

Introduction: Writing Colonial Histories

Alice L. Conklin and Julia Clancy-Smith

In 1941 the Vichy government commissioned *Jeu de l'Empire Français*, a double-sided, brightly colored board game for children, each side with a slightly different “course de l'Empire français,” played on a lavishly illustrated world map (fig. 1). The rules stated that “the Marshal offers a voyage around the world to two French youths, passing through the colonies of the empire and using French maritime and aviation lines.” The players left from Marseille in a race across the empire. The object was to reach the metropole first after completing a “tour du monde” that was also a “course de l'empire.” How fortunate the player whose token landed on square number 72, adorned with a photo of Pétain. For on this space “la Francisque et le Maréchal vont faire au voyageur un bond gigantesque, qui l'amène directement au but” — square number 84, Le Havre, and victory. Similar colonial games were produced in France from the late nineteenth century on: embossed, cut-out paper soldiers—“nos soldats en relief, les goumiers marocains”—toys with movable parts, and diverse game boards. All celebrated conquests of foreign lands in the form of mass-produced playthings for French children, whether at home or abroad. Intertwined with the imperial messages was a blatant commercialism, since the toys often contained advertisements for foods, or even alcoholic beverages. Also at work was spiritual advertising to encourage young men and women to join religious orders and the faithful to make pious donations. The game *Le Tipoye du Gabon*, printed in 1925, shows a nun on

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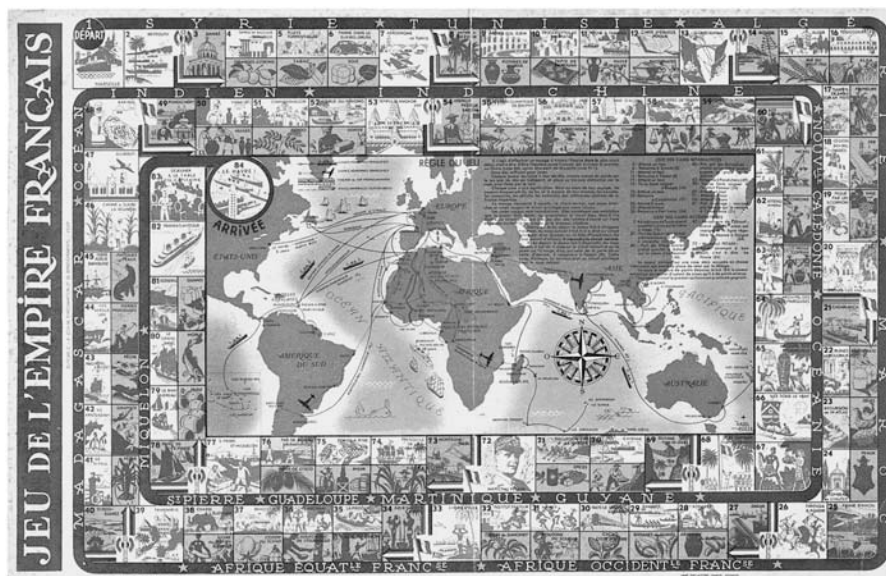


Figure 1 One side of a double-sided game board titled “Jeu l’Empire Français: Course de l’Empire français,” by Raoul Auger, published by Editions Centre d’Information et de Renseignements in Vichy (1941). Research Library, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (910031)

a litter being carried by four Africans, noting that the game’s documentation was provided by “la Congrégation des Soeurs de l’Immaculée Conception, Castres, Tarn.”

These games and toys raise questions about the place of the colonial past in the writing of France’s history. The insertion of empire ideologically, commercially, and pedagogically into all realms of French daily life, from children’s games and juvenile literature to religious activities, mass entertainment, leisure, tourism, advertising, legal categories, language, and so on, and the state’s vigorous role in promoting empire contrasts with the relative inattention to colonial questions in mainstream historical scholarship in France until the past decade or so.¹ As the original *French Historical Studies* call for papers for this issue observed, “The earlier marginal status of French colonial history, combined with the convention of training scholars in only one national

