao Wenqian, *Zhou Enlai*, 45; Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh*, 32, and Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping*, 270. The best biography of Ho’s early years (Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh*, 36) is more cautious – with good reason, since Ho moved to the seventeenth *arrondissement* in July 1921 (governor-general of Indochina to CAI chief, December 13, 1921, CAOM, 1SLOTFOM11), before Zhou arrived on the scene around the Place d'Italie in 1922 (Nie Rongzhen, *Inside the Red Star*, 23).

² Hughes, *Collected Works*, vol. 9, 31; Senghor, *Négritude et humanisme*, vol. 1, 313.

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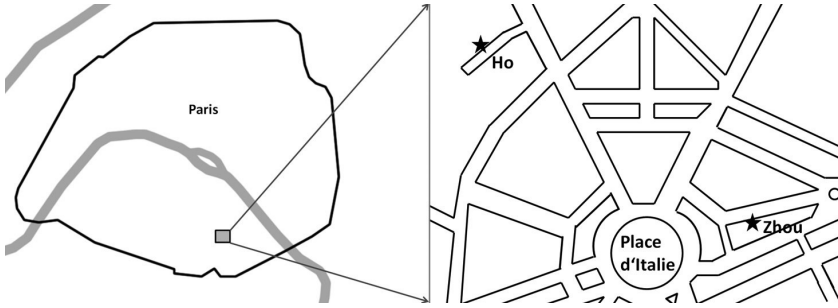
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FIGURE 1. Addresses of Ho Chi Minh and Zhou Enlai in Paris, 1919–24.

foremost marketplaces for the exchange of ideas in the 1920s and 1930s. Celebrated in countless books and movies of “Gay Paree” as a playground of the globe’s vanguardist *bohèmes*, the city was also the site of the political formation of dozens of individuals from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, who after World War II came to play outstanding roles in their home countries’ political and intellectual lives. The list of names of these Third World leaders *avant la lettre* who temporarily called the French capital their home during the interwar years is legion: Besides Ho, Zhou, and Senghor, they include a broad range of the postcolonial elite of North African countries as well as other French colonies and protectorates, a good part of the upper echelons of the Chinese Communist Party, Indian revolutionaries, and numerous Latin American and Caribbean intellectuals. Those who recorded their experience rarely failed to remember, as the Jamaican writer Claude McKay did in 1937, the “cosmopolitan expatriates,” who all “mixed tolerantly and congenially together.”³

That this cosmopolitan mixing, in the light of the global geopolitics of the interwar years, might unleash political fallout did not go unnoticed at the time. During a month-long stopover in 1927 on his way from a Comintern-financed anti-imperialist congress in Brussels to his native Massachusetts, the Harvard-educated civil-rights advocate Roger Nash Baldwin praised Paris as “the capital of the men without a country.” Home to many thousands of Central and East European exiles, Italian anti-fascists, and expatriates from across the Americas, Paris was also

the headquarters of agitation of the French colonial peoples, where black, brown and yellow men can argue their case for freedom from France as the equals of other French citizens without the slightest fear of racial discrimination. The Chinese Kuomintang makes Paris its center. The new League against Imperialism, uniting all oppressed colonial peoples with the workers of Europe, picked Paris for its headquarters [. . .]. Nothing in the life of our many foreign colonies in New York or Chicago touches

³ McKay, *A Long Way*, 243.

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it for vitality. Our colonies of aliens are with us for work and money. The Paris colonies are there for political agitation, for comradeship in exile.

