



PREFACE

The opening quotation from the onetime officer of the Burmese colonial police announces this book's theme: colonies are dangerous to the health of democracy. They act as a sweet but poisoned pill to the states that have eagerly gulped them down. My essays on this theme were written for different occasions over more than a decade. When I sat down recently to reread them, I found a coherence to my various critical efforts. Each piece, I saw, added weight to an overarching concern with how imperial strivings harm the chances for an egalitarian social order. The frequent recurrence of this theme may have been my own colonial unconscious guiding me; but for sure, my conscious research has long been circling over this terrain.

In earlier work, I have found it fascinating to trace the general impact of conquest, rule, and exploitation on the countries that conquered colonial empires. The catalogue of these influences is impressive. The colonies have gifted Europe with economic subsidies, with cultural contributions, with workers and soldiers, and with contemporary domestic social pluralism. Whatever the costs of these aids to the donors, Europe has benefited mightily.¹ But here, my subject is a more sharply focused look at how imperialism abroad, however much seen as beneficial to the national project, has been damaging to democratic efforts at home. The point of Orwell's short story was his realization that to rule others, we have to become sahibs. That is my historical argument as well.

This book is about how the system that made sahibs in the colonies produced correlate effects in the metropolises. I mean here more than so-called *blowback*—the name the CIA gave to unanticipated negative consequences at home of overseas actions, like how the United States

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trained the terrorists who we now fear. In his book of that name, Chalmers Johnson traces these undesired consequences of United States imperial strivings both for American overseas goals and for domestic politics. It is the book to read on that sort of imperial grotesquery.²

But what empires take away from democracies—are they really, always, and for certain unwanted by those who eye world power? Johnson's subsequent study, *The Sorrows of Empire*, comes to conclusions about larger backworkings of empire that, despite his focus on the United States in the contemporary world, support my own findings here about French and British colonialism. In his conclusion, he names "the loss of democracy" as a major sorrowful consequence of empire building.³

How did a systematic "sahibism," acclimated back home, become a permanently corrupting feature of certain Western democratic societies? Even thus delimited, the question is too big for one author and one book. The following chapters do not pretend to exhaust the catalogue of the negative heritage of colonialism in the West. For example, there is little here on racism, the militarization of Western societies, gender implications, or the question of immigrant workers.⁴

The colonial effect is like accumulating magma. So I have decided to do test borings at critical historical strata where the negative workings of imperial expansion on the growth of democratic society in metropolitan nations have been less understood and yet are accessible for study. To follow how I ground this claim in historical specifics, I invite you to trek with me across British, French, and American societies. Within Europe and America, in certain and specific ways, we will come on evidence of the real presence of nominally faraway places—of Burma, the Ivory Coast, India, Algeria, the Pacific Islands, and the stolen lands of the Amerindians.

I'm not the first person to have asked how empires affect their creators. Certain suggestive, but finally misleading, historical correlations between kinds of governments and overseas ambitions are periodically raised. Peter Padfield has recently recycled Britain's Admiral Jackie Fisher's passionate, if self-interested, belief that societies with large and powerful navies to protect home and colonies have avoided oppressive standing armies at home, a garrison state (like Sparta or Prussia), and so, an illiberal society. Writing from a different perspective, Eric Hobs-

bawm has remarked on the curious fact that the last great surge of nineteenth-century empire building was the affair of the most modern, most liberal, and potentially most democratic societies of the West. Britain, France, Holland, Belgium, and, I have to add, the United States not only began the strenuous practice of imperialism early in their statehood, but they also became the most successful practitioners of the so-called new imperialism of the late nineteenth century. After early strong showings, Spain and Portugal could not keep up with the more capitalist states in the modern imperial cross-country races. Nor did latecomers like Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Italy, Russia, or Japan do well.⁵

I do not think democracy is about navies, or Japan would have built a great democracy in the interwar years. Nor, from its creation in Bismarck's new empire to 1945, did the German Imperial High Seas Fleet—even though it was the darling of German nationalist liberals—prove anything but, first, the most reactionary and, then, the most nazified of the military services. And the Weimar Republic's weak and short existence was certainly not due to the support of merchant and banking patricians of Frankfurt, Hamburg, or Bremen. I think Hobsbawm is looking in the right places in noting the link between liberalism and empire. Like him, I am interested in the why of that covariation. And I am interested, as well, in how things turned out: that is, does democracy atrophy in a great empire? My answer is—finally—yes. But, I will argue, certain weaknesses of liberal capitalist and politically democratic societies have made empire a temptation, nay, a need—at least for the incumbent rulers. Clearly, we have a lot of traveling to do.⁶

