

H-France Forum

Volume 18 (2023), Issue 4, #5

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.

Response by Christina Carroll, Kalamazoo College

As we all know, the process of researching and writing a book is a time-consuming and often solitary endeavor; it was made even more so over these past few years by the pandemic shutdowns. And so I want to begin by thanking Venita Datta, who organized this H-France Forum, along with the four reviewers for both their time--that elusive thing that none of us have enough of!--and for their generous reviews. Each reviewer engaged deeply with my book's central arguments and explained their implications while simultaneously pointing towards new avenues for further research. I am delighted by this opportunity to discuss the important questions that the reviewers have raised and the themes that they have highlighted.

The book's framework intersects with two of my long-term interests. I've always been interested in memory and how popular narratives about past events shape the way that different people make sense of the present. But the book's origin emerged more specifically out of research that I was completing for a different project. I was originally working on the memory of the Franco-Prussian War in France and Germany, and I noticed that a number of French republican writers framed French defeat in the war as an effect of France's imperial system, which they described in both Napoleonic and colonial terms. They argued, essentially, that the Second Empire of Napoleon III had been a corrupting force that had cultivated decadence and effeminacy among the French people in order to draw popular attention away from the autocratic nature of the Bonapartist state. These descriptions invoked the specter of what Montesquieu termed "oriental despotism" to discredit Napoleon III. Some writers even described Napoleon III as an Algerian "Arab chief," implying, essentially, that French colonial rule in Algeria had infiltrated metropolitan France through the person of the emperor himself. I was struck by how these descriptions combined a critique of Bonapartist imperialism with racist tropes about North Africa to criticize empire, especially because I knew that a number of these republican writers would go on to promote overseas imperial expansion in North Africa and elsewhere as a solution to republican France's political problems less than a decade later. I therefore became interested in exploring how these writers moved from an apparent rejection of empire to its clear embrace in the intervening years.

My book thus traces the conversation about empire and its implications for France across a political divide: from the Bonapartist Second Empire of Napoleon III into the early years of the Third Republic. The book shows that "empire" continued to operate as a complex and contested category in French politics and thought across both periods. Empire could equally refer to a political system within continental France, to a vision of French dominance across Europe, or to the state structure used to rule conquered territories overseas. It could also evoke the memory of the monarchy's expansion into North America or Bonapartist expansion across the continent--as well as the specter of German unification or Britain's overseas conquests. In fact, the memory of older continental

imperial models shaped French understandings of and justifications for the new colonial empire they were building across the second half of the nineteenth century. At the same time, however, my book also shows that by the late nineteenth century, republican thinkers increasingly differentiated between colonial and continental empire as a result of a politicized campaign led by colonial advocates who sought to defend overseas expansion against their political opponents. The new model of colonial empire that they developed was itself shaped by a complicated set of influences, including the memory of both Napoleons, republican ideological values, political conflict within France, concerns about the French nation, international competition, racial science, and the actions and resistance of colonized communities.

Geographically, the book bridges the French metropole and its colonies to show that shifts in the conversation about empire were driven by developments in both places. The earlier chapters focus especially on Algeria, the colony that commanded the most metropolitan attention during the Second Empire and the early Third Republic. But the book also considers how attempted colonial expansion in Mexico, southeast Asia, north Africa, and central Africa--beginning in the 1860s, but especially in the 1880s and the 1890s--intersected with these ongoing arguments over the meaning of empire. Naomi Andrews nevertheless rightly points out that the conversation about empire traced by my book is centered in the metropole. As I argue, the conversation's shape reflected the structure of the nineteenth-century French public sphere, which was fractured by geography, language, and social hierarchy. French elites mostly dominated debates about empire, especially before the end of the nineteenth century, when, as Edward Berenson notes, empire became a more prominent theme in mass culture and mass journalism. And relatively few members of colonized communities were able to participate as direct interlocutors, thanks to both colonial hierarchies and linguistic divisions. That said, the book shows that the French elites who dominated the conversation were consistently forced to respond to a much wider array of groups, including working-class communities in the metropole and colonized communities overseas, whose actions and resistance both influenced and challenged the visions of empire in circulation. But while the book thus demonstrates that conflicts in the colonies helped shape the arguments that played out in the French metropole, it also acknowledges that those arguments ultimately had a limited influence on the structure of French colonial rule. Instead, as Andrews notes, the book emphasizes the metropolitan consequences of these debates, highlighting the ways that they helped reshape French intellectual life along with the Republican and Bonapartist political traditions in the late nineteenth century.

