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Will French History Finally Engage Intersectionality?

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On both sides of the Atlantic, the study of race in France needs to follow the lead of North American scholars in other fields by engaging intersectionality, theories of whiteness, and gendered conceptions of race. My regional and temporal subfields, French Southeast Asia and the empire as a whole in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, are well suited for critiques of the history of empire as systems of white male privilege. The historical formulations of racist stereotypes specific to French Indochina illustrate the intertwined nature of race, class, and gender.

Compared to American and British historiography, French history has been slow to adopt race as an analytic tool. Up until the 1990s, critical studies of French colonialism were particularly underdeveloped. Much of this can be explained by the development of the cherished myth of a color-blind France. Allegedly free of the racism that beset the Anglo-Saxon world, let alone the genocidal impulses east of the Rhine, the French self-image denied that the nation had a “race problem.” It was a vision of France that blissfully ignored or willfully silenced brutal realities of the colonial empire, the French participation in the Shoah, and the violence of decolonization. Post-colonial labor markets, educational opportunities, and housing patterns have generated a political economy where opportunity and privilege are closely tied to racial identity. Eruptions of protest by disenfranchised male youth of color and the electoral rise of far right xenophobic, Islamophobic, and anti-immigrant politicians are forcing France to reconcile its idealized self-image with its racialized social structures.

That most American historians of France have been Francophiles has only delayed this reconciliation. Unlike post-war scholars of Germany or Cold War Russia experts, few American academics have been critical of France. Seduced by the language, art, literature, cuisine, and above all, by Paris itself, France proved irresistible to American academics, many of whom cherished memories of study abroad programs in an era when the U.S. dollar was king and students and faculty in French studies were overwhelmingly white. When faced with troubling examples of xenophobia and racial violence, even otherwise critically engaged Francophiles could be dismissive. After all, how could the nation that made Josephine Baker the toast of Paris, shielded Richard Wright from the horrors of Jim Crow, and gave refuge to James Baldwin be racist? Fortunately, critical race studies, which include both the empire and the metropole, have become increasingly mainstream within the field. The dramatic increase in such papers and sessions at annual meetings of the Society for French Historical Studies, the Western Society for French History, and the French Colonial Historical Society indicates a critical seachange over the past decade.

My own research on French Indochina has sought to combine archive-based social history with theories of whiteness and critical masculinity drawn from cultural studies. Whiteness theory allows us to conceptualize systems of material, legal, and cultural privilege, and calls attention to porous and often uncertain racial boundaries. In the most concrete uses of whiteness we can observe how white supremacy shaped colonial cities, determined categories of discipline in the empire, and structured colonial and post-colonial labor markets. In short, there were things that could be done with a white body that could only be done with a white body. Conversely, white bodies were excluded from specific types of physical punishment and not expected to perform certain types of labor. Critiques of colonial masculinity illustrate the ways in which French colonizers took control of not just land and resources, but the very bodies of the colonized subjects. White male sexual entitlement to the bodies of native women and men, girls and boys, involved imperial acts on an intimate scale. My work on city planning, political economy, and white male sexuality in French Hanoi (with side projects on Saigon and Phnom Penh) links the ideology of imperial white supremacy to the practice of empire.

We must note that whiteness was not uniform throughout the French empire. Different colonial realities and the varieties of racial stereotypes determined local racial practices. I would argue for a certain Indochinese distinctiveness in regard to French colonial culture in Asia. For example, in contrast to sub-Saharan Africa, it is difficult to find a rape discourse. Furthermore, both official and popular colonial discourses effeminized Asians. Vietnamese, Khmer, and Chinese men were often desexualized while women were hyper-sensualized. I hold that an obsession with alleged Asian luxuries and decadence played a central role in French conceptions of the Far East as a land of silk, opium, and courtesans. Contemporary representations of Asia in French popular culture and especially in nostalgic tourism that Penny Edwards and Panivong Norindr have called “Indo-Chic.” These high imperial stereotypes, tropes, and narratives persist well into the twenty-first century. Such Orientalism underlines the critical need to engage intersectional theory and unpack the intertwined histories of race, gender, and global capitalism.

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