The first leg of our trip takes us to the Ivory Coast and then on to Burma to meet two sahibs, a French colonial officer and a British policeman. These men who ran local areas of their respective modern empires were seen by their superiors as people of a special character. But not everyone had the right stuff to run a colony. In the beginning, most colonial powers practiced administrative bricolage. Trading companies like the East India Company, for example, in the case of Britain, and the navy in the instance of France, initially did the job. But because mistakes were made and because, taking its last big imperial bite in the latter half of the nineteenth century, Europe brought millions more under its rule, the major powers were obliged to create special corps for controlling

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their vast colonial possessions. Sometimes the administrators wrote interestingly about their work to maintain the empire, about what they learned, and how their jobs shaped their characters or their character shaped their jobs. And sometimes, while rummaging through old personnel records, the historian can come on treasures like personality profiles, drawn up by experts for teachers and supervisors, defining the best sort of person for the work.

The memoirs of Raymond Gauthereau, a French colonial administrator who in 1945 found himself posted to the Ivory Coast, contain a fascinatingly revealing episode about the vocation of men such as himself. It begins with local villagers repeatedly petitioning him to shoot rogue elephants foraging in their crops. Since the local people were not allowed arms, it fell on the local officers to keep the peace both in the human and the animal kingdoms. Since it is his job, Gauthereau finally decides he had better do it.

Gauthereau's account of the exploit is lifted from a similar incident that George Orwell narrates in his earlier story titled "Shooting an Elephant." Sometimes, rather than being a disappointing dead end, plagiarisms yield insights, as here, because the completely parallel yet differently nuanced stories put into relief this important quality "character" so valued in colonial officials. At the same time, we learn how the habitus of each—that meeting point of the social and the individual—were related to the differing cultural styles of their respective colonialisms. With difficulty, the French officer makes his kill—and learns from the event that he needs a better rifle. With even more trouble, Orwell also brings down his beast. But in doing so, he understands the corrupting force for Europeans of being a sahib—and that imperialism must end as much for the sake of the conquerors as for the conquered. Neither animal, it turned out, needed to be shot. Soon after his incident, Orwell quit the colonial service and came home to champion anti-imperialism and socialism. Gauthereau stayed on the job. Only after the dissolution of the empire did he return to France to become a novelist. Meanwhile, sixty-three of Gauthereau's colleagues also came home to become senior members of the Fifth Republic's newly created Ministry of Cultural Affairs. André Malraux, their new superior, charged them to do in France what they had done in Africa.⁷ So here

we see sahibism translated back to France as a renewed top-down state cultural regime.

While both in France and Britain some few, very often artists and writers, drew back in various creative ways from the evils of imperialism, the rulers of the two nations clung mightily to their imperial possessions. In France in particular, the Paris International Colonial Exposition of 1931 celebrated a Greater France (*une plus grande France*) as never before.⁸ A few years later, at the moment of the triumph of the Popular Front—which did show empathy for the colonized—a wave of antifascist French patriotism to save “the culture,” ironically declassified the people in the colonies from inclusion as part of the nation.

In the interwar years, the Musée de l’Ethnographie de Paris (Ethnographic Museum of Paris) possessed the most important French collection of objects from nonurban societies. For the most part they had been gathered in the course of empire building. However, one of the museum’s halls was dedicated to the material culture of the provinces of France. During the Popular Front, when the museum was renamed Musée de l’Homme (Museum of Man), the hall of French folklore was separated out and given its own identity as the Musée National des Arts et Traditions Populaires (National Museum of Folk Arts and Traditions).

This line drawn between a museum dedicated to humankind, that is, so-called primitive societies, and one devoted to metropolitan France also divided contemporary social theory: folklorists studied the French provinces; ethnologists studied the colonies. For the history of French culture, René Descartes’s bad move of taking mind and body apart has convinced me that once you take a whole apart—humankind in this instance—you have a devil of a time gluing the parts together again. Finally, as confirmed by the peace signed in 1962 recognizing an Algerian nation, the Algerian Front de Libération Nationale (National Liberation Front, FLN) said, in effect, “We accept that you think us different, that you will not accommodate us to the republic; we will leave.” Empire seemed to require two social sciences, then: one for the dominated overseas and another for the managed at home. The lessons learned from domination heavily infected the policy social sciences in metropolitan France. A draftee and a teacher in Algeria during that war,

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sociologist Pierre Bourdieu made it his work—which was necessarily at the same time, scientific and political—to end this invidious division.

