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Ivan Jablonka, *Les enfants de l'exil. Transfert de pupilles réunionnais en métropole (1963-1982)*. Paris: Seuil, 2007. 344 pp. Bibliography, notes, index, chronology. ISBN 978-2-02-093229-5.

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The relationship between metropolitan France with its overseas territories has long been fraught with ambiguities, ambivalences, resentment and incomprehension. In 2009, when huge demonstrations mobilized the populations in Guadeloupe, Guyana, Martinique and La Reunion (remnants of the first French colonial empire and colonies which experienced slavery and colonial status), French public opinion “discovered” them again. Comments in the media often showed the enduring nature of the clichés and stereotypes of these populations. They were viewed either through the lens of an unchanged “colonial relationship,” victims of a French State which was imposing its policies regardless of local needs and aspirations, or through a lens which dismissed the protesters as shiftless, “these people who beg and do not want to work.” Both positions revealed an ignorance of the regions’ history and a deep misunderstanding of local dynamics. In a 2009 report on the situation of these territories, the Senate effectively summarized the relationship between the Hexagon and its post-colonies: “Our overseas territories are not well known. Our ignorance leads to clichés and ambiguous feelings where envy and dreams, pride and repressed guilt, compassion and exasperation mix.”[1]

The nineteenth century doctrine of “the civilizing mission” still casts its shadow on policies and attitudes towards the post-colonial populations. Deeply convinced of its ingrained capacity for good deeds, throughout its history, the French Republic has launched programs to “civilize.” However, while the abuses of colonial policies have been the subject of many studies, little is known about post-colonial abuses and scandals, ranging from the consequences of the Mururoa nuclear tests to the consequences of the use of chlordecone, a pesticide responsible for prostate cancer which was forbidden in the Hexagon in 1990, but used in the French Antilles until 1993. They tell the story of unequal treatment of French citizens in the Hexagon and the post-colonies. They also tell the story of a blind spot in French research where the history, culture, tensions, creations and memories of these territories’ populations remain marginalized, if not ignored. In *Les enfants de l'exil. Transfert de pupilles réunionnais en métropole (1963-1982)*, Ivan Jablonka examines one of these post-colonial programs. In doing so, he contributes to the emerging body of literature available in French on the post-colonial moment. Through a micro-history, Jablonka wants to look at the “essential elements” of contemporary France and at the silences of decolonization.

In 1963, Reunion society was in turmoil. The population had mobilized against French economic and social policies such as the price of sugar cane, the slow destruction of local agriculture, the lack of schools and hospitals, and the grinding poverty. In response, the government enacted social programs to discipline the poor and weaken the militant spirit of the “dangerous classes,” the poor of Reunion. It launched policies of immigration, organized through the infamous BUMIDOM, *Bureau pour le développement des migrations dans les départements d'outre-mer*. Thousands of young men and women left the island, ending up in factories or working as domestics. Their stories have only started to be told.

The purpose was to reduce the size of population of the poor through the forced sterilization of women and an aggressive policy of contraception, to reinforce the hold of the Church and to facilitate and expand the degree of State intervention in the lives of poor families. Removing children from poor families was a part of this vast program. It harkened back to nineteenth-century state policies of intervention among the poor, considered the dangerous classes, through social programs supposedly designed to improve their lot by encouraging “female virtue,” condemning men’s ways of having a good time and, more generally, popular forms of leisure, for example. In the 1960s, Reunionnese social workers were instructed by the State social services to tell parents that their children would be well cared for, that they be attending good schools and would learn a trade. They remained very vague about the details, as Jablonka shows in the reports he has found. Some children were even removed without the knowledge of parents, who were not home when social workers arrived. The social workers belonged to the emerging lower middle class and they shared their class’ contempt for the poor. They lied, deceiving the parents. Some sincerely believed they were acting in the children’s best interests. They also knew the children were never going to return to Reunion, although neither the parents nor the children were told that.

Between 1963 and 1982, 1,600 children were taken from their families on Reunion Island to be placed among families in metropolitan France, leaving an enduring traumatic memory among the families and society. Jablonka carefully traces how this came to be. He does not seek to distribute blame and accusation, but to show how the State felt justified in playing with the freedom and lives of individuals. It is a sad story of broken dreams, broken lives, of solitude and depression. While some of these children, now adults, have been able to integrate into society, find a job and start a family, many express a feeling of being lost in the world, of having been crushed by something so powerful that reparation seems impossible. However, in January 2002, one of these children, Jean-Jacques Martial, sought reparation from the State. His request was followed by the request of an association of former children. In 2009, the tribunal rejected all requests, arguing that the statute of limitations had expired.