As all four reviewers note, the book thus focuses primarily on the question of how nineteenth-century French ideas about empire were influenced by memories of earlier continental and overseas empires, ongoing arguments over France's political organization, and conflicts in the colonies. But as Patricia Lorcin and Joseph Peterson point out, French ideas about empire also intersected with ideas about nation-states and nationalism. Gary Wilder's work, in particular, has shown us how deeply empire and nation-state were imbricated in France across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[1] At the same time, however, nineteenth-century intellectuals, journalists, and politicians sometimes saw tensions between imperialist and nationalist goals. Napoleon III had sought to position empire and nationalism as compatible and interwoven by describing the Second Empire as the "defender of nationalities" in Europe and overseas. And in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War, some republicans also tied nation and empire together when they positioned empire in Algeria as the solution to the loss of Alsace and Lorraine from the metropole, seeking

to transform displaced Alsatians and Lorrainers into Algerian settlers. But at the same time, as Lorcin notes in her review, nationalists in the early Third Republic saw nationalism and empire as contradictory, condemning colonial expansion overseas as a distraction from the nationalist goals of *revanche* against Germany and the recapture of Alsace and Lorraine. As she rightly highlights, the book only briefly mentions these nationalist movements; it does not engage deeply with their ideas, and I can see how more attention to their claims might further complicate the book's account of the conflicts over empire in the early 1870s. It devotes more attention to later leftist critiques of colonial conquest in Indochina, which similarly maintained that nationalist and imperialist ambitions were in tension with one another. In chapter 5, the book thus notes that Louis Guétant, a future member of the Ligue des droits de l'homme, pointed to Napoleon III's overinvestment in Algeria as a reason for France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War and implied that Jules Ferry's policies in Indochina were similarly endangering metropolitan France. As Peterson points out, the book also shows that even as nationalists and some republicans were contending that Napoleon III's policies were problematic because they had fatally privileged empire over nation, others claimed that Napoleon III's decision to position the Second Empire as a "defender of nationalities" was itself to blame for both France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War and the 1871 Mokrani (Muqrani) uprising in Algeria, which had endangered French rule in the territory. For these thinkers and politicians, nationalism--at least in a certain form--was a threat to the French nation and its empire. Lorcin and Peterson both note that while the book highlights some of these intersections between French debates about empire and French ideas about nation, it never makes ideas about nationalism and the nation a sustained object of its analysis in the way that ideas about empire are. This reflects issues of space and scope, but they are right to emphasize that the intersections between ideas about empire and ideas about nation hinted at here are complicated, contradictory, and a fruitful issue for future scholars to explore.

