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Aurélien Lignereux, *L'Empire des Français, 1799-1815*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2012. 417 pp. 25.00€ (pb). ISBN 9782021 00832.

Review by Tracey Rizzo, University of North Carolina at Asheville

As a specialist in the French Revolution moving into the field of the “New Imperial History,” I was pleased to accept the invitation to review Aurélien Lignereux’s, *L'Empire des Français, 1799-1815*. My own work has followed the broader trajectory in the historiography of Europe away from Eurocentrism to transnationalism and globality.[1] Thus, I hoped that *L'Empire des Français* would be less Eurocentric than its predecessors, placing the European empire in the context of the wider world, and more attentive to the place of race in national identity construction. While it does neither of these things, this fine book is nonetheless a well-researched, thorough and readable textbook for undergraduates in France. Yet, it seems oddly retro given the “imperial turn” referenced by the author himself that has characterized two decades of scholarship on European imperialism and modern European History more generally.[2]

*L'Empire des Français* is the first volume of the new *Histoire contemporaine* series brought forth by Éditions du Seuil last year which replaces Seuil’s previous series from the 1970s. Geared primarily towards undergraduates, these *histoires contemporaines* aim to introduce the fruits of two generations of scholarship in French and English with a special commitment to new work by young scholars working in France. Lignereux is a “maître de conférences” at l’Institut d’Études Politiques in Grenoble whose recently published *Servir Napoleon*, an exhaustive study of the gendarmeries under Napoleon and throughout the empire, drew praise from David Jordan for its erudition. But in his review published for H-France in July, he observed that Lignereux’s refusal to generalize or draw conclusions is frustrating. “Admirable but narrow” was Jordan’s conclusion about *Servir Napoleon*. [2] Though *L'Empire des Français* is far from narrow in its scope of coverage, it is similarly narrow in the conclusions that it draws.

The book begins with a question: is it possible to write a history of the consulate and empire? The answer is amply documented in the literature review which follows, a quantitative and qualitative treatment of recent and classic Napoleon scholarship in French and English. Lignereux’s work exemplifies the “New Napoleonic History,” which, according to Michael Broers, “turns on the examination of Napoleon’s civil reforms... on what was attempted,” and requires that “the man be pushed, if not away, at least a little aside.” [3] This approach is less preoccupied with military achievements and failures, by definition of a more fleeting nature, than with institutional legacies. Lignereux’s book is indeed exemplary of this “new” approach. As the book’s title indicates, Lignereux has written about the French rather than about Napoleon. This subtle foregrounding of Napoleon is largely successful and is likely to hold the attention of readers who care less about the great men of history than the people whose lives their decisions structured in every way. Because of his expertise in the gendarmerie, Lignereux documents the depths of imperial control, whether in finance, law, censorship, style, or military service. His approach is chronological within broad categories. Some of these categories are fairly straightforward, such as “Finir la Revolution,” while others are more abstract, such as “Une Génération impérialiste.”

There are four sections with three chapters each. Every section begins with a brief overview and includes a compelling question, useful to instructors teaching the text. Chapter titles are sometimes provocative: “Tout Empire Périra?” or evocative: “Napoleon et 40 millions de Français.” The scope of the work is sweeping, at least for the European Empire. Questions of citizenship and Frenchness animate the most compelling and original sections, especially given the relative lack of attention among scholars to this crucial period in the construction of national identity and the imagined community of the nation. “Devenir français” explores debates about the transmission of citizenship, ranging from those regarding birthplace, surname and marriage to the development of “social criteria” such as literacy, profession and land-owning (p. 262). The author highlights the conservative view of the empire represented by Chateaubriand among others in which the French nation is “reduced to a province in the European Empire” (p. 270). The hybrid identities and legal quandaries that evolved can also be seen in imperial foods like “poulet Marengo,” developed when army cooks were forced to dress chicken with tomatoes and onions (p. 259). The other side of the “reunion,” the amalgamation of Europeans into the Empire, was the forced citizenship of Belgian officers whose property would be confiscated if they did not swear allegiance (p. 267). These sections will change how instructors teach this material, and for this reason alone the book is valuable, especially for those interested in raising issues of pan-European identity in light of similar debates in today’s EU.

