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Edward Berenson, *Heroes of Empire: Five Charismatic Men and the Conquest of Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011. xii + 376 pp. Maps, plates, endnotes, and index. \$29.95 (cl). ISBN 978-0-23427-7.

Response Essay by Edward Berenson, New York University

It's an honor to have to have such a distinguished group of people comment on my work. These are colleagues whose scholarship I have long admired and without which I wouldn't have been able to write *Heroes of Empire*, a book that focuses on colonialism, gender, and the penny press. As readers of *H-France* know, Alice Conklin's *A Mission to Civilize* helped pioneer a new historiography of French colonialism; Robert Nye and Elinor Accampo are pivotal figures in the analysis of gender, having examined the ambiguities of masculinity and femininity, fatherhood and motherhood, among many other things; and Marie-Eve Thérenty has written path-breaking studies of nineteenth-century journalism and the press. I wish I could have dipped into Thérenty's forthcoming *La Civilisation du journal* (co-written and co-edited with Dominique Kalifa, Philippe Régner, and Alain Vaillant), a monumental work that demonstrates the extent to which the print explosion of the latter nineteenth century realigned society and its representations according to the regular rhythms of the periodical press. I should add that Accampo's wonderful study of Nelly Roussel helped me see how the biographical treatment of an exemplary individual, with all her inner contradictions, can help illuminate the dilemmas of an age. And I have long been indebted to Nye's earlier books for their powerful analysis of fin-de-siècle France's pervasive worries about crowd behavior, national degeneration, and the perils of modern, mass society.[1]

Since the four reviewers have done such an excellent job of summarizing and analyzing my book, I'll move directly to the questions and criticisms they raise. For want of a better approach, I'll take them in alphabetical order. Accampo finds that although I don't emphasize the point, my discussion reveals an apparent "de-sensitization" to colonial violence on the part of French and British journalists and their readers. Related to this emotional immunity, Accampo writes, is "the acceptance of atrocities against native populations despite the moral outrage on the part of some who protested." Accampo finds the explanation of the Europeans' blindness to atrocities in "the degree to which native populations had been objectified"—that is, portrayed in countless verbal descriptions and visual images as sexually-available, "pet-like" creatures lacking the complexity, and even the basic humanity, of the white men (and some women) who observed them. Although I treat these matters extensively, I didn't, as Accampo would have wanted me to, rank them among the "explicit unifying themes" of the book.

Thinking now about the question of de-sensitization, about whether and to what extent Europeans became inured to colonial violence, I'm tempted to argue that just the opposite occurred, namely that after the mid-nineteenth century, ordinary British and French people became highly sensitive to violent acts against Africans. For the most part, this heightened sensitivity led not to humanitarian concern, but rather to emotional distancing, willful ignorance, and to the hero worship of "peaceful conquerors," the better to avoid feelings too painful to endure. Part of this distancing involved objectification, turning human beings into cardboard caricatures seemingly impossible to harm. And part of it involved

demonization, turning those who resisted colonial rule into a frenzied horde against which gentle Europeans had no choice but to defend themselves.

The media of the time, as Thérénty astutely points out, helped make these emotional defenses work. It's not that editors gave clear-cut orders to paper over harmful, murderous acts, but rather that they understood—and often shared—the sensitivities of their readers. They assigned and selected their stories, woodcuts, and photographs accordingly, and they did so mostly without thinking explicitly about the process. This, of course, is not to defend such practices, which often had the effect of encouraging colonial violence precisely by shielding readers from it. But in researching my book, I was struck again and again by the press's exaltation of "peaceful conquerors," gentle explorers, and of what Lyautey, like his nemesis Théophile Delcassé, called "pénétration pacifique." The conquest of Morocco turned out to be horrifically violent, not unlike Lyautey and Gallieni's "pacification" of Madagascar in the late 1890s, but the public didn't want to know, and the press mostly seemed happy not to tell.

