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Christina Elizabeth Firpo, *The Uprooted: Race, Children, and Imperialism in French Indochina, 1890-1980*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016. xi + 260 pp. Bibliography and index. \$55.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8248-4757-9.

Review by Anne Raffin, National University of Singapore.

Christina Firpo has written a solid and moving book about children of mixed ancestry, also known as *métis*, in Indochina from 1890 to 1980. More precisely, this work “investigates the origins and development of French initiatives to ‘protect’ fatherless *métis* children [born to indigenous mothers and mostly French fathers] in Indochina and later, South Vietnam” (pp. 1-2).

The author has accumulated an impressive database encompassing more than four thousand fatherless *métis* children who passed through the protection society system from the early colonial period to the end of the Vietnam War (1954-1975). Indeed, she has done extensive research in seven archives spanning three countries and backs up her arguments with both French- and Vietnamese-language materials. While it probably would have been impossible to put such a large database in an appendix, I kept longing for one while reading this book. A simple statistical presentation with percentages on these 4,337 stories (as of June 2015) with variables such as age, sex, date of birth, whether forcefully or not taken from their mothers, etc., would have been a welcome addition.

Firpo contends that, from 1890 to 1980, French colonial officials and civilian-led protection societies systematically and often forcefully removed fatherless *métis* children from their indigenous environments and placed them in institutions in order to nurture loyalty to France. This social engineering was motivated not only by colonial benevolence, but also by colonial self-interest. *Métis* children might have resented the French government for denying them the rights of French people, since non-legally recognized indigenous children of French fathers were colonial subjects. Hence, officials perceived the *métis* removals as a way of reducing the risk of rebellion. It was also a means of reproducing the French nation, and the *métis* were thus a key group for maintaining the French imperial presence in Indochina.

Chapter one presents the creation of the *métis* protection societies. While the colony's Catholic orphanages took care of *métis* children of European and African soldiers, a separate laicized institutional structure emerged specifically for Eurasian *métis*. French colonists who were permanent residents of Indochina started creating child protection societies for fatherless *métis* in the 1880s. These male colonists felt that *métis* should be integrated into colonial society. One justification for the children's removal from their social milieu was the mother-as-prostitute image, which molded protection societies' rhetoric on *métis* children until 1975. A key institution in assimilating these children into French culture was the school system—specifically, agricultural schools, which would also give the children agricultural skills in order to integrate them into the colonial economy.

Chapter two shows how larger social forces, in this case, World War I and its large number of casualties, led to a change of French attitude regarding fatherless *métis* children by presenting the latter as fully French and subsequently sending them to the metropole as a solution to the rural labor shortage and repopulation of the country, as well as to the land settlement programs in Annam, Vietnam. Because of the global economic crisis, no more children were sent to the metropole after 1929.

The November 16, 1912 law, which allowed research into the paternity of unrecognized children, was put into effect in the colony on June 19, 1913. Despite the fact that this law was written for only French citizens and foreigners, thanks to their political influence and the use of skilled lawyers, the *métis* protection societies were able to help some of the *métis* children acquire French citizenship. The law also allowed the colonial government to intervene in *métis* families, making it even easier to legitimate removing fatherless *métis* children from their mothers. On June 27, 1917, a law called *pupille de la nation* was passed. It was specifically crafted to deal with children whose fathers had been killed or injured in the war and who had become, as a consequence, wards of the state (legally, the state was the legal guardian of children of fallen French soldiers). The colonial government had become increasingly disturbed about the number of fatherless Eurasian children, which had quadrupled as their French fathers were sent to war. Concerned that the children were being raised and subsequently socialized by their Vietnamese mothers without the moderating influence of a French father, the *pupille* law made it easier for administrators to remove the child from his mother.

In contrast, chapter three notes how the Great Depression resulted in mothers, and even *métis* children themselves, asking for state aid. Mass poverty led the French government to develop poverty relief, including child-care institutions. More precisely, in 1939 the colonial government created the Jules Brévié Foundation for fatherless *métis* children, which signaled the start of complete state control over the *métis* protection system.