Lumping together all sorts of migrants, Baldwin concluded that “never in all history have so many of them from so many lands found refuge in one place.” Although Berlin might have offered greater political freedoms by the 1920s, according to Baldwin, there “the cosmopolitanism of Paris [was] lacking. [...] They’d rather risk the French police for the French spirit.”⁴

This study explores the politics of non-Europeans in interwar Paris in order to arrive at a broader argument about post-World War II decolonization and the origins of an anti-imperialist notion of a united Third World. I take the example of Paris to contend the following: Anti-imperial nationalism in what came to be known as the Third World was neither a European transplant nor a natural and deep-rooted homespun reaction against foreign meddling. Rather, it was through contact, networks, and connectivity that later Third World nationalists dreamed up a post-imperial world order. This overriding thesis builds on two subordinate points. First, transnational and transregional networks and intellectual exchange centered in interwar Paris elucidated the systemic global connections of imperialism and opened new horizons. The French capital functioned as a vantage point that clarified the contours of a global system. The types of exchange that drove this intellectual awakening were at least twofold: exchange between the metropole and any given place beyond Europe; and between people from the non-European world. Second, in order to truly understand how these transfers worked, we need to attend to the social bedrock of ideas. That is, we must grant more attention to the everyday experiences of non-Europeans in the metropole. In contrast to the existing historiography on the subject matter, this book is therefore much more of a social history of migration than an intellectual history of anti-imperialism. The latter, in my view, is more firmly rooted in the former than is commonly acknowledged.

To underline this argument, this book opens with a local social history of non-European immigration so as to finally disembark in an intellectual history of anti-imperial nationalism. The first chapters chart the rise of this nationalism as grounded in a world of ethnically, nationally, or regionally bounded student clubs, rights advocacy groups, and mutual aid associations, all replete with their corresponding periodicals or pamphlets – in other words, institutions that are commonplace in immigrant societies. These associations, I argue, formed the substratum on which subsequently larger anti-imperialist movements were often built. Many later leaders first rose to prominence as the spokespersons of such local clubs, which pursued the goals of migrant communities. As a result, the study therefore treats its protagonists first and foremost as migrants – not, as has been customary,

⁴ Baldwin, “The Capital of the Men,” 460 and 465.

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as intellectuals. Drawing the reader away from clichés of interwar Paris as an insouciant playground of bohemians, the book delineates the everyday lives of non-Europeans in the French capital as a motor behind the rise of anti-imperialist politics.

Migration rendered injustices, inequalities, and the juridical pitfalls of colonialism much more palpable. Colonial subjects witnessed at first hand the discrepancy between universalist republican ideals and discriminatory practices, kindling skepticism about France's "civilizing mission." Among Latin Americans and Chinese, too, their situation as exiles brought the geopolitical predicaments and cultural specificities of their homelands into sharper relief. As all these groups found a more permissive climate for their activities in Paris than in their home countries, immigrant associations became vehicles for spreading political messages. But they still garnered support from advocating migrant rights, such as equal pay, freedom of movement, or legal securities. The political careers of future leaders such as Zhou Enlai, Ho Chi Minh, or the founding father of Algerian nationalism, Messali Hadj, arguably began as spokesmen of their respective communities in interwar Paris. Borrowing a term coined by Rogers Brubaker, I therefore treat these figures as "ethno-political entrepreneurs," who "live 'off' as well as 'for' ethnicity" and who, "by *invoking* [ethnic] groups, [...] seek to *evoke* them, summon them, call them into being."⁵

This migratory backdrop explains one of this volume's key findings, namely that many of those who later took leading roles in the political and intellectual lives of their home countries became politicized during their stay in imperial centers, not before. This finding suggests that there was something inherent in the very process of migration that piqued new ways of seeing the imperial order. The Martinican scholar Paulette Nardal tried to encapsulate the matter, acutely felt by contemporaries in the interwar years, when she wrote about the "awakening of race consciousness among black students" in the Parisian *Revue du Monde Noir* in 1932: "The uprooting that [certain Antilleans] felt in the metropole, where the black has not always enjoyed the esteem that one appeared to award him in the wake of the Colonial Exposition [of 1931], bestowed on them [...] a Negro soul."⁶ Regardless of how elusive the notion of a "Negro soul" may have been, similar statements of how the process of migration kindled new worldviews were legion, just like Senghor, as cited in the epigraph above, later claimed to have found himself in Paris. Across this book they will be heard from Chinese worker-students, Algerian workers as much as Guatemalan journalists.

