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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 Joseph W. Peterson, University of Southern Mississippi

Was the relationship between imperial France’s domestic and overseas political regimes primarily one of similarity, or of difference? Did Napoleonic empires seek to extend their imperial values abroad, for example, while Republics sought to extend republican values? Or are empires—no matter the political regime at home—always in the business of “governing different people differently,” always treating the colonized as subjects or second-class citizens?[1] Especially for republican regimes, how does an ideology that makes universal appeals to human liberation and equality justify imperialism; how does it come up with new “strategies of exclusion” that do not contradict its universalism?[2] Was Third Republic imperialism and its “devoir de civiliser les races inférieures” a hypocritical betrayal of its own belief in human equality?[3] Or instead, is exclusion and inequality “constitutive” of republicanism, which from the very beginning had excluded women, children, and other “passive citizens” from its political community?[4] Is it even the historian’s job to determine whether Republican imperialists were conscious of any hypocrisy or cognitive dissonance, or should we instead assume historical actors’ sincerity and focus on explaining why their actions made sense to them in their context?

These are questions that have long preoccupied postcolonial theorists and historians of French imperialism. At the same time, as Frederick Cooper has pointed out, such “conceptual” debates about whether Republicanism is inherently inclusionary or exclusionary “[presume] a singularity of republican thought that flattens French history.”[5] Republican thinkers were never a unified bloc on the question of imperial expansion. Moreover, republicanism in France did not emerge ex nihilo but rather “came of age in a colonial world,” inheriting imperial territories and ideologies from previous regimes such as Napoleon III’s Second Empire.[6]

The genius of Christina Carroll’s new book, *The Politics of Imperial Memory in France, 1850-1900*, is that she takes this multiplicity and historicity of republicanism seriously and then performs the careful work of intellectual history necessary to demonstrate that multiplicity. Moving beyond an abstract republican imperialism “in an ideological vacuum,” Carroll undertakes a deep empirical excavation of Napoleonic and Republican discourses around “empire” (p. 8). In close readings of numerous Second Empire and Third Republic journalists, pamphleteers, politicians, and public intellectuals, Carroll compellingly shows just how “contested” the concept of empire was in nineteenth-century France (p. 8).

In the process, Carroll reveals that the theoretical debates outlined above—the relationship between France’s metropolitan and colonial governments; the extent to which republican imperialism was an inheritance of, or a reaction against, previous empires; the apparent disconnect between republican ideals and imperial practice—were not recent or postcolonial inventions, but

questions that nineteenth-century republicans quite self-consciously asked themselves (p. 2). Republicans even anticipated the “boomerang thesis” of Aimé Césaire and Hannah Arendt (pp. 4-5), when they worried that authoritarian government in their colonies would have a negative or degenerating effect on the politics of the metropole. Inheriting Napoleon III’s empire, but also seeking to cast themselves as the redemptive answer to that empire’s decadence and defeat, republican advocates of imperialism had “a conflicted relationship with Bonapartist legacies,” both borrowing and critiquing those inheritances. They tried to break their own overseas empire’s association with Napoleon III “by describing it as either a specifically republican or more broadly national project” (p. 191).

Carroll is part of a new wave of historians of French imperialism who insist on bringing the Second Empire into the frame of analysis, taking Napoleon III’s empire seriously as a precedent and sometimes “foil” for later-nineteenth century imperialism (p. 212). One of Carroll’s most striking interventions is not only that she begins her story with Napoleon III, but that she treats Napoleon III’s Mexican expedition as central to his imperial project and brings it into conversation with his “Arab Kingdom” policies in Algeria.

For Carroll, contrary to conventional wisdom, the “assimilationist” notion that the overseas empire should be an extension of the political regime on the continent was more a legacy of Napoleon III than of the Third Republic. In Mexico as in France, Napoleon claimed to bring his unique blend of progress, order, and national self-determination. Napoleon and his supporters defended the Mexican expedition with a discourse of *Latinité*: both France and Mexico were supposedly peopled by the Latin race, in a shared cultural community, and both would find Napoleonic empire a suitable administration. For Napoleon III then, empire was continuous with the metropole, reproducing the conditions of his continental empire (pp. 32-33). In Algeria, by contrast, he famously pursued a more “associationist” strategy, when he declared that Algeria was an “Arab Kingdom” and that the culture of its Arab populations would be respected and not forcibly assimilated. But pan-Latin discourse and the Arab Kingdom discourse both flowed from Napoleon III’s desire to tap into the “imperial grandeur” of ancient Rome and of his uncle, without contradicting his belief in national self-determination (p. 25, p. 53).