¹ The Society for French Historical Studies (SFHS) mirrors the growing interest in colonial questions, something reflected in the increasing number of papers on colonial topics given at the annual meeting. An analysis of recent SFHS conferences in terms of papers as well as panels reveals that for the 2003 conference, three panels out of some forty-eight sessions were exclusively devoted to the empire, while another four papers dealt with some aspect of France’s empire. The 2002 program had five panels on colonial questions in addition to eight colonial papers on other panels or sessions. The American Historical Association shows a similar trend.

history, has left the contours of this emerging field ambiguous.” This ambiguity arose in large part from the fact that colonial history was always marginal to the historical profession in France, and virtually disappeared immediately after decolonization.² Until the recent upsurge in colonial studies, non-French scholars tended to carry the flag of colonial history, although this situation is rapidly changing.³

While the present issue does not primarily aim to explain the disinterest of French historians in their own colonial legacy and history (that would be a somewhat different undertaking), it raises that issue indirectly. As formulated, “writing French colonial histories” privileges the realm of conceptualizations and approaches. It is concerned less with the convergence of different disciplines (the subject of the *French Historical Studies* 2003 special issue “Visualizing French History”) than with the convergence of subfields or strands of history. In other words, the issue’s contributors grappled with the problems associated with bringing together three hitherto distinct historical narratives. Until recently, historians of France remained safely within the borders of the nation-state, while scholars in the French Colonial Historical Society went their own way. Researchers whose primary historical training focused on the peoples and cultures colonized by France were assumed to have little to say about the metropole or even about European colonials residing in the empire. The existence of three relatively autonomous scholarly terrains, parallel yet separate narratives, meant that events across the Mediterranean or in Southeast Asia or the Indian Ocean were woven into France’s national history only when extraordinary upheavals, like the Algerian War, brought colonial crises home.

In large measure, this tripartite division of labor was grounded in the unexamined assumption that pressures for change radiated outward and one-way from the metropole to the colonies. The colonized tended to be seen as acted on rather than as full-fledged historical actors. An important step in undermining these assumptions was the

² Colette Zytnecki and Sophie Dulucq argue in “Une histoire en marge: L’histoire coloniale en France (années 1880–années 1930),” which surveys historical writing on Africa both in the discipline and in academic institutions, that “the institutionalization of colonial history remained incomplete and imperfect at the end of the 1930s: if it had implanted itself in certain prestigious *lieux de savoir*, if it was supported by one part of the political classes, if it began to encounter a public, it was not able to attain the position of strength to which it aspired at the Sorbonne, which refused to grant [colonial history] full scientific recognition.” (This article is forthcoming in *Genèses*.)

³ See the review article by Isabelle Grangaud and Christelle Taraud in the “Forum des livres: Histoire,” *L’annuaire de l’Afrique du Nord* 29 (2000–2001): 585–612, which notes a flood of published studies mainly by French scholars or scholars in French institutions devoted to “le fait colonial.” A considerable number of dissertations devoted to the French Empire are under way in French and European universities.

recognition of reciprocal influences and multidirectional flows between France and its diverse colonial possessions. The notion of multidirectionality led to the realization that the colonies sometimes served as laboratories for projects conceived of in the metropole. Another conceptual advance came with the awareness that similar, even identical, methods of coercion and/or assimilation employed within European nation-states to integrate “internal others”—sectors of society viewed as culturally different—were deployed against colonial subjects. This realization soon led to a more finely grained analysis of stratifications within what had once appeared to be monolithic settler cultures. Scholarly interest in groups previously neglected by scholarship—socially marginal European men and women whose ranks included migratory laborers, servants, adventurers, and deported persons—has burgeoned of late.⁴

At one level of analysis, the six essays address the initial questions posed in the call for papers. First, how did activities outside French national borders, or on its margins, however defined, contribute to, forge, or transform processes within France? Second, how can the histories of the colonies and the colonized be integrated into historical narratives without disenfranchising former colonial subjects? This question has obvious parallels to problems associated with writing women’s history and gender history. Finally, how does current research on specifically French colonial history modify, revise, or challenge theories of empire in general, whether drawn from the historical sciences or other disciplines? At a larger level of analysis, this issue invites reflection upon the processes through which a thoroughly marginalized field of knowledge—whose older relationship to the presumed center of knowledge reproduced the older colony–*mère patrie* paradigm—moves from the wings toward the foreground of intellectual preoccupations. This in turn demands consideration of the approaches that foster these kinds of movements or displacements.⁵

In terms of approaches, all the essays in this special issue adopt a comparative framework, although to varying degrees and in different ways. Some consider how the colonial worked its way into the heart of metropolitan institutions; others follow the French overseas in their

⁴ Julia Clancy-Smith, “Europe and Its Social Marginals in Nineteenth-Century Mediterranean North Africa,” in *Outside In: On the Margins of the Modern Middle East*, ed. Eugene Rogan (London, 2002), 149–82; Clancy-Smith, “The Maghrib and the Mediterranean World in the Nineteenth Century,” in *The Maghrib in Question*, ed. Kenneth Perkins and Michel Le Gall (Austin, TX, 1997), 222–49.