To me, the best discussion of the late nineteenth century's new sensitivity to violence and the effort to push it offstage and out of sight comes in Alain Corbin's *Le Village des cannibals*. Corbin's brilliant microhistory examines the brutal murder of a local aristocrat, Alain de Monéys, by a group of Dordogne villagers early in the Franco-Prussian War. To punish de Monéys, whom the peasants accused of being at once a Prussian, a republican, and an aristocrat, the group tortured and ultimately burned the young man alive. The incident took place in full knowledge of local officials and with hundreds of people looking on. For these Périgord peasants, violence still belonged to daily life; torture could proceed, in full view, over many hours. It was bourgeois politicians and journalists, no longer inured to everyday bloodshed, who expressed horror over the gruesome spectacle. To their post-Enlightenment "sensitive souls," the incident seemed so awful and so depraved that it constituted, according to one jurist, a "denial of the nineteenth century" itself.<sup>[2]</sup> The "civilized" sensibilities of modern people recoiled from the Monéys' murder not because they opposed violence in principle but because they couldn't stomach the kind of behavior once accepted, even embraced, as a means of restoring purity to criminals and heretics and re-sacralizing the community they had violated.

So it's not that Europeans became de-sensitized to violence in the era of high imperialism, but rather that they wished not to be troubled by it. Hence, as Accampo says, journalists and sketch artists created stories and images that "helped mask the realities that lay beneath simplistic narratives." Rather than dwelling on the rigors of colonial rule or, for example, on the thousands killed during the conquest of Morocco, journalists emphasized Lyautey's putatively peaceful "tache d'huile" approach to colonization. According to this theory, which Lyautey and his admirers widely disseminated in the early 1900s (and General David Petraeus later adapted for the war in Iraq), the army's chief role was to improve the material conditions of indigenous peoples such that those living just outside French-occupied territory would want that territory to spread like a "tache d'huile" to their own.

These efforts to explain the media's intentions are based on the kinds of circumstantial evidence historians commonly use. We have very few explicit statements of intentionality from editors and journalists. Still, to answer some of Accampo's questions about what editors and artists wished to convey through their selection of images in particular, we can surmise that authenticity did not rank among their primary concerns. Most of the "colonial" photographs I analyzed in the book were staged in London or Paris studios, and many wax museum exhibits drew inspiration from these very photographs and from drawings that appeared in the illustrated press.<sup>[3]</sup> Their enactment and artificiality tell us that they were fictional representations of colonial situations designed for domestic consumption. Paul and Félix Nadar, France's celebrity photographers of the age, posed Brazza as a modern-day prophet dressed in rags. They did so not to depict any reality of African exploration but as an ironic rebuttal to a speech by Stanley dismissing his French rival as a barefoot nobody with holes in his pants. As for the image Accampo mentions depicting bare-breasted "Congolese women bowing before Brazza," we know what the explorer thought about scenes such as this: Africans, Brazza

declared, considered “the highest chief as the husband of the wives of all the lesser chiefs.” As “the great white chief,” the Frenchman considered himself the highest of them all (*H of E*, p. 66).

Turning now to Alice Conklin’s review, I’d like to emphasize one point she makes, namely that I tried in this book to examine the emotions that drew Europeans to imperial conquest. I wanted to look beyond and beneath the ideas and ideology underpinning colonialism, which often had little impact on ordinary people, and I didn’t want to limit my discussion to the “culture of imperialism” central to the analysis of many recent works.[4] These works, important as they are, usually leave unanswered the question of what effects imperial culture (children’s literature, music halls, advertising) actually had. Thérenty thinks I devoted insufficient attention to imperial ideology, and perhaps she’s right, but there are a considerable number of books on this subject, including Conklin’s own, and I thought it important to focus on the register of emotions. That’s why Max Weber’s ideas about charisma seemed crucial to the kind of analysis I wanted to undertake.

For Weber, charisma was first and foremost a way of understanding authority, command, power, and influence (*Herrschaft* in German) that came neither from tradition nor from law. There was a third, or residual, form of authority “foreign to all rules” and embodying the “gifts of grace” (*charismata*) that God originally gave to Christ and that later came to inhere in certain extraordinary individuals. Weber’s commentators have often thought charisma to be mainly a psychological phenomenon, a secularized version of its original Christian meaning. But for Weber, charisma required a relationship between the leader and his flock; crucial as charismatic leaders are, their followers have a defining role to play. Weber insisted that an individual’s charismatic qualities had to be validated by a group or community and that validation would come only if the individual in question regularly provided evidence of his attributes. “If proof and success elude the leader for long,” Weber wrote, “it is likely that his charismatic authority will disappear.”[5] Weber didn’t explore the nature of the connection between a charismatic individual and those who followed him or her, but he suggested a clear, and often intense, emotional bond.