When Napoleon III’s regime fell in defeat to the Prussian army, the Republicans of the 1870s shored up their shaky new regime by attacking the Second Empire’s legacy and playing up Republicanism’s differences from its allegedly tyrannical predecessor. Napoleon’s overseas “adventures” had been an extension of his authoritarianism at home, they argued, and had left France decadent and weak against the armies of Prussia. Even worse, his promotion of national self-determination could be interpreted as having encouraged Prussia’s ethnonationalist claims on Alsace-Lorraine. Subsequent chapters detail how republican writers in the 1870s and 1880s sought “new vocabularies” for distinguishing their “colonies” from Napoleon’s “empire”: by extending republican rights to white settlers in Algeria (but not to Muslim Algerians); by emphasizing how heroic, “peaceful,” and commercially beneficial France’s explorers in Africa were (p. 116); or even by arguing that colonialism was an inevitable feature of developed nations, “apolitical” and needing no particular republican justification (p. 168).

Carroll’s book is smart and wide-ranging. She is clear about her argument, archive, and methods, and masterfully fulfills what she set out to do. I have no criticisms, but in the interest of stimulating

further conversation and research, I offer some questions and comments. The first two comments involve specific terms in the discourse that Carroll has so deftly mapped out; the last two try to find a way to connect the empirical detail and diversity of Carroll's findings back to the more abstract, conceptual questions about republican imperialism with which I began my review.

One issue that might warrant further exploration is the role of missionaries and other Catholic writers in French imperial memory. Of all the continuities between Napoleon III's and the Third Republic's imperial practices, the support for (and reliance on) Catholic mission work as a tool for imperial expansion was perhaps the most noticeable. The Second Empire made the "global promotion of Catholicism" a cornerstone of its pan-Latin discourse and overseas influence, while the Third Republic similarly supported missionaries throughout the world, famously refusing to "export" its anticlericalism to the colonies.[7] Both regimes regularly used the presence of missionaries as a form of soft power or a pretext for further imperial encroachment. Thanks to scholars like J.P. Daughton, a great deal is known about the Third Republic's love-hate relationship with Catholic missionaries in the colonies, but what about missionaries' discursive place in the imperial *memory* Carroll describes? How was this most striking continuity with Napoleonic empire dealt with in republican collective memory? Were missionaries simply ignored, or not viewed as a legacy of the Second Empire? Or did republican writers find some way to meaningfully distinguish between Napoleonic support for Catholic missions and their own support?

Another thread of republican discourse it might be interesting to pull on would be how the concept of nation evolved in the late nineteenth-century, parallel to the evolution of empire and colonies. Carroll begins the book with a brilliant but brief pre-history of the nation in republican and Napoleonic thought, but then nation is not the object of her sustained analysis the way empire is. And yet, she shows how republican writers went so far as to blame Napoleon III for encouraging the kind of German ethnonationalism that brought the Second Empire down. Here, in connection with republican views of nationalism, I can't help thinking of Ernest Renan's famous "What is a Nation?" speech. Speaking in 1882, at the high point of debates about imperial expansion, Renan explicitly condemned racist or ethnic definitions of the nation that had motivated the Prussian annexation of fellow German-speakers. But Renan still defended a chauvinistic cultural definition of the nation, a shared respect for a common glorious ancestry. Moreover, despite his professed anti-racism and belief in consent, Renan still approved of France's imperialism.[8] How was nation, like empire, debated and used in republican discourse? Did nation undergo a redefinition for other Republicans in the late nineteenth century as it did for Renan, to reaffirm its political and cultural content in contrast to Germany's more ethnic nationalism? If so, was the memory of Napoleon III's nationalism then similarly revised to make it look even more un-republican, even more complicit with German ethnonationalism?