⁵ Brubaker, "Ethnicity without Groups," 166.

⁶ Paulette Nardal, "Éveil de la conscience de race chez les étudiants noirs," *Revue du Monde Noir*, no. 6, April 1932, 27.

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This study, then, aims to restore the social to what is now being called “global intellectual history.”⁷ In looking at the intricacies of “everyday ethnicity” it follows the instincts, if not always the methods, of what in Germany was once called *Alltagsgeschichte*, the history of everyday life. Apart from foregrounding social issues such as the everyday workings of community formation through food or music and the importance of sexual relations as well as work and its pay, this also means granting more attention to questions of space and place than is customary among intellectual or political historians. Paris as a whole, but also the city’s specific urban landscape and the spatial circuits in which people like Ho Chi Minh moved, interlaced with community formation and intellectual trajectories. In bringing such issues to the fore, I seek to heed Gregory Mann’s plea “that the specificities of particular *places* be brought to the fore, not only to ground research empirically but also to disaggregate and cast new light upon colonial and postcolonial circumstances.”⁸

By focusing on Paris as a hotbed of anti-imperialism with global reverberations I do not mean to downplay the homegrown roots of resistance to imperial encroachments and exploitation. An important caveat is therefore in order about the title of this book and the scope of its argument. Interwar Paris was not the first, nor only, contributor to the rise of Third World nationalism. Though a Parisian invention, the very term “Third World” pertains to the post-World War II era and it would be anachronistic to locate its emergence in an earlier period.⁹ Regardless of the term, it was not only, nor perhaps even primarily, people in the French capital who realized the pitfalls of imperialism. Whoever had undergone a stint in the harrowing prisons of French Indochina or forced labor recruitment in West Africa needed no further lessons to know that colonialism was a ferocious regime of oppression that had to be overcome.¹⁰ Outrage over the “unequal treaties” ran high in China and U.S. interventions in the Caribbean and Central America stoked resentment in those regions. Hence, the subtitle of this book is carefully chosen in that it does not read “interwar Paris as the only birthplace of third world nationalism,” but “interwar Paris *and* the *seeds* of third world nationalism.”

This is still to suggest that a remarkable number of the most strident and outstanding critics of imperialism raised their voice in places such as Paris. From there, imperialism no longer looked like a series of isolated injustices,

⁷ For an overview of the “field,” if it can be called that: Moyn and Sartori, *Global Intellectual History*.

⁸ Mann, “Locating Colonial Histories,” 410.

⁹ See generally Kalter, *Die Entdeckung*.

¹⁰ An excellent book on the prisons of colonial Indochina as an incubator of Vietnamese nationalism is Zinoman, *The Colonial Bastille*.

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but a larger system that had to be addressed as such. For French colonial subjects, bound through one imperial polity, claims typically related simultaneously to homeland *and* metropole. And Paris facilitated the creation of a common anti-imperialist language, the basic precondition for any concerted action, which prepared the ground for the posterior simultaneity of decolonization. All of this explains why Paris was crucial not only as a hub from which ideas resonated more widely, but also a generator of new anti-imperialist narratives through exchange. The city was what Mary Louise Pratt has called a “contact zone,” that is “the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other.”¹¹ Because it denaturalized the imperial world order from the viewpoint of this book’s protagonists, this contact allowed for drafting an alternative post-imperial order.

