

---

H-France Review Vol. 6 (November 2006), No. 137

**Herman Lebovics**, *Imperialism and the Corruption of Democracies*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006. xx + 172 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$21.95 U.S. ISBN: 0-822-33697-9 (pb).

Review by J. P. Daughton, Stanford University.

---

Herman Lebovics' *Imperialism and the Corruption of Democracies* is a curious book that defies easy categorization. Lebovics offers up six chapters of cultural analysis, five of which were originally delivered as talks at various universities over the past decade, and three of which were eventually published as articles. The result is not exactly a collection of essays, in part because the three unpublished chapters are not developed enough to stand on their own, and in part because Lebovics "found a coherence to [his] various critical efforts" (p. ix) and set out to rework the collection into a book with a single theme: imperialism is harmful to democracy. The book is at once a cultural history of European imperialism and a critique of France's fraught relationship with its colonial past. But throughout, it also reads like—and the preface suggests it is a conscious effort—a kind of Chalmers Johnson-does-European cultural history, as Lebovics strives to warn against the dangers of the current American experiment in empire by looking to the lessons offered by a range of past cultural and intellectual figures.

*Imperialism and the Corruption of Democracies* covers a wide range of subject matter; Lebovics is equally indefatigable analyzing films as philosophical treatises. Its chapters at times follow a loosely thematic, though not chronological, order, and little effort is made to explain the logic of the book's organization. Instead, likening the impact of colonialism to "accumulating magma," Lebovics offers up "test borings at critical historical strata" (p. x) that, he argues, exemplify the negative impact British and particularly French colonialism had on metropolitan society and politics. Many of the topics discussed either directly grew out of, or at least were in line with, themes that Lebovics has explored in his earlier work, especially *True France* and *Bringing the Empire Home*, two books that appear with some regularity in the footnotes should readers want or need further explication.[1]

The eclecticism of these studies is clear from a brief description of each chapter. The first study contrasts British and French administrative styles and mentalities by focusing primarily on two accounts of elephant hunts, the first, from a little-known memoir by the French novelist and one-time colonial officer in Ivory Coast, Raymond Gauthereau, the second, George Orwell's famous short essay, "Shooting an Elephant," based, at least loosely, on his experience as a colonial policeman in Burma. Lebovics makes much of these two stories, arguing that they reflect starkly different administrative approaches to rule: the French, he says, did comparably little "to learn how societies in their empire worked" (p. 12), while the British relied on anthropological knowledge to help them rule.

The following chapter continues on a somewhat related theme, providing a short history of sociological thought in France, from the 1937 opening of the Musée national des arts et traditions populaires, when the folklore of the French peasantry was institutionally separated from the ethnography of colonized people, to Pierre Bourdieu's "cultural revolution" which saw the sociologist deconstruct "the scientific and political boundaries between ethnology and sociology" and thus make "a decisive move to address the European crisis of postcoloniality" (p. 33). Here, as well as elsewhere in the book, Lebovics makes clear his political opinion of the transition: the "bifurcation" of studies of peasants and colonial populations in the interwar period was "a sad mistake" (p. 23), while Bourdieu's death marked the loss of "a brilliant fighter for social justice" (p. 33).

---

Chapter three changes gears rather abruptly, offering a detailed tour through Jean Renoir's films, from *Toni*, the 1934 film about the lives and loves of the ethnically diverse population of Martigues, Provence, to *The River*, Renoir's 1951 American-funded film set in post-war India. Lebovics argues that these two films differ significantly from the films Renoir made during the late 1930s, such as *La Vie est à nous* (1936) and *La Marseillaise* (1938) by being political in "a culturally global way" (p. 34). In what is perhaps the best chapter of the book, Lebovics leads his reader through Renoir's work and the tumultuous political landscape in which he tried to function, opportunistically accepting funding from the PCF during the Popular Front, fleeing the Nazis under Vichy, and then finally making an "escape to the peaceful East" in the wake of the Second World War via *The River*. Renoir's story, however, only tenuously addresses the theme of empire, as Lebovics explains the director's turn to India by claiming that "the temptations of the romantic Orient had always existed to distract the people in the West from fighting for a better world at home" (p. 59).