⁵ Daniel J. Sherman, in “The Arts and Sciences of Colonialism,” *French Historical Studies* 23 (2000): 707–29, reviews scholarship in colonial science and knowledge, one of the most energetic fields in the new French colonial history.

interactions with local peoples and cultures. Both approaches represent an advance over the older imperial history that tended to follow, paradoxically, a national or nation-state framework while attempting to investigate untidy, transnational processes. Moreover, a comparative methodology highlights the different ways in which the formulation of theory has intersected with colonial studies. Scholarship grounded in empirical studies of the British Empire generated some grand theorizing—one need only think of Robinson’s theory of collaboration and the great scholarly rumpus it triggered from 1972 on.⁶ This has not generally been true for the French Empire; rather theorizing came from a vast and rich repository of research on France’s national historical experience, although there are a few noteworthy exceptions to this.⁷ By offering new critical markers for approaching colonial histories, the following essays build upon earlier theoretical work, largely conceptualized within the older historiographical tradition, and then complicate it.

The lead essay by Saliha Belmessous concentrates upon a time of rupture generally not viewed as such, and challenges the conventional periodization distinguishing between the “old” and the “new” French Empires. “Etre français en Nouvelle-France: Identité française et identité coloniale aux dix-septième et dix-huitième siècles” is a study of the formation of national identity *before* a specifically French Canadian identity had crystallized and acquired a full self-awareness. For much of the seventeenth century, the startling contrasts between European or French practices and Amerindian customs formed the principal axis of opposition upon which self-views and difference were based. However, by the second half of the eighteenth century, a novel opposition arose—one marking the *colons* as different from metropolitan French, indeed as distasteful brutes who had willingly succumbed to *ensauvagement*. Was Nouvelle-France a template for later French colonial policies in Africa and elsewhere? The negative attitudes of French officers in

⁶ Ronald Robinson, “Non-European Foundations of European Imperialism: Sketch for a Theory of Collaboration,” in *Studies in the Theory of Imperialism*, ed. Roger Owen and Bob Sutcliffe (London, 1972), 117–41. Along similar lines, while theorizing on race originated mainly from case studies drawing upon the colonial experience of the Americas, that field has produced first-rate scholarship for France and French colonies; see Sue Peabody and Tyler Stovall, eds., *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France* (Durham, NC, 2003).

⁷ Work by Ann Laura Stoler, for example, on racial boundaries and sexuality commenced with the colonial situation and from there engaged in theorizing. See Stoler’s critique of Foucault and his inattention to colonialism in *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, NC, 1995). Pierre Bourdieu presents the intriguing case of a scholar whose ethnological work was nourished by on-site research on Kabyle society during the era immediately following independence; yet it did not interrogate—first and foremost—colonial relationships, or the residue of those relationships, in theorizing from the Algerian case; Bourdieu, *Esquisse d’une théorie de la pratique* (Paris, 1972).

1763 toward the descendants of French settlers in North America bear an uncanny resemblance to the diatribes often launched by those in the metropole at the *pieds-noirs* in Algeria.

