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Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard, and Dominic Thomas, eds., *The Colonial Legacy in France: Fracture, Rupture, and Apartheid*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017. xi + 485 pp. Bibliography and index. \$60.00 U.S. (hb.) ISBN 0-253-02625-3.

Review by Nimisha Barton, Independent Scholar and Diversity Consultant.

The Colonial Legacy in France is a contribution by academics who have eagerly engaged a broad reading public in the last few years about the historical roots of Western society's recent "withdrawal" into itself, often articulated in the accents of racism, Islamophobia, and a "clash of civilizations." [1] It is a substantial volume divided into three parts, each reproducing about a dozen selected essays from volumes previously published under the titles *La Fracture coloniale* (2005), *Ruptures postcoloniales* (2010), and *Vers la guerre des identités* (2016). [2] The publication dates are significant: The publication dates are significant: in 2005, riots in the *banlieues* shook (white) France from its postcolonial torpor; in 2015, radical Islamic terrorists attacked Charlie Hebdo headquarters, the Super Kasher, and the Bataclan nightclub, events that rendered the French a people definitively at war with themselves. "Today," the editors write in the introduction, "we are caught in an identity maelstrom that has been handed down from imperial history, infused with cultural and economic globalization and multidirectional migratory flows, all of which were brought into the light of day during the 2015 attacks" (p. 8). The volume traces the path from 2005 to 2015.

The introduction, translated from *Vers la guerre des identités*, serves as a wide-ranging think piece, moving thematically from historical to contemporary topics, assembling and analyzing various factors that led to France's current crisis, and drawing out the colonial history and postcolonial racism at work therein. Bringing together over a decade of previously published work, the argument arising from the volume's many contributions is that the colonial past is not just a sore spot but a blind spot in French national memory and public discourse. Consequently, many (white) French people cannot see the interrelation of exclusivist discourses and public policies on citizenship and immigration, racialized inequities endemic to public housing, schooling, and policing in the *banlieues*, rising levels of racism in the public sphere, and the radicalization of some Muslim youth of postcolonial immigrant origin. These phenomena stem from the nation's collective inability to find a history of empire upon which all segments of French society can agree. Because of its failure to adequately confront its imperial past, France has succumbed to increasingly violent wars of recrimination between left and right and is currently at a stalemate on the role of race in French society. Reintroducing these themes at this moment is, to be sure, a worthwhile contribution.

According to the co-editors, the volume does not seek to provide a "monolithic interpretation of the situation in France today," but only to improve our "understanding." Indeed, the trope of "understanding without excusing," which recurs throughout the introduction and in several contributions, would at first blush appear a narrow aim for a scholarly work. After all, "understanding" is the implicit goal of scholarship. Yet, the contributions seem poised to engage a broad popular audience interested in contemporary French society and, judging by what our fraught and fragile times

require, “understanding” could be read as an ambitious, even noble goal. That goal is not explicitly stated, but the volume’s structure, methodology, and journalistic style of argumentation suggest it. In the introduction, for instance, the editors are at pains to reassure readers that “Our aim is not to incriminate or make the nation feel guilty” (p. 20), a sentence not only telling of the sad state of public discourse in the West but revealing of why “understanding” alone has become a worthy goal unto itself. By helping readers learn about the French colonial past and postcolonial present, they can at last eschew feelings of “guilt,” “hatred,” or “self-hatred” and instead engage in “peaceful coexistence as opposed to defensive identities” (pps. 5, 8, 21). “‘The end of empire’ left an open wound in French nationalism,” they argue, and a new, more inclusive national history must be written if healing is to occur (p. 21). By restoring an agreed-upon history of empire, decolonization, and immigration to scholarly and popular understandings of French national history, they may even help young people of post-colonial immigrant origin finally find their place in the national community, neutralizing for some their need to seek a radically inclusive community elsewhere, through violence if necessary.

With thirty-five short chapters in addition to the introduction, the volume offers readers diverse fare. Like spokes on a wheel, each chapter radiates out of a common core but extends in different directions, an approach which has its virtues. It covers a wide range of topics and, given the brevity of contributions (rarely longer than six pages), is accessible to an Anglophone undergraduate audience. The encyclopedic coverage of recent political events written in urgent, even alarmist tones, will engage undergraduates and familiarize them with debates in contemporary France over history and memory, empire and race, identity, immigration, and Islam. Because the volume translates a significant amount of French intellectual production written over the course of what was a turbulent decade worldwide, it may also provide students an opportunity to reflect on the painful similarities between French society and their own, inviting them into high-stakes conversations that hit dangerously close to home yet remain appropriately distant, safe. In the hopes of encouraging precisely that, this review surveys a few of the most compelling chapters in the volume and makes suggestions for how to use them in the classroom.

