

■ Métissage in New France and Canada 1508 to 1886

Devrim Karahasan, *Métissage in New France and Canada 1508 to 1886* (European University Studies, Series 3; History and Allied Studies; Bd. 1063), Frankfurt am Main u. a. (Peter Lang) 2009, 313 S., 1 Abb., 58,80 €

As Europe and the Americas ponder the effects of colonialism and post-colonialism on modern world populations, and while rising nationalist groups strive to restore »pure« populations, Devrim Karahasan's work examines the history of the concept(s) of *métissage*, or the blending of French and Indian cultures, in North America. It provides a comprehensive study of *métissage* in New France and Canada, examining the role of history, the church and the various political states. While many specific studies of *métissage* exist that cover specific periods or populations within New France and Canada, Karahasan's sweeping work presents the only complete study that should help future scholars evaluate afresh the concepts of *métissage* and their effects on history and current politics.

Karahasan defines *métissage* in its different usages: as a legal category (when a person is half-French and half-native), a European concept (the idea that some Indians have adopted European culture), a theological definition (referring to Indians who convert to Catholicism) and a term of self-ascription (when modern peoples list themselves as Métis). By exploring these categories, Karahasan adds a layer of complexity that other authors do not. *Métissage* started as a way to describe the melding of French and native cultures, grew into an official church policy, evolved into a legal category for first the French and then the English/Canadian governments and finally, became embraced by individuals as their identity. This series of definitions immediately adds to the richness of the work. Whereas many scholars struggle to iden-

tify who is Métis, Karahasan sidesteps that problem by embracing definitions which range from those claimed to those ascribed. By doing so, she ably deconstructs how the French viewed the process of *métissage*, arguing that at times the church and political leaders embraced it while at other points, they rejected the notion because concepts of *métissage* undermined their need to make the colonies »truly« French. This approach also frees the author from having to find primary sources and recover the voices of those who considered themselves Métis, which, as she points out, would be problematic anyway since until the twentieth century *métissage* was more a Franco-European concept than it was an indigenous one. The downside to this approach lies in the fact that the first half of the book focuses entirely on the European side, and does not recount the life of the Métis population. Karahasan's objective here is to understand how the process of *métissage* began, continued and continually reinvented itself and its role in New France's and Canada's policies.

One of the strengths of the book lies in its inherent argument that the Indians changed Europe as much as Europe changed the Indians. It begins with the idea that *métissage* did not happen right away. The French and the Indians did not immediately bond to create a new population. Yet, European and Indian ideas about one another changed immediately. Karahasan points out that understanding those changes would better inform our conceptualization of the European origins of *métissage*. Using the French obsession of physically bringing Indians back to France as her starting point, the book begins with *métissage* in Europe rather than the emergence of a Métis population in the New World. This differs considerably from how most North American scholars approach the topic, that is beginning only when self-identified Métis enter the picture.

Karahasan further provides an overview of the various regions of New France and

their Métis populations, an aspect which one finds in existing works spread across numerous volumes but not located in one place. Through this comparison, Karahasan demonstrates that even different regions within New France treated *métissage* differently, as she brings together a variety of small studies of *métissage* in one place. Her use of various post-colonial theories of *métissage* frames these comparisons and her overviews of French colonial policy. As she leads the reader through the process of »Frenchification« to conversion, to assimilation, thence to mixed and non-mixed marriage, she intersperses theories about when a Métis population became politically distinct and when *métissage* shaped colonial society. At times, these discussions seem wedged in, but at their best, they raise interesting questions about what can be gleaned from looking at *métissage* as a political and social process rather than as solely a form of self-ascription.

After carefully establishing the process by which *métissage* grew and emerged in New France, the author finally examines the emergence of the Métis population. To some, this placing might appear to come late and to cut the Métis out of the discussion. But that would be an unfair criticism as few have provided such an in-depth overview of the process of the creation of the idea of *métissage* as has Karahasan. Rather than criticizing her approach, future scholars should use it to better understand the processes and the church and government policies that created and shaped the modern Métis population.

Karahasan's overview of the creation of *métissage* is a useful study owing to its precise and exacting use of primary sources, including Catholic Church documents, French government documents and diaries and letters from both French and Métis. Rather than simply quoting the Catholic Church's policy on mixed marriage and its offspring, the author employs quotes from priests and fur traders who add a layer of

complexity to how the policy actually worked *au façon du pays*. Using the early policies from the seventeenth and eighteenth century helps highlight nineteenth-century misinterpretations of *métissage*, when scientists attempted to neatly categorize races based on the Biblical timeline, ignoring mixed-race groups. Additionally, by combining aspects of policy and policy-making with eyewitness accounts, the book offers a corrective to the idea that *métissage* only emerged from the pure sexual desires of French men stranded in North America without French women (a conclusion to which students generally leap). By desexualizing the process, Karahasan introduces the idea of rational choice, both on the part of nations and on the part of individuals. This makes the book's last chapter on the current population of Métis in Canada all the more politically interesting for it explains self-ascription and heritage not in terms of a sexualized past but through choices made by ancestors as they tried to create a new nation state.

Karahasan succeeds in bringing together a vast amount of literature from both European theorists and North American scholars to provide a comprehensive view of *métissage* in North America. The book makes the case that *métissage* emerged not merely through casual contact, but as a result of attempts at »Frenchification« and conversion of the indigenous population to French Catholicism. This central argument, that *métissage* begins as a concept in Europe and practice in North America, makes the work of particular interest to the North American reader. By tracing the history of the concept and its antecedents, it provides a blueprint for future scholars to arrive at a better understanding of the ebb and flow of policies surrounding the Métis population in former French territories in North America. Additionally, it should urge scholars of the United States to examine more closely the effect of former French policies on the populations and regions that eventu-

ally became part of the United States. This book challenges American historians' myopia about the American past as anchored in the English tradition only.

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