To this day, no responsibility has been clearly assigned. Dilatory maneuvers by the State and its bureaucracy, loss of documents, the loss of memory on the part of civil servants involved, a desire on the part of local conservatives to absolve the State, an understandable desire to forget bad moments among some of the exiled children and a desire to “put things behind” members of the middle class of Reunion Island who, having achieved a position of assimilated comfort, want therefore to put behind them anything that would remind them of past struggles, all of these factors have contributed to muddying the waters around this event. Despite books and documentaries on the story, and the mobilization of both the media and political parties, the State has refused to recognize its role in this tragic event, let alone apologize to the *Enfants de la Creuse* (as they became known in Reunion Island).[2]

Jablonka is good at showing the dilatory strategies of the different institutions. Though no direct responsibility can be established (thank to different strategies of avoidance, of the long silence due to the feelings of shame among both the children and their parents), the role of Michel Debré was central, according to Jablonka. Debré, a former Prime Minister for De Gaulle and a fierce opponent of Algerian independence, had been invited by local conservatives in Reunion Island to sit as a candidate for the Parliament. First elected in 1963, he remained the most important conservative representative of the island for twenty-five years. According to Jablonka, Debré consoled himself for the “loss” of Algeria by launching what he saw as a project for the modernization and civilization of Reunion society. His sworn enemy was the Reunion Communist Party whose downfall became one of his obsessive goals. Though Debré opposed the liberalization of contraception and abortion in the hexagon, he was concerned by the demographic trends on the island. He thought that poor women were having too many children. He was convinced that they were unable to raise them since they were illiterate in French, spoke only Creole, and were barely able to support themselves on poor land. Reunionnese families were regularly described as sites of pathology, violence and bigotry. Debré wanted Reunion society to “integrate” with the metropolitan French society, that is, to lose its distinctive differences. He banned the Creole language,

forbade the performance of *maloya* (the music of slaves) in public, rejected vernacular cultural, medical and religious knowledge and practices, tracked communist activists, turned a blind eye to violence and the violation of civic rights, and meddled in every aspect of island society. The Reunionese family was, of course, a target.

Throughout the 1960s and into the 1980s, the social discourse on Reunionese poor echoed European disciplining moral discourses on the poor as well as the colonial discourse of the civilizing mission. Debré's objectives were enacted by the local DDASS (*Direction Départementale de l'Action Sanitaire et Sociale*, the State institution in charge of the application of national welfare programs and measures in each French department). Its employees were convinced that the poor must prove themselves deserving of its welfare by demonstrating irreproachable behavior. The criteria were those imposed by the moral code of the Catholic Church, and of nineteenth-century social thought, itself deeply shaped by Catholic thinking: teach the proper morals to the poor and impose middle class ways of living on them. Echoes of colonial discourse abounded.

The DDASS employees wrote condemnatory reports about the parents of the children chosen for forced migration. The fathers were lazy, violent and alcoholic; the mothers were amoral and lacking in maternal feelings. These were also years of struggle on the island to acquire the equality in social rights that had been promised in the 1946 law which had ended the island's colonial status and made Reunion a French department (along with Guadeloupe, Guyana and Martinique). By insisting on a lack of responsibility among the Reunionese poor, which constituted a large majority of the population, the State justified its policies of repression and its strategies of discipline and punishment. It claimed to be saving the lives of these children by removing them from their families and by transporting them to a truly "French" environment. Very young children would demonstrate their moral strength by accepting the migration. It was a test of their capacity to become "French." Adaptation was seen as a matter of will. Meanwhile, the media and local conservatives described the "métropole" (the Hexagon) as paradise, a site of civilized behavior. Nothing was said about the struggles mobilizing the French society, of course. The term "métropole" was used to construct an abstract and ahistorical space, devoid of contradictions, tensions, social struggle and history, reinforcing the illusions of a protective and generous maternal State.