An us and not-us mentality grew in the arts of the 1930s too. Viewing certain films of Jean Renoir will take us from a France of poor migrant workers in early 1930s Provence to a slowly flowing river in an India just after independence. Even as the peoples of the colonies fought to escape their orientalist bamboo cage, the lands of the South continued to exercise the pull of an antimodernism that has so strongly marked the twentieth-century West.

While trying to formulate some ideas for my almost consecrated role of providing historical background for conferences organized by people in the arts—in this particular case, a conference on the films of Jean Renoir—I found the trajectory of the great filmmaker's work instructive for my own interests in how colonialism diminished French democratic culture. The conference was to focus on Renoir's political films of the 1930s. So, initially, I had intended on concentrating on the historical moment, the era of the Popular Front, when he made *La vie est à nous* (Our life belongs to us, 1936) and *La Marseillaise* (The Marseillaise, made in 1937 but released in 1938). I planned to end my paper with the evidence of his disenchantment with changing the rigid social hierarchy of France, his brilliant *La règle du jeu* (The rules of the game, 1939). But then I saw *Toni* (1934), an earlier film, and *The River* (1951), the film he made after World War II in English on location in India. Viewing all these films in the order of their making allowed me to see an arc of meaning connecting them, and another way in which empire functioned for Europeans.

Toni, which Renoir made just as the world depression hit France, tells a tale of backbreaking work and boiling human passions among quarry workers and peasants in the Midi. Most of the characters in the film are not French; they have curious accents, different customs, and uncommon names. But it does not matter—Renoir treats them as part of a larger humanity. No celebration here of the quaint and folkloric characters of the Midi as in the films of his contemporary Marcel Pagnol. Renoir demonstrates a great human empathy with these seafarers' hard lives, their exploitation on the job, and their intense, and finally fatal, loves. In *Toni* he shows sensitivity to the many ways of living in France.

The two expressly political films that followed *Toni*, namely, *La vie est à nous*, and *La Marseillaise*, were done at the moment of the Popular Front. In these, suddenly, Renoir very much cared about accents and nationality. For, each in its own way, was about who were the “real” French and who, like the contemporary two hundred richest families or Marie Antoinette and her German-speaking companions, were not. The us in *La vie est à nous* is the French working class. And in *La Marseillaise* it is the “little people” of Marseilles and Paris. Once the French aristocrats leave the country, they grow estranged from the living culture of the homeland they have abandoned. They, too, begin to risk joining the not-us.

Renoir made *La règle du jeu* after the defeat of the Popular Front and with it of his hopes for a new world of *fraternité*. About aristocrats and high bourgeois and their servants weekending on a large country estate, it takes the form of a comedy of manners. It features illicit loves and the games of the rich. Uncontained human passions provoke a fatal shooting. But the film ends with the restoration of a violated order. After the “unfortunate accident,” the marquis, the host, invites all—guests and servants—to return to the château.

After the war, and the declaration of Indian independence, Renoir left Los Angeles for India to make *The River*. With this work, we see his turning away from the public sphere entirely to celebrate the simplicity and calm of Indian village life, a surrogate of the world he had lost in France. The supposed inner peace of communal societies—recall, he made this film soon after the communal riots that killed and/or displaced hundreds of thousands at the moment of Pakistan and Indian statehood—had replaced for him and for many other tired Westerners the politicized and contested modernity of the urban West. Here is the third world figured as a slow river of peace and harmony, far from the new postwar struggles back in France to remake the metropole. No longer a champion of the little people of humankind as in *Toni* and his Popular Front films, Renoir aestheticized the timelessness, tranquility, and earthy passions in the peaceful countryside of the third world. He made political disengagement enchanting.