A few contributions give advanced undergraduate and graduate students insight into the evolution of the historiography and even the biases within French academic culture that impact (or impede) that evolution. Bancel’s “A Difficult History” delivers a history of the field of colonial and postcolonial history in France, accounting for its relative marginalization in the French academy as opposed to its Anglo-American counterpart. “[T]he idea of France as a postcolonial society is still practically unthinkable among professional historians,” Bancel first wrote in 2005, a reminder of the radical project he and his editors initially undertook in *La Fracture Coloniale* (p.65). His piece could also be usefully paired with Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch’s “Postcolonial Studies in French Academia” and Stora’s “When a (War) Memory Hides Another (Colonial) Memory.” While the former explains the “rejection” of postcolonial theory among French academics, a phenomenon she attributes to cultural insularity, academic snobbery, and pure chauvinism, the latter describes how misremembering the Algerian War has prevented the French public more widely from “com[ing] to terms with its colonial history” (p.53).

Several contributions also provide useful orientation for debates surrounding empire, race, and republicanism that often attract scholarly attention. The introduction, of course, presents one content-rich option, though it occasionally veers into territory that, while of interest to specialists, may be less useful to undergraduates. Other chapters, though covering well-trod historiographical terrain, do so in just a few pages that give readers a basic understanding of key questions. For instance, in the first chapter, “Republican Origins of the Colonial Fracture,” Bancel and Blanchard (two of the volume’s three co-editors) usefully explore that favorite bugbear of modern French historians: how republicanism, a supposedly liberatory universalizing ideology, could possibly sit alongside empire, a political and cultural project upheld by a particularizing system of racist beliefs. In fact, they show (as many others have, as well), how these ideologies were not at odds, but were mutually constitutive. Michel Wieviorka’s chapter, “The Republic, Colonization, and Beyond,” extends this analysis by explaining how and why so few French people are willing to agree to this accepted scholarly wisdom. According to

Wieviorka, not only does the belief “[put] into question the greatness of the nation and the universal character of republican values, but also it attempts at imposing a new political culture,” one that would look disturbingly like the “American-style multiculturalism” that the French so “deplore” (p. 135). The two pieces work well together, presenting academic arguments about empire, race, and republicanism that, while conventional fare for academics, the public finds hard to swallow. That disconnect alone offers useful discussion fodder.

For those new to the field, the volume supplies some *longue-durée* readings of important historical phenomena, such as, for instance, Patrick Simon’s “‘Race,’ Ethnicization, and Discrimination.” In addition to providing a short historiographical overview of immigration in France, Simon does a broad sweep of the use and non-use of race as an analytical category, which should help non-French undergraduates understand the French aversion to that category. Simon ends the piece with the kind of paradoxical claim that undergraduates love: that in order to become a truly post-racial society, “colorblind France” must finally acknowledge race (p. 196). Similarly, Rachid Benzine furnishes a reading of France’s long history with Islam and Islamophobia, taking into account its own fraught religious history and solution to wars of religion (*laïcité*) as well as modern incarnations of Islamic terrorism and their relationship to the Algerian War for Independence. Benzine, too, ends with an easily digestible reading of how Islamophobia forms the new consensual identitarian terrain for white Europeans. “When we have trouble defining who we are,” Benzine writes, “the most natural reaction is to decide ‘who we are not’” (p. 317).

The chief strength of the volume’s contributions is to explore contemporary public debates on immigration, race, and far-right politics, and many pieces serve well as stand-alone assigned readings. Ariane Chebel d’Appollonia examines the Taubira Affair, one of the more repulsive public episodes of the last few years, in order to shed light on the French inability to define, curb, or otherwise reach consensus on “hate speech.” In particular, her assertion that the Front National “made differentialist racism a mainstream issue” should ring bells, as does her observation that they are largely responsible for “a kind of banalization of hate speech” (pp. 304–305). According to d’Appollonia, FN representatives latched on to publicly acceptable observations of racial and ethnic “difference” then linked them to “preferential hierarchies,” leading to facile formulations like, “hierarchies, preferences, and affinities are only natural. I am French, so I prefer French people” (p. 305). Sylvain Crépon’s “Faces of the Front National (1972–2015)” rounds out this portrait of the FN by investigating how Marine Le Pen “updated” the party’s politics. According to Crépon, Le Pen gave France’s far-rightism a more democratic cast primarily by highlighting what was once considered the best that French republicanism had to offer—namely, its promise of secularism and assimilationism. Excerpted from *Les Années 30 sont de retour*, pieces by Yvan Gastaut and Renaud Dély give undergraduates a neat juxtaposition between that unhappy decade and our own. Gastaut analyzes how economic downturn, anti-immigrant rhetoric, and national identity march in lockstep and Dély examines how Western societies that see themselves as “in decline” imagine enemies within—Communists in the 1930s, Muslims today.