The reality was different. Reunionese children were often shocked by what they found, a society where racism existed and where they were not fully considered to be "French." Children were put with peasant families who often had never seen a black person. They were cut off from their language, their culture, their sisters and brothers, based on the principle that it would be better for the children to be separated from all things familiar to facilitate their integration. If some families tried to make their stay less miserable, many did not know what to do with these children. The children were left to their own devices since DDASS had never planned a follow-up program. The children tell stories of rape and physical abuse, of extreme solitude and of deep sadness induced by the belief that they had been abandoned by their own parents for reasons they could not understand. The parents themselves often did not know what had happened to their children. The few reports by social workers showed a total indifference to the suffering of these very young children. The children were accused of trying to induce pity or of trying to use emotional blackmail in order to garner affection. The social workers who sought to lessen the children's suffering by listening to them and playing with them were quickly transferred to another service. Then, it was silence. Silence for decades. The parents thought their children were dead. The children thought that their parents had forgotten them. Years later, when some children sought their families and were reunited, the intense suffering could not be ignored.

The story of the Reunionese children echoes the story of aboriginal children, whether in Australia, Canada, or the United States, who were also taken from their families for their "own good." Jablonka acknowledges this and compares its effects with those of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1930 in England. As a result of that Act, thousands of children were taken from their families and sent to

Australia. However, Jablonka finds that there is a huge difference. In Australia, Canada and England, those who fought to make this history public, to identify responsibility, were eventually heard. They forced the creation of independent commissions to investigate these programs, the publication of official reports, the construction of memorials, and financial reparations. In France, there has been neither an independent inquiry nor a parliamentary commission. Instead, the investigation of the DDASS administration on Reunion has been conducted by the DDASS itself. In other words, it is yet another dilatory measure.

The silence, and then the subsequent denial of the importance of the history of the “Creuse children” is symptomatic of a general approach to history in Reunion. Reunion society has not yet fully acknowledged the slavery in its past. The complexity of its post-colonial present is barely studied, and when it is so, it is essentially analyzed as a battle between Debré and the communists, ignoring other local and regional dynamics. The society has experienced serious mutations in the last fifty years—its population has multiplied by three since 1946; the rate of unemployment (between 27 percent and 37 percent) has been “stable” for the last three decades; the rural world is slowly disappearing; urbanization is accelerating; the rate of illiteracy is 21 percent; more and more students have access to higher education. The politics of assimilation still weigh on island society, enforcing conformism and hindering autonomous, collective and alternative expressions. One does not dare indict the State or its representatives for fear of appearing an adversary of the *métropole*, a terrible accusation still. In this context, the story of the deported children can be read only as the story of individual suffering and not also as a symptom of a collective blindness on the part of the State and Reunion society to the impact on the children’s lives, of contempt for the poor, and of submission to hegemonic discourse. The voices of the children of exile cut through the lies but they have not yet succeeded in creating a public conversation on abuses.

French resistance to impartial and independent investigations of the abuses and damages caused by post-colonial public policies is deeply ingrained. The main argument is that this kind of attitude will lead to *repentance*, to a demand for apologies, explanations, acknowledgement of responsibility, as well as guilt. History, the argument goes, becomes a tribunal for past events, but which are judged using contemporary principles. Historic decisions were made for the good of the poor, of backward populations, it is argued. To allow an open discussion of the Reunion tragedy would be to admit that the French Republic, through the imposition of diverse regimes of exclusion and repressive policies in its post-colonial empire, had violated the very principles upon which the Republic was said to stand and would force a deep re-reading of republican doctrine. As Jablonka argues in his conclusion, “the suffering induced by integration remains something that is not thought through in the republican psyche” (p. 257). It is a blind spot, the consequence of a collective utopia, typical of French illiberal democracy, he writes.

Jablonka’s *Les enfants de l’exil. Transfert de pupilles réunionnais en métropole (1963-1982)* is a well-told story of abuse, indifference and blind cruelty. Yet, he goes beyond just telling us a story. He shows how much French republican colonialism has been responsible for abuses, how much of an effort must still be made to acknowledge not just guilt, but responsibility. The republic must be accountable for the damages its policies inflict on its citizens, regardless of its understanding of their full and total integration into French “citizenship.” They are French citizens, descendants of slaves, of colonized people, of indentured workers, of poor migrants and citizens. It is because of their citizenship that they demand reparations. This is what is at stake today in France. The issue emerges in the debate about diversity in the media, about the inscription in the national narrative of the memory and history of the slave trade, slavery, colonialism, about museums and the politics of exhibition, and in the controversy over post-colonial theory.

NOTES

[1] “Post-colonies” refers to former colonies of France which, unlike Algeria or Senegal, remained a part of the French Republic. In this case, they were also slave societies.

[2] Philippe Vitale, Corine Spagnoli and Gilles Ascaride, *Tristes Tropiques de la Creuse*. (Marseille: Editions K'A, 2004).

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