Finally, with the last three essays, I ask the terrible *Et alors?* question. That is, the hard question we sometimes pose to prolix doctoral students: “So what? Why are you telling me all this?” In these chapters, I

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move from the historical specifics of the first essays and try to develop a larger argument on how the modern Western democratic societies needed the colonial, used the colonial, and integrated the colonial into global capitalist modernity. The first two essays in this section are dedicated to the long-term colonial solutions to the most fundamental—for those who would rule—social problems at home: the risk of democracy and the dangers of modernity. The historical moments I have found illuminating are, first, Britain between the Puritan revolution and the one called glorious. Second, the imperial dimension of modernity came later, in mid-nineteenth century France, after the bloody suppression of the workers' revolution in 1848. In the first instance, I will ask a philosopher, John Locke, to explain to us how—by means of America—stable parliamentary government came to depend on capitalism and empire. In his turn, the great poet of modernity, Charles Baudelaire, points the way to understanding the rapports of aesthetic modernism and social modernity with the world of the tropics.

Rereading John Locke seems to me a good way to begin better to understand how this linkage of democratic aspiration and colonial rule came to be appreciated by the powerful men of the seventeenth century, and, in the case of Locke, their house philosophers.⁹ If not the most brilliant theorist of liberal society, Locke was certainly its most successful apologist. In an early anticipation of the just-in-time system of capitalist production, the author had the *Two Treatises of Government* ready for delivery in 1688, just as the parliament was exiling Charles II and inviting William and Mary to rule Britain. He has since been celebrated as *the* philosopher of legislative prerogatives and a limited executive, the advocate of tolerance in a divided country. We owe to Locke the clearest philosophical explication of the imbrication of productive wealth and liberal government, of who had the right to rule. In 1647 during the heated ideological debates between some citizens and officers of Cromwell's army then camped at Putney outside London, Commissary-General Henry Ireton tried to stop discussion of this hot question raised by members of the lower ranks in the army by insisting that only people who owned property and so held "a permanent fixed interest in the kingdom," had a right to decide the course of the nation.¹⁰ This formulaic reponse could not, and did not close, the debate. Too many people, some with weapons and a strong sense of entitle-

ment, owned no property. Nor, unhappily, did they see how they might aspire to such ownership. During England's second regime change in the seventeenth century, Locke invoked empire—America—this opened, if tricky, *entré* to participatory politics at home, as his answer to this the most contested question of the modern age. It is right to speak of Locke as the godfather of all later social imperialists, everywhere.

Then to turn our attention to the sibling of imperial liberalism, its social correlative of literary modernism, we move forward some centuries to the France of Napoleon III and the moment of the great remaking of Paris. Walking distractedly in the vast fields of demolition and construction after the street fighting of 1848 and the start of the great reshaping of the city Charles Baudelaire formulated his new discourse on the modern. The poet's *Black Venus* became his guide, his modernist *Beatrice*, in the new uncharted world of Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann's Paris. Since Baudelaire modernism has tempted overwrought artists and intellectuals of the democratic West with the offer of shelter in another, purer, world of art.

Then, to conclude, I will describe the path of historical inquiry toward a cultural history that could, finally, speak of colonial oppression and metropolitan change, without limiting our knowledge to only the slave trade, commerce, resource extraction, and illegal immigrants. My last essay, "Why, Suddenly, Are the Americans Doing Cultural History," was first published nearly ten years ago in a French social science review, in a "Controversy" section invented, as far as I can tell, just for me. It is about why so many progressive U.S. historians have diminished their interest in the social history of the 1960s to begin to do a new cultural history in the nineties. My French friends—and we remained friends despite this well-intentioned attempt at marginalizing my proposal that we on the Left do more cultural history—still sought in the life and work experiences of workers the key to their achieving radical consciousness. However, in the essay, I describe a move away from a limited theory of social organization and of social contestation—which seemed to me both an unnecessarily positivist and undialectical reading of Marx—to studies that appreciate how language, symbols, images, gender choices, and groups' identity claims serve as important modes of expressing refusal and resistance to unjust power. Taking from cultural anthropology important elements of the-

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ory initially fashioned to study empire, cultural history has become the preferred entry to the study of the metropole, the colonial, and the postcolonial. It is able to grasp the colonial situation and so speak of the connections and interactions between metropole and colonies in new ways. It is, I have found, a major means of understanding the historical effects of globalization on societies everywhere. As a personally guided tour through the discussions of the past several decades of how to do history, I thought it useful to mention at the end of that chapter a few of the key books, and to say something about their importance for taking us from there to here. I hope this readers' guide will help others take the next step in understanding our future.

Let us now start our own colonial adventure with an elephant hunt on the Ivory Coast.