

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 Naomi J. Andrews, Santa Clara University

In teaching classes on European empires and modern France, I am fairly frequently asked by students about the difference between imperialism and colonialism, and why it is that the British historiography uses the former term, while the French tends to use the latter. Before reading Christina Carroll's engaging and thoughtful book, *The Politics of Imperial Memory in France, 1850-1900*, I would have said that it is a rhetorical means of distinguishing between the Continental Napoleonic Empire(s) and the French overseas empire, while pointing out to them the different capitalization conventions in periodization charts of French history. Carroll's answer to this broad question in her methodical, engaging work of intellectual history demonstrates that the stakes of this distinction were in fact of great significance to the political culture of France and its engagement with overseas colonialism in the nineteenth century and beyond. She shows, through her careful exposition of a series of pivotal moments in the second half of the nineteenth century, the extent to which variously construed memories of Napoleonic Empire ran through debates over overseas empire and domestic politics, and how these debates worked to legitimate the republican commitment to overseas conquest while disengaging that empire from the legacy and memory of the Napoleonic ones. By rooting her study in Napoleon III's Second Empire, Carroll contributes to a growing body of scholarship that is demonstrating how much of what seemed to be achieved during the Third Republic, mainly political and social developments, but also overseas imperial expansion, in fact dated to the Second Empire, if not earlier.[1] The book is an exemplary work of deeply contextualized intellectual history that demonstrates how crucial contests over meaning and memory are for understanding the French nation in the nineteenth century.

Carroll's narrative unfolds through a series of case studies: imperial ideologies of the Second Empire; the competing yet contemporaneous ideas of *latinité* and the *royaume arabe* in the 1860s; the processing of national defeat and civil war in the 1870s during the transition to the republic; the controversy over the conquest of Indochina in the 1880s; and finally, the reconciliation of imperial expansionism with republicanism at the end of the century. In each chapter, she explores with care the discussions about empire and their relevance to, and reflection of, the larger political contests between the forces of republicanism and their antagonists, whether from the left, the right, or in the form of the remnants of Bonapartism that lingered at least until the aftermath of the Boulanger affair. Plumbing sources from a wide array of political press organs, theoretical treatises, and popular educational and literary sources, Carroll demonstrates how fully the debates about Empire saturated the political conflicts and competitions of this period, both within the governing elite and beyond. An especially fascinating example that she explores in chapter two is the way that republicans, in the early days of the Third Republic, blamed both the French loss at Sedan and the Commune and its destruction on Napoleon III's weakness as a leader. They also criticized the

corruption and decadence of the Empire as part of their efforts to distance the fragile republic from the stain of these defeats and resist pressure from their royalist and Bonapartist competitors.

Carroll notes that it was only in the late nineteenth century that “continental and colonial visions of empire... became *separate* models” (p. 11). Her meticulous case study method elucidates the iterative process through which this happened and by which French republican pursuit of empire gradually became decoupled from the negative associations with Empire that a range of commentators had firmly placed on the doorstep of Napoleon III and his regime. With each chronological case study, she shows how the distance between Napoleonic imperialism and republicanism expanded, ultimately concluding in the consolidation and legitimation of both republicanism and the colonial empire the Third Republic pursued. Impressively, she constructs these case studies in two registers, detailing the specific stakes of the moments at hand in context, while tracking key ideological developments, like racial sciences, and their ramifications. Carroll has a particular talent for capturing and contextualizing nuanced and often idiosyncratic positions with great clarity, making for a highly readable book. The chapters build upon each other, focusing on changes in terminology from moment to moment, like the rhetorical deployment of *politique coloniale* discussed in chapter five, which gives way to the term *empire colonial* in chapter six. Moreover, the way the chapters are structured would permit them to be individually assigned to students, and Carroll does a great job of reminding the reader of the larger frame of the book without too much repetition or redundancy. Her account of Napoleon III’s failed invasion of Mexico and his failed policy of establishing an Arab Kingdom in Algeria “for the Algerians” (chapter one) and chapter three, “Creating a Republican Algeria,” easily stand alone.

Carroll’s achievement is a nuanced view of the intellectual landscape of French thinkers in what is, perhaps surprisingly, given the scope of the project, a distinctly *metropolitan* history of France. Chapters focus on metropolitan debates about Algeria, Mexico, Indochina, and Madagascar. However, as Carroll repeatedly observes, participants were mostly distant from these locales of empire and largely ignorant of, and irrelevant to, colonial life, with the one major exception of the debates within Algeria about assimilation among colonial administrators and colonists discussed in detail in Chapter three. One consequence of Carroll’s focus on the metropole is that it illuminates how the multivalent idea of empire primarily informed French metropolitan intellectual life, even though it had relatively little impact on the lived reality of empire. The book’s focus on the metropole also provides an excellent companion to the predominant approach to the troubling dilemma of republican imperialism, which has for some time consisted largely of an examination of the ways that republican ideals played out (and were betrayed) in the overseas territories controlled by France. Carroll’s deeply contextual account also nuances the question of how important high-minded ideals like the *mission civilisatrice* were to most of the actors involved in republican imperial expansion. Her account of Paul Soleillet’s “adventures” in Algeria and French west Africa (chapter four), suggests the ways that a certain version of idealism, albeit rooted in free market ideology, was operative in the colonial explorations of the day, even if such ideals ultimately proved impracticable.

The Politics of Imperial Memory in France is a rigorous and enlightening work of intellectual history that, nonetheless, raised some questions that it did not answer as fully as I would have liked. The first of these has to do, broadly speaking, with gender and its politics in the nineteenth century. Carroll refers repeatedly to allegations, from both republicans and their antagonists, that the

Second Empire had rendered French masculinity weak and effeminate. As a number of scholars (all cited by Carroll in the footnotes) have shown, anxiety about national virility after France's defeat in 1870/71 was widespread and informed many aspects of French culture and politics and was in itself a driver of advocacy for colonial expansion. Given how vigorous that discussion was during the Third Republic, I would have liked a more expansive discussion of this issue, both during the Second Empire as well as in the aftermath of its fall. Was it about more than blaming perceived weakness on the defeated regime, as a way of reasserting compromised masculinity after military defeat? This seems to me a fruitful path of inquiry and one that would have added to our understanding of the cultural politics of the moments she chronicles. On a related topic, I would have liked to understand how the renewed 1880s engagement with the Napoleonic idea of *latinité* discussed in chapter five, with its focus on the transnational settler population in Algeria, intersected with the pronatalist debates that were hotly engaged during this timeframe; in fact, the topic of population anxieties and their implications is not pursued in the book in any sustained way.

These questions notwithstanding, Christina Carroll has written an important book that widens the frame through which we should think about the idea of empire and how it was remembered, lived, and understood by nineteenth-century French people, predominantly men, across the political spectrum. It also illustrates the way political categories and identities were defined through debates at many different levels of discourse, from elite academic journals to popular journalism. Carroll's readers watch the process by which republicans defined themselves against their competition, and how the category of empire was interpreted and reinterpreted to meet the specific political stakes of the moment. In this respect, the book tells us about much more than just the politics of imperial memory, but also about how debates over meaning and memory are at the root of both historical and, as we are experiencing today, contemporary political contests for authority and power.

NOTES

[1] E.g., Special Issue of *French Politics, Culture, and Society*, "The Politics of Empire in Post-Revolutionary France." (2015).

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