Lebovics returns to a more directly colonial theme in the following chapter in which he "asks" the poet Charles Baudelaire "to help us understand the connection of modernity and colonialism" (p. 61). According to Lebovics, the two phenomena "reciprocally potentialized each other. In other words," he continues, "no French colonialism, no aesthetic modernism; no aesthetic modernism, no empire building" (p. 60). While not entirely convincing, this argument takes Lebovics to some interesting, if not entirely new, territory, as he reads Baudelaire's real-life relationship with an African-French actress and his poetic construction of the "Black Venus" in *Les Fleurs du mal* as an encounter with an "Other" that "could be born only of the union of aesthetic modernism and colonial encounter" (p. 67). The most insightful part of the piece is the conclusion, which examines how the death of colonialism and aesthetic modernism, and the subsequent emergence of post-modernity, has led to "historical amnesia" about the meaning of the colonial past among intellectuals and politicians in the decades since the Algerian War.

The crux of Lebovics' argument about imperialism and democracy comes in a somewhat unexpected place: an analysis of John Locke's "Second Treatise of Government." Acting as a sort of thematic conclusion after four chapters primarily concerned with nineteenth and twentieth-century France, Lebovics' assessment of Locke allows him to argue that imperialism was a fundamental part of the seventeenth-century philosopher's understanding of how to construct a stable and prosperous society at home. Lebovics effectively demonstrates that this spokesman of "future generations of capitalist ruling classes" (p. 88) could only overcome the logical paradoxes inherent to his own theories by promoting the practical policy of colonial expansion. By showing that Locke's nascent liberal notions were inextricably linked to domination and subordination of colonized populations—in this case, Native Americans—Lebovics asserts that imperialism should not be seen as a late stage of liberalism, as Lenin and others have claimed, but rather part and parcel of the ideology itself.

The book's loose unifying argument might have been best served had it ended with Locke. Instead, a final essay, entitled "Why, Suddenly, Are the Americans Doing Cultural History?," takes the subject matter back off topic, offering a concise account of the development of American cultural history, its main political impulses, key theoretical divides, major figures, and accomplishments. The chapter does little to add to the main theme of the book, other than by championing cultural history as a particularly productive way of exploring the "diverse" humanity (p. 101) of the colonial experience. But in so doing, this chapter draws attention to a shortcoming of the study as a whole. Cultural history may well be, as Lebovics argues, an exemplary way "to cross frontiers" (p. 101) of states, ethnicities, gender, and sexuality, but there are remarkably few figures in this book who are not white, male, and straight. There are non-Europeans around the periphery of the study—Orwell's crowd of villagers, Baudelaire's "Black Venus"—but they never shake the status of "Other" or find a voice in this cultural history.

---

At its best, *Imperialism and the Corruption of Democracies* provides a clearly-written and thoughtful tour of sites in the cultural landscape of France (and to a lesser extent Britain) guided by an experienced scholar of metropolitan and colonial history. Lebovics is at his strongest when doing close readings of short stories, films, poems, and philosophy and relating them to the politics of their day. Even when his readings are not fully persuasive, they are learned and thought provoking. Some of the observations he makes in a minor key are the most compelling, such as when he demonstrates that French art and scholarship, as exemplified by both Jean Renoir's film-making and the social sciences during the interwar years, have been at their most compassionate and humane when not tainted by party politics.

The individual chapters likely made for excellent talks, especially during the question and answer sessions when participants could ask Lebovics to elaborate on some of his balder claims, such as that the French did relatively little to learn about the local societies they ruled (p. 12), or unpack his occasional jargon, such as "emergent global episteme" (p. 114). Some of the chapters, especially those on Gauthereau and Orwell, Renoir, or Locke, could be used successfully in undergraduate classrooms. Similarly, the chapter on cultural history would be an excellent way to introduce students to the field. Pedagogically, they would likely spark debate or reinforce the importance of including colonialism in any study of the metropole. This book should also be required reading for those cultural historians of modern metropolitan France who continue to doubt or deny the relevance of the empire to their field.