Its lens on the social history of intersecting migrations in one particular place sets this book apart from much of the previous scholarship touching on the same topic. So far, the importance of Paris as a formative center of postcolonial elites in Africa and Asia has been approached chiefly from the angle of political and intellectual history. This bias is naturally strong in the biographies of prominent individuals such as Ho Chi Minh, Zhou Enlai, or Léopold Sédar Senghor. The social surroundings of their stays in Paris, in any event a passing moment in their longer trajectories, have typically remained opaque.¹² This concentration on political history is equally true for the small group of Chinese worker-students, many of whom later played a prominent role in Chinese communism.¹³ The very few studies that have dealt with several groups at once have placed their chief interest in the history of the French Left.¹⁴ The main reason for this focus on intellectual and political history is probably that, as Daniel Hémery found with regard to the roughly 5,000 Vietnamese in 1920s France, “it is easier to catch a glimpse of the political conflicts that shake up the migrants than to probe their deeper social life.”¹⁵

Apart from achieving such a deeper probing, this book also seeks to overcome the bilateralism that continues to be dominant in studies of this kind. Scholars interested in early twentieth-century non-European migration to France have usually focused on the two-way relationship between France and one particular “group,” such as “blacks,” Vietnamese students,

¹¹ Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 6.

¹² Useful biographies of these individuals are Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh*; Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh*; and Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh*; Wilson, *Chou, Lee, Zhou Enlai*; Barnouin and Yu Changgen, *Zhou Enlai*; and Gao Wenqian, *Zhou Enlai*; Davis, *Aimé Césaire*; and Fonkoua, *Aimé Césaire*; and Vaillant, *Black, French, and African*.

¹³ Levine, *The Found Generation*, and Wang, *Émigration et politique*.

¹⁴ Liauzu, *Aux origines* and Morin and Biondi, *Les anticolonialistes*.

¹⁵ Hémery, “Du patriotisme,” 46.

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Algerian workers, or Latin American expats.¹⁶ The institutional inertia generated by area studies, churning out specialists in one country or region, have conspired with postcolonial studies and the new imperial history – with their characteristic attention to the relationship between colonizer and colonized through methods derived from psychoanalysis, literary criticism, gender studies, and discourse analysis – to produce a vast body of scholarship on the relationship between metropole and *one* particular country or region. As Frederick Cooper has pointed out, “the trope of ‘otherness’ or ‘alterity’ has become a cliché in literary studies, problematic not just because of its increasing banality but because it discourages attention to non-dualistic forms of cross-cultural linkage.”¹⁷ One can admittedly uphold some of the arguments made in this study by looking only at the bilateral relationship between France and, say, Vietnam. But the “uprooting” that “certain Antilleans” felt in the metropole according to Nardal can hardly be explained without referring to their meeting of Africans. And black movements as a whole learned from and inspired other anti-imperialists. Hence, in looking at Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans together, this book heeds recent calls of going beyond the bilateral relationship between colonizers and colonized.

Dealing with non-Europeans from dissimilar backgrounds and looking at transfers between them does not mean to homogenize their experiences. Paris played very different roles for the development of anti-imperialist movements across the globe. And non-Europeans in interwar Paris belonged to starkly different echelons in France. The dividing lines between French citizens, colonial subjects, and foreigners were especially notable. By drawing out their implications, this book stresses the differences between formally colonial relations, on the one hand, and a merely asymmetric distribution of power, on the other. Being Algerian in interwar Paris was a wholly different experience from being Argentine. Unifying talk of a united front of anti-imperialism, which later recurred in buzzwords such as those of the Third World or more recently the Global South, should be met with a healthy dose of skepticism. Although Senegalese and Vietnamese may have felt that they had something in common as victims of French colonialism and, as a consequence, occasionally united in the same political groups for that reason, this was not true of the Chinese and the Latin Americans.

The inclusion of Latin Americans in this book is particularly exceptional. Socially and politically, Latin Americans were the odd ones out among

¹⁶ E.g. Dewitte, *Les mouvements nègres*; Boittin, *Colonial Metropolis*; McConnell, *Leftward Journey*; Stora, *Nationalistes algériens*; Bouguessa, *Aux sources*; Aissaoui, *Immigration and National Identity*; and Streckert, *Die Hauptstadt Lateinamerikas*.