Issues of deculturation and acculturation are also the subject of Owen White's essay, which illustrates once again the rich intellectual dividends gained from stopping to interrogate phenomena taken for granted in past scholarship. In "The Decivilizing Mission: Auguste Dupuis-Yakouba and French Timbuktu," White makes the important point that the phenomenon of "going native" has not been adequately problematized in most research to date. Dupuis was a member of the White Fathers in Timbuktu who abandoned his order (but not his faith) in 1904 to marry a Songhay woman and found a large family; fully accepted by local Muslim elites, who gave him the name Yakouba, he also remained in the employ of the French administration in Timbuktu until his death in 1945. Dupuis-Yakouba became France's most notorious *décivilisé* in the 1920s precisely because his cultural hybridity offered the French public a more egalitarian example of colonialism than that envisaged by contemporary republican rhetoric. Dupuis-Yakouba was simultaneously African and European, and interpreting his story through a binary *optique* would utterly fail to translate the multiple registers of his identities or the complex ways in which they resonated in the metropole.⁸

Dupuis's contradictory relationship to modernity finds echoes in the next two essays. Erica J. Peters in "Taste, Taxes, and Technologies: Industrializing Rice Alcohol in Northern Vietnam, 1902–1913" employs taste as a theoretical marker which, when factored into an investigation of the practices of daily life, offers a novel reading of how local modernities were experienced and articulated. Her work is indicative of a growing disenchantment with studies informed principally by considerations of imperial discourse and points to a reawakened appreciation for economic questions. Returning to the material foundations of imperialism, Peters provides agency to Vietnamese peasant producers in a way that the earlier economic histories generally did not. By focusing upon the economics and politics of taste, she moves beyond a superficial treatment of rhetorical strategies or debate to the spaces where daily practices and colonial policies collided and intersected. Thus a

⁸ White's research also points to a fund of documentation which French colonial historians have tended to neglect compared to historians of other empires—missionary records. This neglect may be beginning to change on both sides of the Atlantic; see, for example, James P. Daughton, "The Civilizing Mission: Missionaries, Colonialists, and French Identity, 1885–1914" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2002); and Karima Direche-Slimani, *Chrétiens de Kabylie: Histoire d'une communauté sans histoire; Une action missionnaire de l'Algérie coloniale* (Paris, 2004).

colonial case study—peasant resistance to a French monopoly imposed on rice wine—causes us to rethink theoretical constructs, such as Lefebvre’s ideas on social change, whose genealogy lay outside of colonial relationships.

In “Conservative Confluences, ‘Nativist’ Synergy: Reinscribing Vichy’s National Revolution in Indochina, 1940–1945,” Eric Jennings recounts the violent departure of the French from Vietnam, and the attendant “disentanglement of colonial and decolonized cultures” that this departure occasioned. Since relatively little is known about how colonial states dealt with children and youth—outside the schoolroom—his study of youth movements represents another one of those critical markers discussed above.⁹ Jennings examines social conservatives, youth groups, and reactionary ideologies in the colonial context—all subjects previously slighted by historians—to bring to light larger problems in the historiography on anticolonial nationalism and decolonization. Much has been written out of the nationalist narrative that has dominated postcolonial thinking, particularly the ironic possibility that French traditionalist rhetoric could fuel the very nationalist sentiment it was designed to arrest. Jennings shows that the ultra-conservative Indochinese Right borrowed heavily from Vichy nativist propaganda to author its own authentic past from which to launch a nationalist struggle that was both anticolonial and anticommunist.

The final two essays call into question recent theorizing specifically devoted to empire by interrogating colonial inheritances on metropolitan institutions, discourses, and practices. In his study of the Paris hospital for North African workers, “The Colonial Politics of Health Care Provision in Interwar Paris,” Clifford Rosenberg argues that the “portrayal of the relationship between colony and *métropole* is misleading” in much of the literature on colonies as experimental terrains. The resources needed to fund the ambitious social engineering projects hatched by authoritarian colonial administrators often never materialized overseas. A more promising strategy for research is the reimportation of such projects into the heart of the Republic, where colonial ambitions to discipline meshed with local, national, and international politics to produce hybrid modes of governance for France’s Maghrebi

⁹ On youth in Africa during Vichy see Ruth Ginio, “Les enfants africains de la Révolution nationale: La politique vichyssoise de l’enfance et de la jeunesse dans les colonies de l’AOF (1940–1943),” *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine* 49, no. 4 (2002): 132–53. See also Spencer D. Segalla, “Teaching Colonialism, Learning Nationalism: French Education and Ethnology in Morocco, 1912–1956” (PhD diss., State University of New York at Stony Brook, 2003); and Gregory Mann, “Fetishizing Religion: Allah Koura and French ‘Islamic Policy’ in Late Colonial French Soudan (Mali),” *Journal of African History* 44 (2003): 263–82.

immigrants. The Franco-Muslim hospital that opened in Paris in the 1920s is very much a case in point. Launched by former administrators from Algeria who transferred back to Paris, this expensive institution ultimately represented a new departure in the surveillance of colonial subjects within *l'Hexagone*.

