

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Pascal Blanchard, Sandrine Lemaire, Nicolas Bancel, Dominic Richard David Thomas, eds. *Colonial Culture in France since the Revolution*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014. viii + 633 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-01045-2.

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*Colonial Culture in France since the Revolution* constitutes an ambitious project to bring the history and legacy of the French empire to the attention of a broad audience. The forty-seven chapters are arranged into five chronologically coherent sections: the creation of colonial culture during the “long” nineteenth century, its rise to hegemony during the immediate post-WWI period, its apogee during the 1930s, its transformation during the era of decolonization after 1945, and finally its long-term impact on contemporary French society. The book’s main goal is quite simple: to “provide ... an examination of the background of the foundations and therefore the legacies of colonial culture in France today” (p. 37) in order to “decolonize the [French] mind” (p. 40). In other words, the authors study the country’s past and present so as to offer a fundamental critique of today’s paternalistic and racist policies both at home, mainly towards immigrants, and abroad, specifically “French neocolonialist activities” (p. 40). *Colonial Culture in France* thus constitutes a scholarly project with an explicitly political agenda, in the best sense of the term, which seeks to change public discourse. With regard to this, the book must be considered a complete success.

Although few of the arguments made in *Colonial Culture in France* will surprise scholars familiar with such approaches, the authors’ skillful analyses of numerous aspects of France’s history constitute impressive demonstrations of the opportunities made available through postcolonial studies. While it certainly would not be necessary to read all 574 pages, interested scholars could select individual chapters in combination with the well-written introduction to learn more about those aspects most interesting to them. Between topics as diverse as economic history and cinematography, political violence and immigration, taste and collective memory,

this book offers interesting insights to readers from virtually every imaginable background.

Two aspects of *Colonial Culture in France* are especially commendable. First, rather than constituting an edited volume, it is a well-written book with multiple authors. With almost every chapter contributing directly to the main argument, it does not contain the cacophony of voices otherwise characteristic of multi-author works, but rather forms a coherent tome with few weaknesses and many strengths that makes for an enjoyable read. Evidently the four editors worked hard to synchronize the chapters with regard to both content and style, which is an admirable achievement considering that the book was co-written by fifty different contributors. Another factor adding to the book’s coherence is specific anecdotes, such as the racist depiction of the jolly and childlike “y’a bon negro” in advertisements or the pivotal 1931 colonial exposition in Paris, which reappear in different chapters and thus offer red threads of consistency to readers immersing themselves in this massive volume.

Secondly, *Colonial Culture in France* caters to both scholars and non-academic audiences. With few exceptions, the contributions are void of unnecessary jargon, and contain clear arguments and ample convincing examples as evidence. Whereas generally interested readers will encounter a great overview of two hundred years of French (and non-French) history, academics should enjoy the many brief introductions to the scholarship of French colonialism, which cover all parts of the former empire from Indochina to West Africa.

In addition to its academic purposes, *Colonial Culture in France* also offers a scathing critique of contemporary French society, for example with regard to the official responses to the riots in the suburbs of Paris in the fall of

2005, challenging its “deep racism” (p. 527) and warning against the “‘alzheimerization’ of [public] memory as to the dark pages of its colonial history” (p. 518). Even more impressive are the authors’ repeated attacks on the country’s much-cherished “Republican values,” which are unmasked as being interwoven with the twin concepts of “racism and progress” (p. 256), while reminding readers that the “colonial enterprise and the Third Republic were born in the same moment” (p. 3). It is refreshing to hear such well-documented criticism of France’s quasi state religion amidst the dearth of truly dissenting voices on this topic in today’s public discourse.

Of course, a book of this magnitude inevitably contains some factual errors, such as the claim that the French army began its conquest of Algeria in Sidi Ferrouch in 1931 (p. 491). Slightly more disturbing is the claim that the Moroccan counter-sultan Ben Arafat collaborated with the Istiqlal party in his fight against the

nationalist movement during the 1950s (p. 239), which is so absurd that it can only be the result of an erroneous translation or poor editing rather than stem from the pen of the eminent North Africanist Benjamin Stora. Moreover, chapter 1 on slavery and abolitionism—while certainly interesting—sticks out rather awkwardly from the otherwise relatively coherent narrative. In general, though, the book contains few glaring errors considering its length.

Overall, *Colonial Culture in France* is a very well-written book that showcases the potential benefits of multi-authorship as well as the ability of scholars to simultaneously reach both academic and non-academic audiences. It could be recommended to readers interested in various aspects of France’s (post-)colonial history as well those seeking to understand contemporary French society, whether in the Élysée Palace or the *banlieues* of greater Paris.

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