

H-France Forum

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Christina B. Carroll, *The Politics of Imperial Memory in France, 1850-1900*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2022. xiii + 284 pp. Notes, illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$49.95 U.S. (h.b.). ISBN 9781501763083; \$32.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781501763137.

Review Essay by Edward Berenson, New York University

In her excellent, well-constructed book *The Politics of Imperial Memory in France, 1850-1900*, Christina Carroll argues that the ways commentators of all ideological stripes remembered key practices and discourses of the Second Empire shaped French ideas about colonialism and empire for the rest of the nineteenth century. Because Napoleon III called the political system he established an empire and himself emperor and also tried to forge an overseas empire, the term “empire” became fraught with ambiguity and contradiction. On the one hand, Napoleon III and his propagandists identified their empire as a new French political system distinct from, and superior to, both a republic and a monarchy—while featuring the best elements of both. And on the other, Napoleon III understood his empire as a multinational entity with European France at the center and other nations or peoples connected to it, either through cultural affinities (e.g., a supposed common Latinity with Mexico) or political/military oversight (as with Algeria).

After the defeat by Prussia in 1870-71 and the fall of Napoleon III, empire became a dirty word. For republicans in particular, it connoted a weakened France whose imperial leaders squandered men and resources in a disastrous effort to create a colonial empire in Mexico and a viable settler-run colony in Algeria. Those resources, republicans said, should have been arrayed against Prussia. Empire also connoted an authoritarianism that sapped vitality in France and oppressed people abroad. Monarchists and other conservatives shared many of these views, although they, of course, did not see a republic as the answer.

The result of this way of framing the Second Empire—“framing” might be a better word than “remembering,” at least for the early years of the Third Republic—made republicans hesitant to undertake colonial ventures of their own. When they eventually did, they tried to justify them as liberatory and “civilizing” while refusing to say they were creating an empire. Leftist republicans, upset over the moderates’ colonial policies, if not over colonialism itself, responded to their country’s troubled 1880s intervention in Indochina by connecting it to the reviled Napoleonic empire. Not until the 1890s did memories of the Second Empire fade enough to allow a variety of commentators and theorists to use the term “empire” to refer to France’s colonial project.

Carroll’s argument, stripped to its essentials here, is compelling, as is her treatment of Napoleon III. All too often, those of us who write about French colonialism hop from Saint-Domingue to Algeria and then directly to the hyperactive imperialism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, leapfrogging over the Second Empire. This is a mistake. As several historians have recently made clear, the Second Empire and its ruler must not be dismissed, as so many have done since Marx and Hugo belittled it early on. The Second Empire was innovative and important, though not necessarily in salutary ways.[1] Its colonialism deserves to be studied in detail, which

Carroll does in a long chapter, while referring back to it throughout the book, especially in connection with Algeria and Mexico.

Carroll shows that Napoleon III manifested more sympathy towards indigenous Algerians than did the regimes sandwiched around his empire, the July Monarchy and Third Republic. The Europeans who settled in Algeria were extremely unhappy about this sympathy, and many turned to republicanism in search of an ideology and political system more favorable to them. For the settlers, empire was a regime hostile to their interests because it limited their economic prospects and kept them at arms' length from mainland France. The settlers saw themselves as inhabiting lands integral to France, while Napoleon III wanted Algeria to be part of a multinational empire overseen by France but autonomous from it in certain ways.

As for Napoleon III's efforts to colonize Mexico, it was a fiasco from start to finish. France's failed intervention alienated key Mexican elites and created an aura of weakness and incompetence at home. Napoleon III and his policy makers maintained that Mexico and France were connected by a common Latin culture, which is why Mexico deserved to be part of a French-led empire. But the idea of a shared "Latinity" convinced almost no one, and besides, the emperor tried to install a German prince on the Mexican throne.

The misadventure in Mexico coincided with efforts to explore southern Algeria and link it to the Western Sudan and Senegal, where France possessed long-established outposts. These explorations, billed as pacific endeavors but perceived locally as aggressive, also ended badly, as did early efforts to bring parts of Vietnam under French influence or control. The upshot of these colonial failures, as of the Second Empire's unpopularity in Algeria, harmed Louis Napoleon's standing at home and deprived his empire of the legitimacy it had enjoyed in the 1850s, a time of economic growth and apparent military successes in Crimea and Italy. The emperor's failures overseas also gave opponents of France's later colonial ventures a ready-made argument against them, whether to oppose French imperialism altogether, an increasingly rare position, or, more commonly, to reject the particular policies employed. Critics tended to condemn the Indochina interventions of the 1880s and the ones in Madagascar a decade later not because they were a bad idea, but because of their poor execution.

