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James E. Genova, *Colonial Ambivalence, Cultural Authenticity, and the Limitations of Mimicry in French-Ruled West Africa, 1914-1956*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2004. xi + 300 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$72.95 US (cl). ISBN 0-8204-6941-6.

Review by Owen White, University of Delaware.

The noun *évolué* is one of a number of lexical innovations from the colonial era that point to some of the attitudes that underpinned French overseas rule from the latter part of the nineteenth century. Used to designate an African who had received a certain amount of French education, the word presumed French superiority yet offered the possibility that this level might be attained by those willing to learn. Through its implication that an individual could “evolve” by acquiring positive attributes in the course of his or her life, the theory of evolution to which the concept gestured appears more consistent with the ideas of the French biologist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck than those of Charles Darwin. In the way that it had its roots in the biological sciences yet purported to be assigned according to a culturally defined measurement, the word *évolué* might be said to stand for much more that is true of French colonialism and French views of non-French peoples.

The cumbersome title of James E. Genova’s book rather conceals its primary content, which is an analysis of the rise to prominence and, ultimately, power of those West Africans whom the French described as *évolués*. Genova argues that such people, among them well-known figures like Léopold Sédar Senghor, cultivated a claim both to natural authority within Africa—they were the “true” nationalists, in touch with Africa’s roots in a way that representatives of industrial labor were not—and as indispensable cultural brokers in dealings with the French. Their emergence as “a self-conscious social category” (p. 2) and accession to power in the decolonization era in West Africa has had effects well into the post-colonial period, among which Genova suggests have been repercussions unfavorable to organized labor and movements for women’s emancipation. Genova further contends that the emergence in the colonial period of a shared French and West African “assumption of essential and immutable cultural differences between Europeans and Africans” (p. 281) continues to manifest itself in the form of French tolerance for authoritarian regimes in Africa (on the basis that Africa has its own special standards for measuring political liberty); while the concerns expressed for the sanctity of “Frenchness” in the debate over immigration might also be compared to the rise of ethnic particularism in places like Côte d’Ivoire.

Genova begins his analysis in 1914, when the election of Blaise Diagne as Senegal’s deputy to the National Assembly in Paris made a powerful statement about the rising influence of a French-educated elite in West Africa. The Great War tended to amplify this influence due to the exigencies of French recruitment in Africa, but at the war’s end prominent commentators like the ethnologist Maurice Delafosse (a dedicated opponent of Diagne) argued strongly that African recruits should now go back to being Africans in their “traditional” environment. This general outlook was reflected in French West Africa between the wars in the move to restore some degree of power to “traditional” chiefs and in policy initiatives intended to reinforce this development, such as the creation of so-called *écoles rurales populaires* that aimed to teach rural Africans something of their own “heritage.” Some West African *évolués*, particularly those like Senghor who had based themselves in France and were participating in the elaboration of essentialist ideas of *négritude*, were sympathetic to the aims of this program. Like so many of the schemes devised by colonial policy-makers, the *écoles rurales* proved ephemeral. But Genova argues that this unexpected confluence of interests between some *évolués* and the colonial power can be

seen to have had longer term significance, in the sense that *évolués* often proved willing henceforth “to embrace the practices and discourse of colonial rule and wield them as weapons of resistance against colonial domination” (p. 122). Genova holds that the story of widening African political participation after World War Two reflects this pattern, right up to the *loi cadre* or enabling act of 1956 which Genova states resulted primarily from “the ascendancy of the *évolués* as the dominant social force in West Africa” (p. 250).

Though the broad outlines of much of Genova’s narrative will already be known to those familiar with the work of historians like Tony Chafer, Frederick Cooper, and Alice Conklin,^[1] the theme of cultural authenticity is one that Genova does well to highlight and he has put in solid archival work to this end in Aix-en-Provence and Dakar.^[2] There are, however, several problems in the way the argument is cast that prevent the book from being fully persuasive. Perhaps the most significant problem lies in Genova’s use of the term *évolué* as his principal category of analysis. The concept, after all, was emphatically a French invention, and it is not clear to me that any of the Africans described in the book ever used the term to label themselves; at any rate, none of Genova’s quotations indicate that this was the case. Moreover, even within the terms of his analysis it is never exactly clear who the *évolués* were. Early on Genova defines the objects of his enquiry as a “French-educated elite” (p. 2), yet he does not say what kind of schooling one needed to qualify—was a missionary education good enough?—or how much.^[3] When discussing the Four Communes of Senegal, Genova broadens the definition to one based primarily on residence: they were “an urban social group” that retained “strong familial and historic links” to the countryside (p. 22). Later, the definition appears to be extended once more to incorporate different kinds of life experience, particularly those that might have caused some sort of social alienation, as when Genova refers to “demobilized *tirailleurs*, and all other *évolués*...” (p. 58). By this time it is hard to see on what basis *évolués* can have constituted an “elite” within West Africa, and the lack of definitional clarity poses serious problems for Genova’s assertion that they represented “a self-conscious social category” with “a unique identity” (p. 2). Similarly, the backgrounds of prominent individuals like Félix Houphouët-Boigny, a planter with a medical training from a chiefly lineage, suggest the problems inherent in drawing too sharp a distinction between those that might be called *évolués* and those who Genova persistently labels “the pre-colonial elite.” Indeed, the limitations of such labels show how careful colonial historians need to be when appropriating colonial terminology for their own analyses.

NOTES

[1] Tony Chafer, *The End of Empire in French West Africa. France’s Successful Decolonization?* (Oxford: Berg, 2002); Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society. The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Alice L. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize. The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

[2] More than once—though he does not cite this particular source—Genova’s analysis echoes concerns addressed by Jean-Loup Amselle in *Mestizo Logics: Anthropology of Identity in Africa and Elsewhere* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998). Notions of cultural authenticity among colonized peoples have also recently been discussed in, for example, Alice L. Conklin, “Who Speaks for Africa? The René Maran-Blaise Diagne Trial in 1920s Paris,” in Sue Peabody and Tyler Stovall (eds.), *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 302-337; and Eric Jennings, “Conservative Confluences, ‘Nativist’ Synergy: Reinscribing Vichy’s National Revolution in Indochina, 1940-1945,” *French Historical Studies* 27:3 (2004): 601-636.

[3] Genova's analysis would have benefited, I think, from exploring the formative role of the École William Ponty in the lives of many of the historical actors he describes; this federal school located in Senegal trained many African schoolteachers, who as Genova notes were disproportionately prominent in colonial politics. On this institution see Peggy Roark Sabatier, "Educating a Colonial Elite: the William Ponty School and its Graduates" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1977).

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