One of the many strengths of the book as intellectual history is that Carroll is attentive to a wide range of published texts but is also careful to emphasize how limited this public sphere was, how little access colonized peoples had to this public sphere. This is, after all, not so much a book about imperial practices on the ground as it is a book about how republicans used debates about empire for their own domestic legitimacy-building purposes. Indeed, Carroll points out that most of these debates were domestic affairs that had little discernible impact on France's actual colonial administration. Moreover, in one of the few instances where well-meaning republican discourses seemed poised for actual implementation in the colonies—the "peaceful" exploration that would

lead to railroad construction and nonviolent trade relations in West Africa—these efforts were sabotaged by more aggressive military officials in the colony (p. 138, p. 141). I wonder, then, does Carroll’s story bring us at least somewhat back to the view that the civilizing mission was a matter of good metropolitan intentions contravened by nefarious administrators on the ground in the colonies? In other words, could the evidence presented in this book still implicitly serve as a defense of republicanism in the abstract, showing that republican plans for a peaceful and egalitarian empire were not tainted with systemic inequality from the very beginning, but rather betrayed in the execution?[9]

My final comment concerns the issue of structure vs. individual intent in evaluating historical texts and actors. When it comes to discursive structures like the civilizing mission and other republican justifications for empire, we are sometimes told that it is not the historian’s place to judge individual colonialists as conscious of any hypocrisy or inconsistency. Rather, we should treat these imperial ideologies as sincere and focus instead on more systemic economic or legal contradictions that kept colonized people excluded, regardless of individual colonialists’ intentions. These are necessary cautions.[10] Yet as Carroll has so skillfully shown, although debates about empire and imperial memory were “oligarchic”—a “discursive field” that was constructed top-down—within that discursive field there was a lot of leeway for contestation and individual agency (p. 11, p. 9). Many were the voices in the 1870s and 1880s that criticized Republican imperialism as inconsistent or hypocritical (to say nothing of the voices of the colonized themselves, largely absent from metropolitan discourse). I take this to be an important implication of Carroll’s work: the contradictions of Republican imperialism were known and discussed at the time; anticolonialism was not unthinkable. In her conclusion, Carroll discusses the Young Algerians, who demanded that France fulfill its promise to civilize and assimilate them, rather than “hypocritically” deny them “the ideals of French republicanism” (p. 216). Later there was Aimé Césaire, who knowing full well that racism and colonialism have structural and economic causes, nevertheless also accused individual colonialists of racism, hypocrisy, and guilt.[11] We must be clear: Anticolonialists could only make this rhetorical move, attacking the “bad faith” of the civilizing mission, because the inconsistencies were so apparent even at the time.

NOTES

[1] Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 7.

[2] Uday S. Mehta, “Liberal Strategies of Exclusion,” in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, eds. Frederick Cooper and Laura Ann Stoler, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 59-86. See also Alice L. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 2.

[3] Jules Ferry, “Discours du 28 juillet 1885,” in *Discours et opinions de Jules Ferry, vol. 5: Discours sur la politique extérieure et coloniale, 2ème partie*, ed. Paul Robiquet (Paris: Armand Colin & Cie., 1897), 210-211.

[4] Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism Between the Two World Wars*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 5, 16.

[5] Cooper, 5.

[6] Gavin Murray-Miller, “Imagining the Trans-Mediterranean Republic: Algeria, Republicanism, and the Ideological Origins of the French Imperial Nation-State, 1848–1870,” *French Historical Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (Spring 2014), 306; and Murray-Miller, “A Conflicted Sense of Nationality: Napoleon III’s Arab Kingdom and the Paradoxes of French Multiculturalism,” *French Colonial History*, Vol. 15 (2014), 1–38.

[7] David Todd, “A French Imperial Meridian, 1814–1870,” in *Past and Present* 210, no. 1 (2011): 180-81, 184.

[8] Ernest Renan, “What is a Nation?,” translated and annotated by Martin Thom, in ed. Homi K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*, (London and New York: Routledge), 1990, 8-22; and Robert D. Priest, “Ernest Renan’s Race Problem,” in *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (March 2015), 309-330.

[9] This is Gary Wilder’s (in my view somewhat unfair) critique of Alice Conklin, that her work focuses on “the motivations of individual policymakers” and “functions to protect the purity of republican universalism.” Wilder, *French Imperial Nation-State*, 6-7.

[10] See Wilder, *French Imperial Nation-State*, 6-7, and email communications with Julia Clancy-Smith, Sept. 29, 2018, and Emmanuelle Saada, Sept. 19, 2018.

[11] Aimé Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism* can be read as an extended reflection on this very paradox—intent vs. structure, the “subjective good faith” of the individual colonialist ideologue vs. the “objective social implications of the evil work they perform as watchdogs of colonialism.” Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham, (New York: Monthly Review Press, N.D.), 55 and throughout. For more on the strategy of critiquing the civilizing mission by treating it as sincere and holding it to its literal promises, see Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 7.

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