
H-France Review Vol. 21 (March 2021), No. 31

Douglas W. Leonard, *Anthropology, Colonial Policy, and the Decline of French Empire in Africa*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. xi + 235 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. £85.00 U.K. (hb). ISBN 9781788315203; £76.50 U.K. (EPUB eb). ISBN 9781786726131; £76.50 U.K. (PDF eb). ISBN 9781786736192.

Review by Roy Dilley, University of St Andrews.

In 1852, Louis Léon César Faidherbe, later promoted to General in the French Army during the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-1871, was transferred from Algeria to Senegal in the role of Deputy Director of Engineers. Two years later, now *chef de bataillon*, Faidherbe was appointed Governor of Senegal, a position he held until July 1865, with one brief hiatus from 1861 to 1863. He immediately rose to the task, instituting a new colonial regime that aimed at the *mise en valeur* of the region. With the backing of powerful merchants from Bordeaux, Faidherbe sought to pacify the hinterland along the banks of the Senegal River east from Saint Louis on the coast, where rich pickings in trade were to be had.

One of Faidherbe's first missions was to subjugate and repulse Moorish traders from Saint Louis and its surrounds, sending them back north of the river valley into the desert margins. He then set about quelling Al Hajj Umar Tal and his Futanke followers from Fuuta Toro of the middle valley. Alarmed at the growing power of the militant Islamic leader, Faidherbe went on the offensive, abandoning the cautious approach of his predecessors, and he drove Tal and his armies east. By the time Faidherbe had broken the Tal's siege of the French fort of Medine in 1857, the lower reaches of the valley had been ruthlessly cleared of forces opposed to annexation, leaving French traders to operate relatively unhindered.

Not content with these victories, Faidherbe struck south by engaging in a campaign against the Serer kings of Sine and Saloum, who were crushed in 1859, following a humiliating French defeat at the hands of the enemy just months earlier. Faidherbe undertook this campaign without approval from the authorities in Paris, and under his orders had the settlement of Fatick and surrounding villages burnt to the ground. Sometime later, French forces also invaded Wolof country, leading to the full annexation of the kingdom of Kayor, just north of the Cap Vert peninsula, by 1865. Hostilities continued on and off until 1886 when the Damel or king of Kayor, Lat Dior Diop, was killed in battle against the French, who had by this time established a railway through the heart of Diop's kingdom.

Faidherbe thus transformed his colony from a collection of scattered trading posts into the dominant political and military power in the region. As William Cohen argued, "rough buccaneer

types were probably just the sort of men who were necessary to break local resistance and assert French authority,” and these were only later to be replaced by the bureaucrat. [1] Conquest could impose, so it was claimed, more enlightened and more humane institutions on subjugated regions and their populations. And this is where Douglas Leonard starts his new book by highlighting the humanist, associationist path, with its respect for local social institutions, ways of life and local communities, that Faidherbe and other officers claimed to follow. Leonard opens the book with a chapter on Faidherbe, who cut his colonialist teeth in Guadeloupe and Algeria where, the author argues, the colonial officer learnt the arts of associationism and gained respect for local understanding of native populations—the better to rule them. Faidherbe did, however, come to express sympathy for his African subjects and concern for their welfare; and he set up institutions, for example, to train the sons of traditional chiefs to become more efficient agents of French rule. Leonard, a historian at the United States Air Force Academy, points up what he labels “duality” in the French colonial project: “the humanist possibilities of a colonialism that considered native methods useful and valuable in their own right and the terrible brutality required to ‘pacify’ a hostile population” (p. 12).

It is this duality or extreme contradictory tension at the heart of colonial methods that the reader must hold in mind as she reads this text, for terrible brutality is never far from the surface, and one must remind oneself of it throughout the narrative that is presented to us. The rhetoric of associationists (a term not used in Dakar until after World War One) should be held at a distance from the policies and actions of colonialists on the ground. Indeed, it is sometimes difficult to ascribe clearly the labels “association” or “assimilation” to the processes that were taking place in French colonial territories. As Alice Conklin points out, if people had to “evolve” within their own culture under colonialism, it had to be in a way so as not to conflict with Republican principles of French civilization; [2] indeed, “association and *mise-en-valeur* led to the most coercive period of colonialism in the interwar years.” [3] There was another level of debate about these two differing approaches to colonial policy, and that involved charges of racism. Leonard describes how Marcel Griaule had talked of assimilation as the “unacknowledged child of racism” that denied the importance and vitality of African civilizations” (p. 94). However, there was a counterclaim made by young educated elite West Africans, such as Blaise Diagne, whereby associationism played on customary practices that highlighted difference and otherness, rather than the idea of universal humankind, which was “everywhere equal in potential and deserving of emancipation.” [4]

