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Emmanuelle Saada, *Les Enfants de la colonie : Les métis de l'Empire français entre sujétion et citoyenneté*. Paris: Editions de la Découverte, 2007. 335 pp. Notes and bibliography. 24€. ISBN 978-2-7071-3982-5.

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While the question of *métissage* has in the last two decades generated a significant volume of scholarly works from a diverse range of disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives, Emmanuelle Saada's monograph, which grew out of her 2001 doctoral dissertation at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, is quite unique in that it provides the first systematic and in-depth investigation of the judicial aspects of what was referred to as "la question métisse."<sup>[1]</sup> Drawing on a wide array of materials ranging from archival and juridical sources to works from legal studies, history, anthropology and sociology, the author reconstructs the highly complex and tortuous trajectory that transformed the legal status of the empire's *métis* from that of native subjects to being French citizens during the first quarter of the twentieth century. Given the book's focus, the term "métis" in *Les Enfants de la colonie* is used to refer not to mixed-race children in general, but to the *métis non reconnus*, that is, those born out of wedlock that had not been legally recognized by their European fathers and were abandoned by them. As a result, this group of *métis* was given by default the status of native subjects. It was the plight of this particular category of illegitimate and racially mixed progeny of European men that became the object of the interventions of administrators, philanthropists and legal professionals in the colonies.

The starting point of Saada's investigation of "the *métis* problem" is the 8 November 1928 decree which made it possible for the *métis non reconnus* born in Indochina to be granted French citizenship if one of their parents, legally unknown, could be presumed to be of "French race." According to the decree, this presumption could be established "par tous les moyens," which include "le nom que porte l'enfant, le fait qu'il a reçu une formation, une éducation et une culture françaises, sa situation dans la société" (p.13). The momentous interest of this legal text was twofold. On the one hand, it constituted the first occurrence of the word "race" in French legislation. On the other hand, the term was deployed not for an exclusive purpose, but rather to justify the integration of certain subjects of the empire in French citizenry.

Using the 1928 decree as the basis of her narrative, Saada's study of the socio-legal history of the *métis* in the empire is organized into three parts. The first part focuses on the social condition of mixed-race children before 1928. This is followed by the history of the legal articulation of the "question métisse" leading to the promulgation of the decree. The final section examines the changes effected by the decree the most important of which was the dissolution of the "*métis*" category itself. While the problem of mixed-race children was a phenomenon affecting in varying degrees many parts of the empire, it was particularly acute in Indochina, which had served as an arena for some of the most intense debates on the subject. The centrality of the Asian colony in the formulation of the "*métis* question" explains the author's extensive reliance on Indochinese sources in her investigation.

The first part of the book provides a detailed and carefully researched history of the construction and evolution of the "*métis* question" across the French empire. In her analysis of the numerous articles and reports by colonial philanthropists and administrators on the plight of illegitimate mixed-race children,

Saada shows how starting in late nineteenth century the “*métis* question” was construed as a socio-legal problem involving primarily the European male parent while totally occluding the role of the native mother. Among the *métis* population, the group that had most captured the attention of *métis* sympathizers were those that were raised by their European fathers during their childhood years, but subsequently abandoned by them. In the eyes of the colonial philanthropists, what made the plight of these children particularly poignant was the incongruity between their legal status as native subjects and their “real” identity that was rooted in their physical appearance, their “French blood,” and their early French upbringing.