It seemed to me that such a bond existed between each of the colonial figures I studied and a large number of their countrymen and women. But it was a bond mediated by a new, mass-produced popular press eager to feature extraordinary people (or at least those who could be portrayed as such) and to stir the emotions of its readers. Because Weber drew most of his examples of charismatic men from ancient times, that is, from an era when communication tended to be unmediated, or at least minimally so, he largely ignored the question of mediation. He also mistakenly believed that the newspapers of the twentieth century would be controlled by the major political parties and that their bureaucracies would stifle charisma and forbid its appearance in the press. Partly for these reasons, Weber didn’t notice the eruption of charismatic media heroes in the late nineteenth century and failed to anticipate the charismatic demagogues of the interwar period, whose use of media, especially radio and film, underpinned their success. The sociologist did identify Karl Lueger, the populist anti-Semitic mayor of fin-de-siècle Vienna and certain Russian revolutionaries as charismatic ideal types.[6]

That Weber didn’t point to people like the ones featured in my book leads Robert Nye to question whether they should be termed “charismatic” at all. “For all the adulation they received,” Nye writes, they didn’t embody “the divine qualities for which Weber’s example of the leaders of the early Christian church is the classic instantiation and which ought to have fitted our heroes for a kind of revolutionary leadership.” While it’s true that Weber began with early Christian leaders in mind, he quickly secularized the concept of charisma to include individuals “considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities.”[7] In his earliest writings on the subject, Weber maintained that charismatic figures could be insiders or outsiders, magicians or prophets. The former shored up the existing order by solving problems that appeared to threaten it, while the latter pointed to new forms of existence by championing alternative systems of belief [8]. Charismatic figures did not, as Nye maintains, have to be revolutionary leaders;

they could bolster the existing order through heroic, exemplary actions that unite people in their wake. This is precisely what each of my five colonial figures did, at least for a time. I also disagree with Robert Nye that Stanley alone of the five stood out as a “natural leader” who shunned remuneration and responded to “distress.” If anything, Stanley was the only one who didn’t fit this bill. He made vast sums of money from his writing and lecture tours, tainted his leadership with brutality and awkwardness, and responded mainly to artificial, trumped up distress, especially the hullabaloo underlying the unnecessary rescues of David Livingstone and Emin Pasha. What made Stanley charismatic was his ability to translate public adulation into great political influence, if only for a limited time, and to arouse a considerable popular appetite for British involvement in Africa.

In any case, I agree with Nye that these matters are quibbles, especially since the term “charisma” can be imprecise. What’s important, as Nye aptly writes, is that each of the five heroes in question fulfilled key psychic needs for those around them and “performed a symbolic function that stimulated the formation of collective identifications, transforming the image of the nation itself into a synthesis of its heroic past...and its adventuresome present.” Here Nye cites Venita Datta’s important new work on fictional treatments of historical heroes and their public and journalistic reception in the late nineteenth century. Thérenty also praises Datta’s book, which I wish had been available while I was writing mine.[9]

In his conclusion, Nye says that my understanding of how heroic reputations are created works for the period 1870–1914 and possibly for another fifty years, although in the later era through film, radio, and TV rather than the newspaper press. But he adds, with a trace of regret, “All that is finished. Now, a virtual celebrity is open to us all.” While it’s true that the celebrity-making machine has changed a great deal, especially with the advent of TV shows like “American Idol” and “The Jersey Shore,” I don’t think our own situation is so very different from the one that existed more than a century ago. Relative to the overall population, the number of celebrities remains small, and most celebrities now, as in the late nineteenth century, are created by mass media. If the conquest of Mt. Everest and the decline of the space program have deprived us of celebrated explorers and adventurers, sports and business reliably produce media heroes, as do talk radio and certain TV shows. Traumatic events can do the same, as in the case of Rudy Giuliani and 9/11. In France, certain media-savvy intellectuals can still attain celebrity status, as can the best-known chefs. In Britain, members of the royal family are celebrities rather than political figures, and I suppose that in Russia, chess masters can be celebrated even today. But most of us are destined to remain unheralded and unknown. According to the China Internet Information Center, in 2007 there were more than 72 million blogs in China alone. All but a vanishingly small percentage of these and the world’s other bloggers will forever remain obscure.[10] Facebook and Twitter have helped turn political figures like Sarah Palin into huge celebrities, but only after TV had anointed them first. The rest of us will not attain Andy Warhol’s 15 minutes of fame.