Although the book claims to be about the French people, the focus on policy renders the work more of an institutional history than a genuine social history. DMG Sutherland’s history of this same period was more successful at centering the narrative on the “ancient weight of peasant France.”<sup>[4]</sup> Lignereux does document the integration of peasants into the empire’s government, including the prevalence of “peasant” mayors who accounted for 40 percent of all mayors in 1811 (p. 113). He explores paths to notability among the French themselves and then later in the empire. But there are few stories or names, let alone colorful episodes, though opportunities should be in ample supply. For example, popular theater and papal injunctions collided over Napoleon’s decision to vaccinate troops. While the author references popular “anti-vaccinisme,” he doesn’t discuss the roots of it. Instead, he offers two other gems, clearly illustrating his orientation. The first is from the police archives, regarding an order of nuns devoted to health care (“filles de la sagesse”): “Ces bonnes filles nous sont trop utiles pour les tourner en ridicule” (p. 170). The second is his statistical analysis of the prevalence of the practice and the resulting decrease in mortality.

Although Lignereux’s discussion of the vaccine episode would have been enriched by a gender analysis, he does include women where topically relevant, including the displacement of midwives by doctors as medical learning about gender physiology located women’s unfitness for public life in the body (p. 127). He explores the gender implications of the Civil Code, pointing out how laws regarding the division of estates to sons and daughters offset other retrograde measures (p. 127). Women feature in sections on the empire style in furniture and clothing surrounding Josephine, and on the role of notable women such as Stéphanie de Genlis in knowledge production (p. 140). His description of the cover art (which unfortunately only occurs on p. 276) draws attention to the various positions occupied by members of a family looking at a map of the Empire in 1807. Boilly’s “La Lecture du Bulletin de la Grande Armée” may very well be “assuredly patriotic,” but Lignereux might further analyze the ambivalence he notes in the female figure’s gaze. Her fiancée kisses her hand, eyes downcast in an obvious gesture of melancholy at his imminent departure. Thus, the image contains multiple meanings, but we are left with only the briefest mention of the most obvious one.

The tendency to mention rather than analyze challenges all textbook authors, but when the author suggests he will take a position on a particular issue, readers expect more. Lignereux explicitly locates his work in the context of contemporary racial politics. In answer to his rhetorical question of whether it is possible to write a contemporary history of the consulate and empire, he mentions the status of Blacks in France today and the conflicts in the *banlieues*, (p. 11) leading the reader to expect an analysis

of the evolution of French racism, rooted in the institutions and imperial practices of the first Empire. Examples do appear occasionally, but it is left to the reader to connect the dots. The slight attention to slavery, to the Caribbean colonies, and to race more broadly demonstrates his relative lack of engagement with these questions, though there were several missed opportunities. After describing the reintroduction of slavery in the Caribbean, for example, he briefly discusses the dismissal of black officers from the forces in 1802 and prohibition of interracial marriages in 1803. Contrasting these policies with Baudry's negrophilia and enlightened views of the unity of the human race, he nods in the direction of the Revolution's multiple legacies, but that is as far as he goes (pp. 47-48). Elsewhere he describes contests over colonial possessions from Senegal to Java and the French refusal to enlist men of color as examples of policies which were "in a sense racial" (pp. 79-80). Indeed they were. That, at least, would be the conclusion drawn by historians of the Black Atlantic, not to mention scholars of the New British Imperial History, which he claims is "transposables au domaine français" (p. 13).