Besides being genuinely troubled by the predicament of the half-caste children who had to bear the double stigma of bastardy and hybridity, *métis* advocates, Saada argues in chapter two, were also deeply preoccupied with the potential political liabilities this group might represent. In the minds of many colonialists, the very existence of the *métis* constituted a threat to the foundation of the colonial social and political order as their racially mixed condition blurred the distinction between French and natives, thereby undermining white dignity and prestige, which rested chiefly on the distance between colonizers and colonized. A second related concern was that given their partial French racial and cultural heritage, the mixed-race children could grow into a class of uprooted *déclassés* bitterly resentful of their native status, which fell far short of the French aspirations they were said to have developed from living with their French fathers before the latter’s desertion. To obviate this potential threat, colonial administrators and philanthropists undertook to “reclasser” the *métis* through engaging in a form of neo-Lamarckian social engineering, according to which both the physical and social milieus contribute as much as heredity to the formation and transformation of the individual. Starting at the turn of the century *métis* concern groups arranged to have mixed-race children removed at an early age from what was perceived as the unwholesome maternal native home and have them placed in special “orphanages”[2] where they would find themselves immersed in a totally French familial environment. The ultimate objective of such a “dressage” was to turn the half-French progeny into “Français d’âme et de qualités”(chapter three).

Yet it was soon realized that the mere fact of being “Français d’âme et de qualités” would not automatically entitle the *métis* to be treated as *bona fide* French in colonial societies. For in spite of their French upbringing, mixed-race children continued to be considered by the law as native subjects and thereby denied access to the many prerogatives enjoyed by French citizens. In the second part of the book, which constitutes its core, Saada retraces the steps through which “la question métisse” came to be “saisie par le droit” (p.109). She starts by disentangling the exceedingly intricate history of the relationship between “nationality” and “citizenship” in the empire. Drawing on a voluminous metropolitan and colonial legal literature, the author shows how starting in the mid nineteenth century the concept of “nationality” came to be dissociated from that of “citizenship,” first in Algeria and later in other colonies where citizenship became a matter of transmissions through filiations: “On naît citoyen; on ne le devient qu’exceptionnellement, après s’être rapproché objectivement de la civilisation française” (p.126). In the absence of French ascendancy the colonized could only be given the status of “native subject,” meaning “ressortissant français privé de citoyenneté” (p.119).

But the citizen/subject dichotomy ran into serious difficulties in the classification of the *métis non reconnus* as it was unclear how the division could apply to them. Some administrators argued that they should follow the status of their native mothers while *métis* philanthropists believed that they should be given French citizenship. A long-drawn debate ensued, which was informed along the way by numerous controversies the most important of which were cases of “reconnaisances frauduleuses” involving Frenchmen falsely recognizing *métis* children as their own and the question of the application of paternity suit in the colonies (chapters five and six). It was in Indochina that the “*métis* question” made legal history with as main protagonist Henri Sambuc, a Saigon lawyer and prominent champion of the *métis* cause.

In chapter seven, in many ways the highlight of the volume, Saada takes readers through the different stages of the legal battle Sambuc waged to get the law to recognize the Frenchness of the *métis non reconnus*. Given the difficulties of the judiciary in determining what laws to apply to mixed-race children, a decision that required an a priori cognizance of their legal status, which was precisely the matter under dispute, Sambuc proposed to introduce the “extralegal” concept of “race” as a factor of recognition via the notion of “possession d’état.” Defined by Article 321 of the Napoleonic Code, the “possession d’état” served to establish an individual’s filiations to a family on the basis of his name, his upbringing, and the recognition he received from society and the family he claimed to belong to. In a 1926 case involving the candidature of the *métis* Victor dit “Lisier,” dit “Barbiaux” for French citizenship, the Hanoi court, following the reasoning of Sambuc, decided to make “race” an element of the “possession d’état” whereby “race” was to be determined not only by biological features, but also social and cultural characteristics. The important finding Saada establishes from her meticulous step-by-step analysis of the debate over the status of mixed-race children is that it was through the recourse to the twin process of the “racialisation de la citoyenneté” and the “étatisation de la paternité” (p.220) that the case for granting citizenship to the *métis non reconnus* was made. Under the new legislation, it was no longer up to individual fathers to choose whether or not they would transmit their “race” and citizenship to their offspring as paternity had now taken on a collective qua national character.