Several chapters will pair nicely with assigned readings exploring contemporary life for postcolonial immigrants in the forgotten suburbs of France (think Mehdi Charef’s *Tea in the Harem*). These include Thomas Delthombe and Mathieu Rigouste’s “The Enemy Within,” Anna Bozzo’s “Islam and the Republic,” and Didier Lapeyronnie’s “The *Banlieues* as a Colonial Theater.” While all plumb the relationship between postcolonial immigrant youths in French society, touching on the media, public schooling, urban housing, and policing practices, Lapeyronnie’s piece features interviews with young Muslims from the banlieues and is thus one of the volume’s few chapters that allows postcolonial immigrants—on behalf of whom all the authors write—to actually speak for themselves.

For the more courageous among you, the chapter by Alain Mabanckou and Dominic Thomas (the third of the volume’s editors) will make for spirited classroom discussion. The article analyzes South African artist Brett Bailey’s controversial 2013 installation, “Exhibit B,” which recreated the “human zoos” of the International Exposition era. As such, it invites students to consider deeper questions about empire

and history, racism and memory, privilege and the power of the (white, male) gaze. While faculty could usefully assign the reading alongside images from the exhibit, they must of course carefully prepare students in advance of the discussion, for instance reminding them how and why the images are potentially disturbing and providing them with the critical tools necessary to productively and responsibly interrogate the images. It is a worthwhile classroom exercise that gets to the heart of what today's faculty members (and Bailey himself) should be asking: what is the balance between pedagogy and provocation? How do we teach in a responsible way that embraces both empathy and rigor? How will we use the classroom (or the artist, an exhibit) to invite society's members in rather than shut them out?

One of the more delightful surprises of the collection is its fair number of readings devoted to the history and practice of teaching slavery, empire, and decolonization in French classrooms. Benoît Falaize's chapter, for instance, examines the evolution of French high school history lessons over the last half century, how teachers struggled and stalled at identity issues in the face of a student population with immigrant and often post-colonial immigrant origins. According to Falaize, "From the 'enchanted future' promised by the traditional narrative of French history...the school system transitioned to a confrontation with a 'disappointing past,' in which a form of guilty and repentant memory at times gives way to history as 'therapy' for a society that is being assailed by identity claims, issues of memory, and competition between memories" (p. 240). Though it is most certainly of primary interest to French educators, faculty in universities outside of France would be remiss if they did not ask themselves how an increasingly diverse undergraduate student body receives—or does not—lessons on French history crafted in and handed down from another era. For Falaize, the best way to confront today's postcolonial classroom "is to understand that the history of slavery, colonization, and immigration is not 'other' people's history...; rather, it is a shared history" (p. 241). In many ways, Falaize's chapter goes furthest in suggesting how to inculcate those habits of mind in the next generation that will allow them to understand, as the editors of this volume so desire.

The editors close the volume wisely with Alec Hargreave's "After *Charlie*," one of very few pieces written expressly for the present volume. Summarizing and distilling the volume's multiple themes into a coherent, tightly-written narrative, Hargreaves also explores how and why some young "second-generation immigrants" from post-colonial backgrounds are drawn to the siren song of radical Islam and its strategy of terror. Quoting from Olivier Roy, he writes, "they seek to turn the tables through extreme acts of violence designed to produce 'a world where losers suddenly become winners, be it only for the length of a terrorist attack'" (p. 424). French society today, Hargreaves argues, contends with violent extremism "conceived in distant places" whose appeal the state's "domestic policy shortcomings" has only amplified (p. 413). Moreover, the French lack a vocabulary to discuss these issues, getting lost in a race-infused yet colorblind linguistic quagmire of "victimhood" versus "blame" among "Arabs," "blacks," and "Muslims." By way of closing, Hargreaves reminds readers that France has become "Europe's largest supplier of jihadist recruits" because it is at "an impasse that is in large measure grounded in injustices steeped in the unfinished business of the colonial past" (p. 425). It is an unsatisfying ending, but perhaps the only one possible at present.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard, and Dominic Thomas, "Introduction: A Decade of Postcolonial Crisis: Fracture, Rupture, and Apartheid (2005-2015)"

Part One: Colonial Fracture / 2005

1.1 The Emergence of the Colonial

Nicolas Bancel and Pascal Blanchard, "The Republican Origins of the Colonial Fracture"