This begs the question of the purpose and intended audience for the series. Unlike the previous series, this one begins in 1799, not 1789. Lignereux attributes disinterest in the Napoleonic period to contemporary anti-Bonapartism (p.11) and to the bicentennial celebrations of 1789. Preferring to honor strides during the revolutionary era towards eliminating racism (the extension of the rights of man to free men of color in 1791 and the abolition of slavery in 1794) rather than their swift reversal by Napoleon, public historians and professional scholars may indeed have neglected the era of Bonaparte. Thus *L'Empire des Français* and the series more generally may be a corrective. But readers are left to conclude that 1789 is no longer viewed as the origin of contemporary France, though Lignereux draws attention to the many ways in which Napoleon's regime operationalized the Revolution. Is the *bureaucratization* of the Revolution then the proper origin of contemporary France? And is the decade of the Revolution itself now seen as the end of the previous epoch? Because its *Histoire* modern series will not be complete for some time, we have to wait to see how Seuil situates the Revolution as the end of modern history. And on the question of race, are these *reversals*, as opposed to the grand ideas and the legislation they overturned, the starting point for contemporary French History? Or are the author and the series avowedly apolitical?

Pamela Pilbeam also pondered the seeming lack of political or ideological engagement in her review of volume 3 of this series, Quentin Deluermoz's, *Le crépuscule des révolutions 1848-1871*.<sup>[5]</sup> Thus, if this series is any indicator, French scholars of French history, at least those published by Seuil, eschew political questions or metanarratives in a turn away from the politically charged approaches to their history which dominated French academia during the previous century. Lignereux does not offer an overarching interpretation, distancing himself directly but offhandedly from a Marxist reading of Napoleon's legacy by referencing that of Tocqueville, but neither figure nor interpretation are discussed further (p. 348). Students reading this book will not know that a Marxist interpretation of the Revolution dominated French historiography for decades, nor even what such a beast once looked like.

Perhaps contemporary French undergraduates and the authors who write for them care more about questions of citizenship in a transnational *European* entity such as the Napoleonic Empire—or the EU—than in the wider world. From reading *L'Empire des Français*, I can only surmise that this is one animus of the work. If Anglophone trends in the historiography of France are any indicator, however, the French have always existed in the wider world, contacts with which figure in the construction of contemporary French identity. Occasionally, Lignereux glimpses this idea. To round out the section on popular reactions to lifting grain trade regulations, for example, he mentions the "Le Laboureur Chinois," an opera from 1813 which exalted the generosity of the Chinese Emperor compared to "l'impuissance nourricière" of Napoleon (p. 97). *L'Empire des Français* is at its best when it enlivens the narrative with such tidbits. For Anglophone instructors, an occasional rich episode such as this one, the description of Napoleonic institutions, the sections on citizenship, and the many statistics will make this book worth consulting, but the analysis and interpretation will be left to its readers.

## NOTES

[1] Tracey Rizzo and Steven Gerontakis, *Body and Gender in the Age of Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, under contract).

[2] See, for example, Sebastian Conrad, "Enlightenment in Global History: A Historiographical Critique," *American Historical Review* 117, no. 4 (October 2012): 999-1027; Suzanne Desan, Lynn Hunt, and William Max Nelson, eds., *The French Revolution in Global Perspective* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2013). Reviewed here by Peter McPhee, *H-France Review* Vol. 13 (July 2013) No. 185.

[3] Michael Broers, Peter Hicks and Agustín Guimerá, eds, *The Napoleonic Empire and the New European Political Culture* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 1. Reviewed here by Philip Dwyer, *H-France Review* Vol. 13 (July 2013) No. 160.

[3]. David Jordan, Review of Aurélien Lignereux, *Servir Napoléon: Policiers et gendarmes dans les départements annexés (1796-1814)*. *H-France Review* Vol. 13 (July 2013) No. 108.

[4]. D.M.G. Sutherland, *The French Revolution and Empire: The Quest for a Civic Order* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2003).

[5]. Pamela Pilbeam, Review of Quentin Deluermoz, *Le crépuscule des révolutions 1848-1871*. *H-France Review* Vol. 13 (July 2013) No. 106, p. 1.

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