Leonard’s narrative introduces us in chapter one to Faidherbe and the construction of intellectual networks, and in chapter two to Louis-Hubert Lyautey and General Joseph Gallieni and their early efforts at political association informed by ethnology. Chapter three discusses Paul Marty, a scholar of West African Islam, and Maurice Delafosse, another administrator-scholar of West Africa who attempted to engage native sources to develop an informed colonial state. The figure of Marcel Mauss, based in Paris, who reached out to the colonies for ethnographic insight, is outlined in chapter four. Chapter five, entitled “Jacques Soustelle and the ethnological state,” focuses on Algeria during the period of revolt against the colonial authorities. The sixth chapter focuses on Pierre Bourdieu, whose colonial heritage was forged in Algeria in the 1950s and 1960s, and who subsequently sought to define new directions for French social theory.

The key theoretical concept driving Leonard’s text is the “rhizome,” which he takes from Deleuze and Guattari’s work *A Thousand Plateaus* and uses to track a “path through the infinite connections” coalescing around the “single idea [of] political association” in the French colonial

system (p. 4). The investment in this fascinating approach certainly delivers dividends in understanding the processes by which French colonial officials generated ethnological knowledge and thereby technologies of rule. Leonard is to be applauded for attempting to go beyond the directives issued by the metropolitan government or by colonial governors situated in African cities, and toward the reality of colonial practitioners in the field. That reality was one defined by tenderness and tense ties, by intimacy and violence, by humanity and brutality at almost every turn.[5] The conditions of possibility of ethnological knowledge were predicated upon this reality; but the lack of recognition of those conditions by its authors fatally undermined the enterprise.

This idea of the lack of recognition throws up a question about Leonard's choice of epigram taken from Marty's work at the start of chapter three. The selected extract, under the heading "Colonialism bred violence," describes in gory detail how the inhabitants of the forest region of Côte d'Ivoire dismembered a French train conductor. What might have been equally, if not more, instructive would have been to choose an example of how colonialism bred violence among its own colonial officers, the primary focus of the book. Such a view might be embraced as part of the author's "transactional approach" (p. 4) towards the colony; indeed, it would be to take an example that does not play to colonial stereotypes of African "savagery" (p. 47). Instead, framing the uncivilizing influence of the supposedly civilizing mission of French colonialism might have turned our attention back to the imperialists. The atrocities committed by the Voulet and Chanoine mission of 1898–1899 in the Soudan en route to Lake Chad, for instance, illustrates this point;[6] as does the case of two French administrators, Toqué and Gaud, who, in celebrating 14 July 1903 at Fort Crampel, on the borders of the French Congo, ignited dynamite strapped to the body of a native guide to mark the national day. Colonialism certainly did breed violence even among the most ordinary of men; it was part of the colonial transaction.

Leonard describes in welcome detail the way in which Faidherbe, Gallieni, and then Lyautey cultivated, employed, and exploited African savants and local informants in assembling a body of knowledge for use by the colonial state. These rhizomes bred connections not only within West Africa but also back to the metropolitan center, where academics, such as Marcel Mauss, sought to draw on and in turn influence the direction and scope of ethnological missions. Maurice Delafosse was, for example, a prime correspondent with Mauss, who himself was the teacher of the next generation of colonial administrator ethnologists, such as Jacques Soustelle. Governor Soustelle's system of ethnological surveillance, however, failed to pick up the causes of the nascent revolt in Algeria by dismissing the young, largely secular urban elites, who refused cooperation with the colonialists and who, together with the alienated rural poor, were crucial sources of discontent. Soustelle's resort to the use of torture and of increased military force sounded the death knell to his regime, which ironically became increasingly linked to the aspirations of many right-wing *pièdes noirs*.