The last section of the book is devoted to examining the impacts the 1928 decree had on the *métis* themselves. In their newfound identity as French citizens, the *métis* became the object of a more systematic intervention by colonial administration as seen in the establishment in Indochina of the Jules-Brévié foundation in 1939, an umbrella organization which oversaw the institutions that looked after the *métis* children. The hope was that by virtue of their mixed biological and cultural heritage the *métis* could serve as the “traits d’union” (p.231) between the native and colonial populations, albeit in mainly subaltern capacities. Another consequence of granting French citizenship to the *métis* was that following the advent of decolonization after the Second World War the latter had to be evacuated en masse as “rapatriés” to France even though many of them had little, if any, knowledge of the metropole. Once in France where the citizen/subject divide had no legal validity, the “problème métis” dissolved along with the disappearance of the category itself. [3]

In this richly documented and lucid study Saada has, through interweaving French colonial and metropolitan history, convincingly demonstrated that “Avec le décret de 1928 et ses avatars, c’est bien la nation française qui se découvre sous les traits d’une race” (p.19), a finding that challenges in a fundamental way the conventional view that the French notion of nationhood is both universalistic and blind to origins. A second no less significant conclusion is the extent to which the “*métis* question,” articulated in terms of citizenship and filiations, was construed as essentially “une affaire d’hommes” (p.32) involving mainly male participants and focusing principally on the plight of male *métis* children.

Given the heavily masculine inflected legal sources it has to draw on, the volume has relatively little to say about the condition of the *métisses* whose story has yet to be written. [4] While it might be the case that from the legal perspective the status of the racially mixed female children posed a lesser challenge which, it was assumed, would be resolved through matrimony, their predicament was in fact perceived to be even more precarious than that of their male counterparts. One widespread fear was that these young women, raised by “amoral” native mothers, would find themselves driven to prostitution.<sup>3</sup> Another curious omission in the book is the contingent of non-European *métis* which was particularly important in Indochina as a result of the widespread unions between local native women and Chinese men. The condition of the Sino-Vietnamese (known as *Minh-huong*) and Sino-Khmer children, who were also referred to by the French as *métis*, was often compared to that of the Eurasians in the debate of the “*métis* question” in Indochina. [5]

Overall Saada has done a splendid job unpacking the highly complex and multifaceted history of the making and unmaking of the “*métis* question” in the French empire. Her study provides a most valuable

contribution to the history of race and colonial *métissage*. *Les Enfants de la colonie* is an indispensable reading to anyone interested in imperialism and colonialism, French legal history and postcolonial studies.

## NOTES

[1] The issue of *métissage* has received a great deal of critical attention in Francophone postcolonial and diasporic studies, which tend to focus on the literary and cultural aspects of the question. For recent book-length historical studies of the condition of mixed-race children in the French empire in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see: Owen White, *Children of the French Empire: Miscegenation and Colonial Society in French West Africa, 1895-1960* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Ann Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: California University Press, 2002). Neither of these books provides the comprehensive legal treatment of the *métis* question that one finds in Saada's study.

[2] As White points out in *Children of the French Empire*, the use of the term "orphanage" by colonial administrators and philanthropists is highly misleading since many of the *métis* who were sent to these institutions were not orphans.

[3] For an in-depth ethno-sociological study of the repatriated Indochinese *métis* community that settled in Noyant in 1955, see: Pierre-Jean Simon *Rapatriés d'Indochine: Un village franco-indochinois en Bourbonnais* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1981).

[4] On the condition of the *métisses*, see Henri Bonvicini's *Enfants de la colonie* (Saigon: Editions Orient-Occident, 1938) in particular the chapter entitled "Pour nos jeunes filles." See also: Clotilde Chivas-Baron, *Confidences de métisse* (Paris: Charpentier et Fasquelle, 1927).

[5] See: Henri Sambuc, "Enquête sur la question des métis II," *Revue Indochinoise* 19 (1913): 201-209. For a discussion of the legal status of the Sino-Vietnamese *métis*, see: Sambuc, "Notice sur la situation des Chinois en Indochine," *Revue Indochinoise* 11 (1909): 1063-1100; "De la condition des *Minh-huong*," *Revue Indochinoise* 9-10 (1917): 253-262.

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