As she lays out her argument, Carroll delves deep into the intellectual history of France's pro-colonial thought. Several of the writers she examines are well-known—Paul Leroy-Beaulieu, Gabriel Charmes, and, of course, Jules Ferry—but she also considers the work of lesser-known figures, such as the Fourierist Jules Duval, the Catholic Pierre-August Raboisson, and the naturalist and governor of French Indochina Jean-Marie Antoine de Lanessan. These more obscure figures also made important contributions to the era's debates over colonialism. It's good that Carroll includes these other voices, but one key colonial theorist, Lucien Anatol Prévost-Paradol, deserves more than the two sentences she allots him. Prévost-Paradol's 1868 book, *La France Nouvelle*, went through eleven editions in its first year on the market and several more in the 1870s and 1880s. He argued that France was in decay and that the only way to inject much-needed vitality into its society, politics, and culture was to create a greater France extending from Calais to Chad and encompassing 100,000,000 Frenchmen. Despite this oversight, Carroll's discussion of the various colonial theorists of the late nineteenth century shows both a solid grasp of the relevant primary sources and an impressive knowledge of a huge secondary literature.

This intellectual history, strong as it is, focuses too narrowly on elite writers who mostly addressed a small audience of specialists, members of geographical societies, and individuals with political or commercial interests abroad. These relatively highbrow theorists are important, of course, but Carroll's analysis would have been fuller had she devoted more than passing attention to the powerful role of popular journalism and mass culture in the elaboration and diffusion of pro-colonial attitudes and designs.

More attention to popular journalism and mass culture would have reinforced Carroll's excellent discussion of French commentators' attitudes about race. As she shows, even those who claimed to have no "prejudice of color" (158) nonetheless subscribed to the ideas about racial hierarchy sharpened after 1850 and used to justify imperial conquest as one or more of the following: a civilizing mission, law of Darwinian nature, means to enhance French prestige and international standing, and a way to inject manly vitality into a decadent France. Even those who opposed France's colonial ventures shared the dominant racist beliefs. Criticizing the civilizing mission, for example, many asked how the imposition of French values could improve the condition of peoples inherently inferior to Europeans, as the new "racial science" taught.

Some of those most opposed to French conquests abroad likened them to Bismarck's seizure of Alsace and Lorraine in the Franco-Prussian War. Should France do to Africans, these critics asked, what Germany did to us? These questions implicitly or explicitly raised the issue of imperial conquest within Europe versus imperial conquest overseas. Many republicans rejected the former while embracing the latter. But in rejecting European conquest, they glossed over the memory of Napoleon I, whose exploits on the continent enjoyed widespread support while underway and fond memories among French people of all ideological stripes long after Waterloo, which itself was recast as a "glorious defeat," as would be the Franco-Prussian War fifty-five years later.[2] Because French republicans also characterized Fashoda as a glorious defeat, it seems plausible to suggest that the politics of imperial memory in France encompassed not just the afterlife of the Second Empire, but of Napoleon I's European empire as well.[3]

NOTES

[1] Juliette Glikman, *La monarchie impériale: L'imaginaire politique sous Napoléon III* (Paris: Nouveau Monde Editions, 2013); Eric Anceau, *Napoléon III: Un Saint-Simon à cheval* (Paris: Editions Tallandier, 2008); Sudhir Hazareesingh, *From Subject to Citizen: The Second Empire and the Emergence of French Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Sudhir Hazareesingh, *The Saint-Napoleon: Celebrations of Sovereignty in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 2004); Matthew Truesdell, *Spectacular Politics: Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte and the Fête Impériale, 1849-1870* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Edward Berenson, "Napoleon III: The People's King," in Eva Giloi et al., ed., *Staging Authority: Presentation and Power in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Berlin and Boston: de Gruyter, 2022), pp. 51-90.

[2] Jean-Marc Largeaud, *Napoléon et Waterloo: La défaite glorieuse de 1815 à nos jours* (Paris: Boutique de l'histoire, 2006); Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2003).

[3] Edward Berenson, *Heroes of Empire: Five Charismatic Men and the Conquest of Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), pp. 166-196.

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