If the culture of celebrity remains alive and well in our twenty-first century world, what seems in decline is charisma. I don’t mean the ersatz charisma of rock stars and Hollywood actors (better termed “glamour,” according to Virginia Postrel), but the real Weberian variety, the one that packs a genuine political punch.[11] Who nowadays speaks of Barak Obama’s charisma? It’s as if Obama’s *legal* authority as president has usurped the charismatic authority he enjoyed while running his electoral campaign. (Weber didn’t exclude the possibility that a given individual could possess charismatic authority along with the traditional and statutory kind.) Perhaps this is why Palin appears reluctant to seek any office higher than the one she occupies at Fox News? Her charisma is safe as long as she can avoid the responsibilities of governing and the intense media scrutiny that accompanies them. Here’s where the Internet may come in. Would Reagan’s presidential charisma have survived YouTube videos, gone viral, showing him nodding off in cabinet meetings or flubbing his lines? And we can easily imagine what viral videos and relentless bloggers might have done to Clinton’s charisma during the Lewinsky affair.

So, as Nye says, the media have changed a great deal, but our lives continue to be structured—though

not, of course, determined—by them. Which brings me to Marie-Eve Thérénty's extraordinarily illuminating remarks. No author could fail to be flattered by such a piece. Not only is it faithful to what I tried to say in my book, but it brings out certain key matters better than I did. One of them turns on the extent to which journalists identified with the colonial figures they were sent to cover and vice versa. While I hinted at this crucial phenomenon, Thérénty fully fleshes it out. It's crucial because journalists, and by extension journalism itself, gained legitimacy through a close association with colonial officers, explorers, and adventurers deemed to represent the nation and act on its behalf. By identifying with a colonial hero, the journalist and his paper could appear to serve the same national purpose as the hero. Thérénty's discussion of the journalist Paul Bonnetain is revealing on this score. It's the general who shows the reporter what to observe and hence what to write: "Le général," declares Bonnetain, "me prend par la main et m'annonce un coup d'œil curieux." This episode echoes many I discussed in my book, the most amazing of which involved the London *Times* correspondent, Frank Power, who made himself Gordon's mouthpiece in Khartoum and adopted Gordon's skewed perceptions as his own. "General Gordon," wrote the reporter, "is perfectly confident that he will accomplish the pacification of the Soudan without firing a shot" (*H of E*, 107). This is exactly what the British government had sent Gordon to achieve and what the public apparently hoped would occur—even though such "pacification" was pure fantasy. Worse, the failed pacification of 1884-85 set the stage for Britain's colonial revenge of 1898, when Kitchener's army slaughtered 15,000 Islamic soldiers at Omdurman.

Kitchener's war of "re-conquest" took such a terrible toll on Britain's Mahdist enemy that two of the country's most prominent war correspondents, George Steevens and the young Winston Churchill, ardent imperialists both, found themselves shocked by the killings and incapable of suppressing a certain humanitarian regret. "It was a terrible sight," wrote the future prime minister; piles of Mahdist lay dead, while "they had not hurt us at all" (*H of E*, p. 180). In expressing ambivalent feelings, Churchill showed that a single journalist could, often unwittingly, present two conflicting points of view. Omdurman represented a glorious victory; its human toll troubled the soul. Here the war correspondent echoed his era's sensitivity to violence: the re-conquest, necessary as it was, should have been purer of human blood.

If a single journalist could present opposing points of view, so, as Thérénty writes, could different newspapers or different writers from the same paper. Although Britain and France's mainstream press generally supported their countries' colonial ventures, individual newspapers and journalists condemned them when they became too violent: the press was far from monolithic in its treatment of imperial conquest. Stanley, in particular, faced hostile criticism for the excesses of his Congo expedition of the mid-1870s, and French atrocities in that region received extensive coverage when revealed in 1905.[12] *L'Humanité's* accounts of these abuses were at once relentless and well informed. Even *Le Temps*, a conservative, ardently colonialist paper, called attention to the Congolese horrors by assigning the socialist Félicien Challaye to cover Brazza's *enquête*. Still, editors and journalists mostly minimized the violence of their own country's imperial enterprise (while often insisting on the brutality of their rivals'), either by failing to cover it, sanitizing it, and on occasion justifying it—with all due reluctance—on grounds of self-defense.

