Cécile Vidal (ed.)


While France was considered a nation long before the eighteenth century, questions of sovereignty and citizenship were addressed in the context of the French Revolution that turned the idea of nation into a major political entity. Indeed, from the Middle Ages onward, the term was used to refer to diverse human groups and spaces in various parts of the empire. With the advent of the Republic, however, this fluid definition was reduced to a cohesive and homogenous political body—following new logics of territorial and racial inclusion/exclusion—that turned to the State for matters of rights to nationhood and citizenship. Although generally associated with the eighteenth-century change in French political debate, this shift was in fact also strongly determined by the colonial and multiethnic dynamics in non-metropolitan French territories. At this time, new meanings of nationhood were both articulated against and challenged by imperial rivalries, multidirectional migrations, development of colonial settlements, and expansion of slavery across the empire.

Using a diachronic approach to the study of French nationhood—from the sixteenth-century imperial expansion to the abolition of slavery in the mid-nineteenth century—this volume exposes the historically flexible correlations between nationhood and Frenchness. Challenging the traditional dichotomy between empire and nation, it investigates the role played by political and cultural interactions between the metropole and its colonies in the debate; and it links this revisionary examination to the importance of both multiethnic populations in African, Native American, and Indian Ocean colonies and the gradual racialization of national identity in the politicization process of the nation. National identity, as introduced by Cécile Vidal, serves as an analytical framework for the study of agencies and coercions that determined colonial politics of identity and differentiation. The eight essays thus explore the heterogeneous realities and geopolitical experiences that, across the empire, challenge nationhood as a given and passive form of belonging. Underlining the role of civil society as much as the State in this debate, they further demonstrate that, throughout history, Frenchness has been contested, challenged, and given diverse meanings, especially in the colonies, where questions of recognition and access to French status have constantly been raised. While these experiences of Frenchness incorporate both metropolitan and peripheral actors and positionalities, they reveal the fluidity of imperial cultural repertoires and redefine the colonial system less in terms of center and periphery than in terms of political rights, inclusion and exclusion.
The book thus examines how these nonmetropolitan relationships to Frenchness allow for a reevaluation of the changing definition of nation in eighteenth-century France, as a result of the simultaneous politicization of both nation and empire. Exploring themes such as language recognition (Paul Cohen), monarch and subject relationships (Thomas Wien), and revolts and insurrections (Vidal) in the colonies, the first part, “Nation and Empire,” addresses some of the difficulties linked to the establishment of royal power overseas and argues that imperial rivalries and changes of sovereignty framed the discussion on Frenchness and ethnicity in nonmetropolitan territories. In the second section, “Nation, Ethnicity and Race,” Gilles Havard, Guillaume Aubert, and John D. Garrigus explore the gradual racialization of Frenchness through a study of the internal relationships between Europeans and local populations in various colonies. In the final section, Vanessa Mongey and Sue Peabody focus on post-1804 colonies. They examine the more popular form of sovereignty that emerged from the dissociation between nationality and citizenship at the time of the French Revolution, and discuss whether nationality is ultimately an inalienable right or a privilege conferred by the State.

The well-documented discussions of nation, empire, and race engage remarkably with the historical and geopolitical complexities of the subject, while attempting to break free from a historiographical tradition that ignores the importance of colonial margins in the study of eighteenth-century discourse on nationhood. Subjecting Frenchness to decentralized cultural, political, and judicial interpretations, the essays demonstrate that there was hardly ever a consensus on what it means to be French. The geographically diverse areas discussed (France, Louisiana, the Mascarene Islands, West Africa, Canada, and the Caribbean) indeed represent the empire as a composite structure characterized by multipolar exchanges, negotiations, and relations, not only between the metropole and the colonies, but among the colonies themselves. Rightfully engaging with the beginning of the modern period, the essays also argue that, up to the nineteenth century, the correlation between nation, empire, and race constantly evolved. Yet, as Frederick Cooper’s afterword reminds us, the unstable nature of both nation and empire is still an unresolved question today. In the postcolonial debate about Frenchness in global context, what also strongly matters is not so much the old binary opposition between metropole and (ex-)colonies, but the multipolar links between nonhexagonal spaces and the complexity emerging from their differentiated experiences of Frenchness.

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