¹⁷ Cooper, “Decolonizing Situations,” 60. Cooper’s own demand to treat colonies and metropole in a single “analytical field,” however, may have to take some of the blame for this unsatisfactory bilateralism: An oft-cited text to drive home that point is Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, “Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda,” in Cooper and Stoler, *Tensions of Empire*, 1–56.

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the anti-imperialists treated here. Richer than any other group, they came from sovereign countries that had mostly reached independence roughly one century earlier, and they had no qualms with European, but only with U.S., imperialism. Hailing from an urban elite that was culturally Europeanized, they interacted relatively little with natives from French colonies. And yet no single criterion suffices to set them apart from all other groups. Haitians, too, worried about North American, not French, imperialism. The Chinese, concerned with British and then Japanese imperialism, also came from a formally sovereign country, as did the considerable number of African Americans. Some lawyers from Martinique or traders from Egypt and the Levant were not necessarily less wealthy than Latin Americans. Looking not only at French colonial subjects, but also at the Chinese and the Latin Americans, therefore, serves to sensitize the historian to what is specific about a properly colonial relationship and what is indicative only of power asymmetries. Imperialism emerges from this as a much more variegated landscape of many shades of grey, not so much as clear-cut opposition between colonizer and colonized.

In seeking to bring together, in an empirical inquiry, world regions that are usually treated in isolation from one another, the following chapters also speak indirectly to debates about the reach and limits of postcolonial studies – and by extension, of colonial history and the very term colonialism. The 1990s saw an inspiring discussion about the relationship between postcolonial studies and Latin America. Historians of Latin America have, in Nicola Miller's words, been "chary both of the concept of post-colonialism itself, identifying a universalising impulse in it, and of its application to Latin America."¹⁸ Jorge Klor de Alva has been a strident critic of attempts to extend methodological lessons from, say, India to Latin America, pointing not only to the much earlier independence in the latter region, but also to long-standing cultural hybridization.¹⁹ Postcolonial historians mainly interested in Asia, on the other hand, have been peculiarly indifferent to the question of how places like Latin America may fit into the dichotomy between "the West" and "the rest."

Partly because of the inclusion of Chinese and Latin Americans, this book generally speaks of anti-imperialism rather than anticolonialism. Using the term imperialism seems more apposite in that it encompasses a broader range of political practices resting on global power asymmetries that compromised sovereignty without necessarily entailing formal colonization. The two terms of course were, and still are, often used almost interchangeably. However, as Jürgen Osterhammel has pointed out, imperialism tends to be more closely

¹⁸ Miller, "The Historiography," 203.

¹⁹ Jorge Klor de Alva, "The Postcolonization of the (Latin) American Experience: A Reconsideration of 'Colonialism,' 'Postcolonialism,' and 'Mestizaje,'" in Prakash, *After Colonialism*, 241–75.

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associated with the late nineteenth century and with the spread of capitalism, as opposed to Spain's early modern "colonialism" in the Americas, for instance.²⁰ Given the theoretical treatment that imperialism received from writers such as Hobson and Lenin, it was also the more political term, the one that had acquired more pejorative connotations, and the one more often used by Marxists in the early twentieth century. This study uses anti-imperialism not to point to the intrinsic connections between imperialism and capitalism, but rather to direct attention away from the binary between colonizer and colonized implied in the more reductive term of colonialism. This dredges up the patchwork character of international relations and of imperialism in the early twentieth century.