Benjamin Stora, "When a (War) Memory Hides Another (Colonial) Memory"

Nicolas Bancel, "A Difficult History: A Brief Historiography of the Colonial and Postcolonial Situation"

Nacira Guénif-Souilamas, "Reducing the Republic's Native to the Body"

Sandrine Lemaire, "Colonization and Immigration: 'Blind Spots' in the History Classroom"

Pascal Blanchard and Isabelle Veyrat-Masson, "Memory Wars: A Study of the Intersection between History and Media"

1.2 The Return of the Colonial

Thomas Deltombe and Mathieu Rigouste, "The Enemy Within: The Construction of the 'Arab' in the Media"

Anna Bozzo, "Islam and the Republic: A Long, Uneasy History"

Michel Wieviorka, "The Republic, Colonization, and Beyond..."

Rony Brauman, "Colonial Natives and Indigents: From the Colonial 'Civilizing Mission' to Humanitarian Action"

Didier Lapeyronnie, "The *Banlieues* as a Colonial Theater, or the Colonial Fracture in Disadvantaged Neighborhoods"

Nicolas Bancel and Pascal Blanchard, "The Pitfalls of Colonial Memory"

Françoise Vergès, "Overseas France: A Vestige of the Republican Colonial Utopia"

Part Two: Postcolonial Ruptures / 2010

2.1 Debating the Colonial Legacy

Jack Dahomay, "Rethinking Politics in the French Overseas Departments"

Patrick Simon, "'Race,' Ethnicization, and Discrimination: Is History Repeating Itself or Is This a Postcolonial Peculiarity?"

Valérie Amiraux, "From the Empire to the Republic: 'French Islam'"

Yvan Gastaut, "Immigration: From *Métèques* to Foreigners"

Pascal Blanchard, "Inequality between Humans: From 'Race Wars' to 'Cultural Hierarchy'"

2.2 Postcolonial and Critical Gazes

Benoît Falaize, "The Postcolonial Challenge of Teaching History: Between History and Memory"

Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, "Postcolonial Studies in French Academia"

Patrick Weil, "From Slavery to the Postcolonial"

Elsa Dorlin, “The Great Strip Show: Feminism, Nationalism, and the Burqa in France”

Renaud Dély, “From the Red Peril to the Green Peril: The New Enemy Within”

Part Three: Apartheid and the War of Identities in France / 2015

3.1 The End of the “French Model”?

Ariane Chebel d’Appollonia, “From the Dakar Speech to the Taubira Affair”

Rachid Benzine, “Could Islamophobia Be the Start of a New Identity-Based Bond in France?”

Alain Mabanckou and Dominic Thomas, “The Black Question and the *Exhibit B* Controversy”

Nicolas Lebourg, “Cultural Orientalization or Political Occidentalism”

Sylvain Crépon, “Faces of the Front National (1972-2015)”

Raphaël Liogier, “Infiltration of Liquid Populism”

3.2 The Rejection of the Other, Identity Radicalization, and the Colonial Unconscious

Achille Mbembe, “Nanoracism and the Force of Emptiness”

Emmanuel Debono, “Antiracism: A Failed Fight or the End of an Era?”

Claire Rodier, “Closing Borders Against Fear: Europe’s Response to the 2015 ‘Migrants Crisis’”

Alain Ruscio, “Toward a Real History of French Colonialism”

Nicolas Bancel and Pascal Blanchard, “Is a Colonial History Museum Politically Impossible?”

Alec Hargreaves, “After *Charlie*: A New Era of Unfinished Business”

NOTES

[1] Claude Askolovitch, Pascal Blanchard, Renaud Dély, and Yvan Gastaut, eds., *Les Années 30 sont de retour: petite leçon d’histoire pour comprendre les crises du présent* (Paris: Flammarion, 2014); Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard, Ahmed Boubaker, eds., *Le Grand repli: pourquoi en sommes-nous arrivés là* (Paris: Découverte, 2015); and, though more academic in nature, Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel, Dominic Thomas, eds., *Vers la guerre des identités?: de la fracture coloniale à la révolution ultranationale* (Paris: Découverte, 2016).

[2] Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel et Sandrine Lemaire, eds., *La Fracture coloniale: la société française au prisme de l’héritage colonial* (Paris: Découverte, 2005); Nicolas Bancel, Florence Bernault, Pascal Blanchard, Ahmed Boubeker, Achille Mbembe, Françoise Vergès, eds., *Ruptures postcoloniales: les nouveaux visages de la société française* (Paris: Découverte, 2010); Bancel, et al., *Vers la guerre des identités?*

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