There is much more to say in response to these four penetrating and thoughtful reviews, but even cyberspace has its limits. I'll conclude by thanking Elinor Accapo, Alice Conklin, Robert Nye, and Marie-Eve Thérénty for a wonderful set of critical reflections. Their commentaries demonstrate our need to think further about the nature of colonial violence and the local and European reactions to it; about the persistent desire for heroes and charismatic leaders in modern societies; and especially about the myriad ways in which mass media not only represent society, politics, and culture, but make them what they are.

## NOTES

[1] Alice Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Elinor Accampo, *Blessed Motherhood, Bitter Fruit: Nelly Roussel and the Politics of Female Pain in Third Republic France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); Robert Nye, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor in Modern France* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1993); Nye, *The Origins of Crowd Psychology: Gustave LeBon and the Crisis of Mass Democracy in the 3rd Republic* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1975); Nye, *Crime, Madness, and Politics in Modern France: The Medical Concept of National Decline* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Marie-Eve Thérenty, *La littérature au quotidien : Poétiques journalistiques au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 2007); Thérenty, *Mosaïques : être écrivain entre presse et roman 1829-1836* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2003); Thérenty and Alain Vaillant, *1836: l'an I de l'ère médiatique* (Paris: Nouveau monde, 2002); Dominique Kalifa, Philippe Régnier, Marie-Ève Thérenty and Alain Vaillant, eds., *La Civilisation du journal. Histoire culturelle et littéraire de la presse* (Paris: Nouveau monde, 2011).

[2] Alain Corbin, *Village des cannibales* (Paris: Aubier, 1990); *The Village of Cannibals: Rage and Murder in France, 1870*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992). Quotations from the English translation, pp. 1, 119.

[3] On wax museums, see Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). Schwartz kindly sent me a photograph of the Musée Grévin's Brazza exhibit, which she'd used in her book and I, in turn, used in mine.

[4] John M. MacKenzie, *Imperialism and Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985); Kathryn Castle, *Britannia's Children. Reading Colonialism Through Children's Books and Magazines* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996); Antoinette Burton, "Making a Spectacle of Empire: Indian Travelers in Fin-de-Siècle London," *History Workshop Journal* 42 (1996): 127-46; Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose, ed., *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Tony Chafer and Amanda Sackur, eds., *Promoting the Colonial Idea. Propaganda and Visions of Empire in France* (New York: Palgrave, 2002); William H. Schneider, *An Empire for the Masses: The French Popular Image of Africa* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982); Pascal Blanchard, Sandrine Lemaire, and Nicolas Bancel, eds., *Culture coloniale en France: De la Révolution française à nos jours* (Paris: Editions autrement, 2008); Pascal Blanchard and Sandrine Lemaire, *Culture coloniale: La France conquise par son Empire, 1871-1931* (Paris: Editions autrement, 2008).

[5] Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, eds., 2 vols. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), 1:242.

[6] On the development of Weber's concept of charisma, see Wolfgang J. Mommsen, "Max Weber's 'Grand Sociology.' The Origins and Composition of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft Soziologie*," in *Max Weber's Economy and Society: A Critical Companion*, Charles Camic, Philip S. Gorski, and David M. Trubek, eds. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 70-97. See also, Edward Berenson and Eva Giloi, ed., *Constructing Charisma. Celebrity, Frame, and Power in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), esp. 1-17. For the classic discussion of Lueger as charismatic leader, see Carl E. Schorske, "Politics in a New Key. An Austrian Trio," in *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna. Politics and Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1980).

[7] Weber, *Economy and Society*, 1: 241.

[8] *Ibid*, I: 399-401.

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[9] Venita Datta, *Heroes and Legends of Fin-de-Siècle France: Gender, Politics and National Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[10] [www.cnnic.cn/html/Dir/2007/12/27/4954.htm](http://www.cnnic.cn/html/Dir/2007/12/27/4954.htm)

[11] Virginia Postrel, "Obama's Glamour Can't Fix His Charisma Deficit," *Bloomberg View*, 4 August 2011. Postrel, who is writing a book on glamour, is strong on this concept but weak on the notion of charisma.

[12] On Stanley and the Congo, see Felix Driver, "Henry Morton Stanley and His Critics: Geography, Exploration, and Empire," *Past & Present*, 133 (1991)

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