Daniel J. Sherman's essay on the Musée National des Arts et Traditions Populaires, "'Peoples Ethnographic': Objects, Museums, and the Colonial Inheritance of French Ethnology," raises similar questions from yet another vantage point. As French ethnographers on the eve of World War II sought to transform an older antiquarian interest in metropolitan folklore into a proper science through the founding of a new museum devoted to the display of the material artifacts from traditional *terroirs*, they borrowed from colonial ethnology its conceptual and practical apparatus. The colonial inheritance led French ethnographers to construct rural cultures as both other and defunct, when of course they were neither. When this legacy later became embarrassing, the professionals in question quietly jettisoned it. Nevertheless, colonial forms of knowledge remain deeply embedded in universalist museological assumptions about how to represent not only the French past, but the pasts of others in the postcolonial world. As two current museum initiatives in France demonstrate, too often still, "scientific" French ethnographers see themselves as the only legitimate "saviors, guardians, and teachers" of objects not of their own making.

The essays in this collection, then, advance scholarship in two arenas. First, the official transcript of the state, colonial proconsuls, and powerful capitalist interests that dominated colonial history is unraveling—in much the same way that the upsurge in migration studies in France has overturned "the perspective of Third Republic administrators" and their "authoritarian policy of national assimilation," which concealed the existence of diverse immigrant peoples and cultures in metropolitan France.¹⁰ So the official transcript gives way to others that divulge, for example, the surprising diversity of public opinion in interwar France toward empire or the wide-ranging approval, from unlikely quarters, of the church and its overseas missions. Individually and collectively, the essays help dismantle the mutually exclusive binaries employed to conceptualize the colonial situation and its principal actors, oppositions that fell into bleak, totalizing categories, such as "the colonized" (or "the natives") and "the settlers" or "the Europeans."

¹⁰ Gérard Noiriel, *The French Melting Pot: Immigration, Citizenship, and National Identity*, trans. Geoffroy de LaForcade (Minneapolis, MN, 1996), 265; Philippe Dewitte, ed., *Immigration et intégration: L'état des savoirs* (Paris, 1999).

In the dismantling process, undifferentiated, linear narratives are supplanted by multiple histories whose specificity deepens our understanding of what constituted colonial practices and ideologies and what did not.

Another expression of the binary principle is the center-periphery/metropole-colony model, whose inadequacies have been the subject of debate among not only colonial but also world historians. All of the essays reveal the intricate workings of multiple centers and peripheries linked by complicated, often contradictory, lines of political and ideological transmission. Seemingly local struggles did not merely pit local administrators and their native allies against indigenous peoples; for, as several essays argue, there were no simple choices. In short, the issue's contributors mess up the neat binaries of conventional historiography and in doing so suggest a weblike metaphor for, and approach to, writing French colonial histories.¹¹ Like the child's board game *Jeu de l'Empire Français*, the articles invite us to conceptualize empire as a constantly shifting landscape with innumerable detours where a roll of the dice brings into play unsettling colonial actors, unholy political alliances, or unsuspected pressure groups that demand new interpretive strategies.

Spanning four centuries—from seventeenth-century New France to current debates over the direction of France's *Musée National des Arts et Traditions Populaires*—this issue represents a sort of “grand tour” of questions, problems, and approaches now being considered by colonial historians. All the contributors linger long enough to consider various behaviors seen as inherent to the colonial situation but rarely subjected to thorough analysis. Taken collectively, these essays point to a considerable fund of scholarship on the French Empire, some of which we had the pleasure of reviewing during the selection process. The limitations of space and the need for internal coherence meant that a number of fine submissions could not be included. Overall, the larger pool suggests that future research on modern France that fails to consider *outré-mer* processes or transnational forces will be increasingly viewed as unsatisfactory. Finally, the quality of scholarship in the expanding field of French colonial history offers hope that the stranglehold that the British Empire has long held on colonial studies, empirically and theoretically, may be loosening.

¹¹ Tony Ballantyne argues for a weblike approach in *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire* (New York, 2002).