Moving to the World War II period and the Japanese occupation of Indochina, when the Japanese let the French government have control of the colony's domestic affairs, chapter four shows how the political volatility brought by World War II revived a pronatalist approach as a means to maintain a permanent French population in the face of Japanese occupation and France's fear of losing the colony, which included the *métis* population. For instance, the Jules Brévié Foundation aimed at cultivating a *métis* elite class that would check the power of the indigenous elite.

Chapter five deals with the French Indochina War (1946-1954), in which France tried to re-impose colonial power over Indochina while the newly formed Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) strove to establish Vietnamese sovereignty. During this time, the colonial *métis* became a contested political symbol. Although the DRV officially welcomed *métis*, some soldiers perceived them as a "treacherous race," and thus the children were sometimes victims of violence (p. 109). At the same time, the French government put the *métis* protection system under civil control, establishing the Federation des Œuvres de l'Enfance Française d'Indochine (FOEFI). The FOEFI formed a Paris delegation in 1951 to relocate operations and wards to France. Most of the children sent to France were allocated to institutions for only FOEFI wards, while some ended up in orphanages and others, reunited with their paternal families. With the French defeat, the FOEFI administrators pleaded with the French authorities to include FOEFI wards among their evacuees.

Chapter six underlines that, despite the 1954 Geneva Accords which dismantled the French empire in Asia, the FOEFI kept searching for *métis* children--in its eyes, a reminder of French imperial importance--and referred to defunct colonial laws to help separate them from their mothers and send them to France until 1975. After the April 1975 fall of Saigon, many *métis* who had elected to remain in Vietnam searched for a way to emigrate to France. But the French government hindered entry-visa paperwork, while the FOEFI deplored the "racial injustice" on the part of the French government (p. 162).

Very much at the heart of this study is the issue of racial identity linked to citizenship, as some citizenship laws tied French identity to either race or culture requirements. The racial categories describing fatherless *métis* children evolved over time as colonial security issues changed in Indochina. In addition, the criteria for in-group membership (i.e., belonging to the French nation), could differ between the metropole and the colony. Whereas in France, being French meant having two white parents, colonial administrators and protection society members considered mixed-race children to be part of the French nation, as well as a solution to the perceived colonial population decimation after World War I.

However, racial phenotypes became important again during the Japanese occupation, when high-ranking administrators and Jules Brévié Foundation leaders demanded to search for *métis* who looked sufficiently white as a way to preserve as much French whiteness as possible in the colony and boost the permanent French presence there. This was motivated by their fear of losing the colony. Yet the French Indochina War showed that such a racial desire was a luxury that the French empire could not afford. Consequently, Afro-Asian and Indian-Asian *métis* children were welcomed as members of the French nation. Here, French identity was defined as a shared relationship with the French empire.

Looking at the postcolonial period until 1980, repatriated colonists and FOEFI administrators' "crusade to save these left-behind *métis* children" underlined the emotional component of identity, as "for many *métis*, repatriation felt like exile from the only home they knew. In France *métis* adults were socially displaced and *déclassé*" (p. 133). Overall, these *métis* adults constructed complicated identities, whereas colonial authorities and civilian organizations often made instrumental use of identity.

While reading this work, I kept thinking of David M. Smolin's article "Child Laundering" on international adoption scandals, where Western legal systems "launder" children, taken illegally from birth parents as "legally" adopted children.[1] In both studies, child-care services and adoption were sometimes understood by the biological mothers as short-term solutions in the face of economic hardship. In both cases, protection societies such as Smolin's baby-recruiters very rarely returned the children. Some colonial officials erased information about fatherless *métis* children's Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian past before they entered or during their stay in the protection societies. Likewise, some orphanage directors and baby-recruiters created false identities and histories for these adopted children, making it impossible for them to later find their original families. Both publications demonstrate that it was the children's fundamental human right to grow up with their birth families that had been violated.

The author does a good job of underlining the contrast between the colonial government's public discourse of "saving" children from supposedly corrupted mothers and the violent reality of separating them from their mothers. This is an important book for people interested in colonial and postcolonial Vietnam, race and identity issues, as well as the troubling ways in which states and civil organizations can take children away from their birth families in the name of social engineering.

NOTE

[1] David M. Smolin, "Child Laundering: How the Intercountry Adoption System Legitimizes and Incentivizes the Practices of Buying, Trafficking, Kidnapping, and Stealing Children," *Wayne Law Review* 52(2006): 113-200.

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