But scholars of empire, particularly of French colonialism, might find some aspects of *Imperialism and the Corruption of Democracies* to be frustrating. The book could be much more engaged with recent scholarship on colonialism. In fact, from the text and footnotes, an uninformed reader could easily believe that little new scholarship has been produced on French colonialism over the course of the past decade. For example, Lebovics discusses the civilizing mission, colonial subjugation, and moral principles (p. 67) without making any reference to Alice Conklin's nuanced work; he states that Foucault's notion of biopower was "systematically practiced" (p. 114) in the French empire without any reference to Peter Zinoman's magisterial study on colonial prisons in Vietnam, a book that addresses this very issue; and he makes categorical statements about the French concept of race (p. 115) without addressing recent reappraisals in collections on this very complicated subject.[2]

This neglect of recent scholarship is stranger still considering that French colonial history has taken a definitive "cultural turn"—a point made by a number of recent reviews—and coincides closely with Lebovics' own theoretical and methodological interests.[3] Yet none of the spate of recent essay collections and only a few of the recent monographs on the culture of colonialism make an appearance here. This lack of engagement with major publications in the field is not simply a question of professional etiquette, or footnotes for footnotes' sake. On a number of occasions, Lebovics makes bold and sometimes problematic assertions in the course of shaping his arguments. Addressing some of the rich and diverse scholarship produced in the last few years—much of which, unlike Lebovics' book, is based on extensive archival research—would give depth, complexity, and subtlety to claims that otherwise can seem blunt or overly simplified.

This last point is perhaps most apparent in the book's central contention. For scholars who have thought much about imperialism, the observation that empires are harmful to democracy will likely be less than revelatory. And yet Lebovics, from the preface forward, suggests that this issue has been only been "periodically raised" (p. x) by scholars (as examples, he puzzlingly cites just Peter Padfield's recent book on the British navy and an article by Eric Hobsbawm that appeared in *Le Monde Diplomatique*).[4] To the contrary, one could make the argument that the vast bulk of recent scholarship on colonialism by historians of France—much of which has been influenced by colonial studies methodology—is overwhelmingly concerned with the impact colonialism has had on the metropolitan attitudes, values, and practices at the very core of democratic ideals and institutions. Lebovics' own True France played

---

no small role in encouraging a new generation of scholars to incorporate the colonial periphery in their understanding of French history. *Imperialism and the Corruption of Democracies* could have offered far deeper reflection on how the field has developed in the last decade before staking its own claims.

Despite these shortcomings, Lebovics' latest is a valuable book. Many scholars of colonialism may have learned much in the last decade about how imperialism has corrupted democratic sensibilities, but not everyone has heard the message. As Lebovics points out, books on the colonial past can still be—and are—written as triumphalist history full of encouraging lessons for today's empires.[5] Orwell's famous observation, "When the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys"—the epigraph of *Imperialism and the Corruption of Democracies*—seems more prescient today than ever. Lebovics has written a book that is not only a work of scholarship, but also a statement of political conviction. Cultural historians interested in exploring and discussing the lessons that "Old" Europe's colonial past holds for the political conflicts of our own era will find *Imperialism and the Corruption of Democracies* a worthwhile read.

---

## NOTES

[1] Herman Lebovics, *True France: The Wars Over Cultural Identity, 1900-1945* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992); and *Bringing the Empire Back Home: France in the Global Age* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004).

[2] See Alice Conklin, "Colonialism and Human Rights, A Contradiction in Terms? France and West Africa, 1885-1914," *American Historical Review* 103 (April 1998): 419-442; and Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1890-1930* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997); Peter Zinoman, *The Colonial Bastille: A History of Imprisonment in Vietnam, 1862-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); and on race, see Sue Peabody and Tyler Stovall, eds., *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003); and Herrick Chapman and Laura L. Frader, eds., *Race in France: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Politics of Difference* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004).

[3] On French colonial history's "cultural turn," see, for example, Daniel J. Sherman, "The Arts and Sciences of Colonialism," *French Historical Studies* 23 (Fall 2000): 707; and Edward Berenson, "Making a Colonial Culture? Empire and the French Public, 1880-1940," *French Politics, Culture & Society* 22 (Summer 2004): 127-149.

[4] The works cited are Peter Padfield, *Maritime Power and the Struggle for Freedom: Naval Campaigns That Shaped the Modern World* (London: John Murray, 2003); and Eric Hobsbawm, "Où va l'Empire américain," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, June 2003, I, 20-21.

[5] See, for example, Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2003).

J. P. Daughton  
Stanford University  
daughton@stanford.edu

Copyright © 2006 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172