Another plank of Leonard's argument is that the ideas and perspectives arising from the field in French colonial Africa led to a reshaping of French social theory as articulated in Paris. Marcel Mauss, although he never conducted any sustained fieldwork as such, encouraged others to engage in firsthand research overseas. He was, for example, a prime mover in raising funding both in Europe and the United States for Marcel Griaule's Dakar-Djibouti mission of 1931–1933. And it is in this context that Leonard highlights one of the main contributions of Pierre Bourdieu, whose early ethnographic work descends, it is argued, from that of Maurice Delafosse (p. 124).

Bourdieu moves from his empirical studies of Algeria through a period as a “blissful structuralist,” to then go on to develop a theory of practice.[7]

Leonard’s analysis of the ethnological rhizome stretching across West Africa and back to mainland France is engaging, informative, and valuable. This aspect is one of the central attractions of the book for this particular reader. I wonder, however, whether scholars of French social theory will be so enamored of the last few chapters (especially chapters four and six), where Leonard places less emphasis on his earlier biographical approach to the origins and effects of colonial ethnology (p. 4) and more on tracing French social theory via debates between academics in Paris, such as Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, and Claude Lévi-Strauss and Pierre Bourdieu. A number of the key points raised by Leonard are moot. In escaping the influence of his uncle Durkheim, Mauss is said to have emphasized a focus on individuals rather than social institutions: “Individuals, then, held the key to understanding the fundamental principles that guided societies,” states Leonard in relation to Mauss’s method (p. 92). He repeats a similar claim with respect to Bourdieu’s theory of practice, which was forged in “intertextual conflict” with the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss: “Bourdieu thus advocated for social study focused first on the individual” (p. 140).

The place and status of the individual (that ideological obsession of Anglo-American thinking) in French social thought is complex, nuanced, and long-debated in Paris (from Durkheim to Louis Dumont, from Mauss to Michel Foucault, and beyond) and cannot be reduced to such simplistic assertions. While Bourdieu, for example, tried to introduce “real-life actors” into the sociological equation, he did so with regard for the “structuring structures” of habitus,[8] or in an attempt to open up the idea of strategy in gift exchange, where the timing and tempo of the gift were key. These strategies were to be understood within the context of the principles of reciprocity originally identified by Mauss in 1925. Indeed, the extent to which “real-life actors” are granted agency in Bourdieu’s scheme of things is not undebated.[9]

This reader would certainly have preferred to see less on the critiques of Durkheimian or Lévi-Straussian forms of social theory (of which there is an abundance in any university library) and more on the way in which, say, Bourdieu’s “efforts to extricate Algeria from its associationist stance” was effected through his “engaged ethno-sociology” (p. 145). Equally, more is required on how Bourdieu sought to assist the politically disadvantaged through social reform after first understanding the “collectivity’s fundamentals” (p. 141). Such topics would have extended the reach of the most important contribution that this book makes to our understanding of an emerging ethnology and anthropology in the context of the French colonial system in Africa.

Leonard concludes that the decline of the French empire in Africa is linked to both the lack of any real consent on the part of the governed and the unwillingness to acknowledge the power differences inherent in the colonial system itself. He also argues that “ethnological conversations, both textual and oral, with native Africans” (p. 147) triggered a sense of identity, of cultural nationalism, and of political consciousness among local populations (just as participation by African troops in the trenches of World War I had done, too). Specifically, the networks generated by French writers, thinkers, and administrators would give “native Africans the tools to dismantle colonialism” (p. 149), to “ultimately undo the instruments of colonial rule” (p. 6). There is a poetic justice in the idea that bourgeois French colonial officers created their own systemic gravediggers.

NOTES

[1] William Cohen, *Rulers of Empire: The French Colonial Service in Africa* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1971).

[2] Alice L. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 6.

[3] Conklin, p. 247

[4] Conklin, p. 204.

[5] See, for example, Martin Thomas, ed., *The French Colonial Mind: Mental Maps of Empire and Colonial Encounters*, vol. 2, *Violence, Military Encounters, and Colonialism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011).

[6] Bertrand Taithe, *The Killer Trail: A Colonial Scandal in the Heart of Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[7] See Pierre Bourdieu, "The Kabyle House or the World Reversed," in *Algeria 1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1979), pp.133-153.

[8] A more complete quotation describes habitus as "systems of durable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures," in Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 72.

[9] See, for example, Richard Jenkins, *Pierre Bourdieu* (London: Routledge, 1992).

Roy Dilley

University of St Andrews

r.m.dilley@st-andrews.ac.uk

Copyright © 2021 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 republication 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