Whereas colonialism often proves too reductive a term, there is also the opposite problem of concepts that lose precision because they are too encompassing. This danger can befall "imperialism," but it is even more acute for the terms "global" and "globalization." While they have the advantage of pointing to the increase in connectivity that lay at the heart of early twentieth-century anti-imperialism, they run the risk of lumping together disparate phenomena under a single rubric that loses meaning as it is broadened. The paradigm of "globalization" in historical studies, according to Cooper's compelling critique, all too easily "ends up glossing over the mechanisms and limitations of spatial relationships."²¹ The degree and the ways in which the particular places on the world map from which the anti-imperialists treated in this volume hailed were connected to Paris differed widely. While the French capital was crucial for politics in Basse-Terre, it was much less so for Shanghai. While the latter was a city intimately connected to numerous other places, the interior of French Equatorial Africa was not, which accounts for the negligible numbers of colonial natives from these areas in France. For all the astonishing mobility of intellectuals and workers from outside of Europe who came to Paris, their connections with the French capital were of a highly uneven nature, just as the various types of imperialism they professed to oppose did not spread evenly across the globe.

My argument, therefore, is not that the protagonists of this book found themselves in the same situation vis-à-vis an overbearing imperial power. Rather, it was the common presence of people of very divergent provenances that accentuated the global inequalities of legal situations, social profiles, and political goals. Heightened awareness, often through comparisons and extrapolations from one case to another, helped enable new forms of thinking because interstices cracked open room for experimentation and alternative ideas, as well as practical leverages. Fissures, discrepancies, and disconnects made the imperial order appear less natural, thereby engendering a more profound questioning of the status quo of global power

²⁰ Osterhammel, *Kolonialismus*, 28.

²¹ Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, 92.

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relations. Exchange between the various groups treated in this study was therefore crucial; a finding that resembles what Elleke Boehmer has argued about intellectuals from the British Empire: “Anti-imperial and nationalist movements [...] found inspirational solidarity and instructive models in *one another’s* work and experience.” It was, in other words, not only contact “between the European colonial centre and its periphery” but also “*between* peripheries,” albeit via the metropole in my case, which drove ideological change.²² As James Spiegler once noted, “the chance [for Africans and Antilleans] for contacts with natives of other colonies” in interwar Paris drove the emergence of a French equivalent of the Harlem Renaissance.²³ Unevenness became productive.

In the 1920s, this chance of forging cross-ethnic and cross-regional contacts was greater in Paris than elsewhere. With a population of roughly 100,000 non-Europeans by 1930, the French capital accommodated more people from the Global South than any other contemporary city worldwide, except perhaps New York. As this book shows, exchange between activists from different world regions, moreover, concentrated in particular neighborhoods and meeting halls of the French capital, especially those of the Latin Quarter. The Parisian backdrop of this exchange colored the language of the anti-imperialists analyzed in this study. As Chapter 7 reveals, certain republican notions and the buzzwords of the French Revolution turned into standard staples of an anti-discriminatory rights discourse that stood at the heart of early twentieth-century anti-imperialisms in different world regions. To an extent, the Parisian background thus interacted with the globalization of republican notions about equal rights. In examining such transfers, this book takes seriously the demand, recently lodged by many historians, to grant attention to how the global is inscribed in the local, and vice versa.²⁴ It shows how exchange and contact between the metropole and non-European actors, as well as among the latter, played into the emergence of nationalisms at the “periphery,” which due to Paris’s role as a center of transnational exchange had wide-ranging repercussions.

By examining this republican component of anti-imperialist discourse, this book provides historical depth to current debates about immigration, ethnicity, and citizenship in France. Following Gérard Noiriel’s study of 1988, I argue that immigration is critical to any understanding of twentieth-century France.²⁵ The book also speaks to the often-drawn contrast between an allegedly race-blind, yet assimilationist, French republican model and the

²² Boehmer, *Empire*, 1–2. For a similar claim regarding the specific case of Egyptians and Indians in London, see Khan, *Egyptian-Indian Nationalist Collaboration*.

²³ Spiegler, “Aspects of Nationalist Thought,” 22. Another classic short account is Langley, “Pan-Africanism in Paris.”

²⁴ For a typical example, see A. G. Hopkins, “Introduction,” in Hopkins, *Global History*, 1–38.

²⁵ Noiriel, *Le creuset français*.