All four reviewers thoughtfully suggest different additional lines of examination that would extend the book's analysis. Berenson suggests that greater engagement with mass culture and popular journalism would deepen the book's intellectual history of empire; he also argues that the book might have paid greater attention to the work of Lucien-Anatole Prévost-Paradol, a colonial theorist who was especially influential in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War. I am very sympathetic to these suggestions; in my initial vision for the book, I had planned to focus on representations of empire in popular literature as well as in political and theoretical writing, but I found the scope of that project too wide to sustain. I chose to not focus on Prévost-Paradol's book, on the other hand, because I had written a separate article about it for the *Journal of the Western Society for French History*.^[2] But I can see how including it here, too, might have contributed to the book's analysis of shifting ideas about empire in the late Second Empire and early Third Republic. Andrews, on the other hand, suggests that a deeper engagement with ideas about masculinity and populationist anxieties would have expanded the book's account of political conflict over empire in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War and the return to Napoleonic ideas about *latinité* in chapter 5. Peterson then asks about the role played by missionaries and Catholicism in the memory of empire in both Second Empire and Third Republic France. And Lorcin asks about the role played by economics in the politics of imperial memory--a question that the book engages with only briefly in chapter 4 when looking at the expeditions organized by Paul Soleillet, an explorer who sought to set forward a model for what he claimed was a peaceful republican imperialism grounded in free trade. I very much appreciate all of these suggestions, as they point towards the wide range of different possible directions that the questions the book raises

might be taken in; the reviews also highlight the richness of these different avenues for future research.

Finally, Peterson also raises an important theoretical question about the implications of the book's argument for how we understand the relationship between republican colonial discourses on the one hand and colonial violence and oppression on the other. He asks, "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? While I do think that there were profound divides between metropolitan discourses about empire and colonial realities, that pattern characterized not only the Third Republic but the Second Empire as well, as we can see with Napoleon III's *royaume arabe* in Algeria and ideas about *latinité* in Mexico. And while colonial realities were usually more violent than the metropolitan discourses used to describe them, those discourses were themselves racist, unequal, and used from the beginning to justify violence. Napoleon III's ideas about the *royaume arabe* and *latinité* were predicated on the idea that the French were superior to both Algerians and Mexicans, and that as a result, both peoples' right to independence could be at least temporarily suspended as long as French rule worked to "improve" them.

The claim of Paul Soleillet (who, as Andrews notes, probably is the advocate of colonial expansion who comes closest to being an "idealist" in the book) that he would help build a republican empire through peaceful exploration and the fostering of free trade worked in similar ways. First, part of the reason why the republican colonial advocates who endorsed Soleillet were so committed to positioning their efforts as "peaceful" in the 1870s was because they were concerned about being associated with the discredited government of Napoleon III, which republicans had condemned as "warmongering" and "despotic." Republican claims about their "peaceful" intentions cannot be taken at face value either. Even as Soleillet claimed that his vision of France's future in Africa was pacific, humanitarian, and commercial, it was actually ambitious, expansionist, and interventionist. This vision of empire may not have been based explicitly on military conquest, but it depended on political, economic, and cultural domination. What's more, even as he and his supporters condemned what they called "the prejudice of color," they subscribed to a vision of civilizational hierarchy much like the one that Napoleon III and his followers had invoked in both Algeria and Mexico. Soleillet's denial of his own racial prejudice worked to both naturalize and legitimize that hierarchy, which he saw as the foundation for a new kind of imperial system. And the republican government that hired Soleillet to trace the southern part of the imagined Trans-Saharan railway's route selected a military officer, Paul Flatters, to lead a contingent of soldiers to trace the northern part of the route--raising questions about how "peaceful" this vision of colonial expansion really was, even in the 1870s. What's more, as the memory of the Second Empire faded and many of the expeditions of the 1870s ended in disaster, republican politicians in the metropole increasingly invoked republican principles to defend outright colonial conquest.

Ultimately, the book follows the approach of Fred Cooper, Sankar Muthu, and Jennifer Pitts insofar as it does not try to make a claim about republicanism's or liberalism's or Bonapartism's essential relationship with empire; instead, it treats these political traditions as evolving ideologies

understood and mobilized in distinct ways by different people at particular historical moments.[3] But at the same time, it argues that for the most part, republican and Bonapartist ideas about empire throughout the second half of the nineteenth century were neither peaceful nor egalitarian at their root, even though some intellectuals and politicians made claims to the contrary.

I wanted to end as I began—by thanking the reviewers for their deep engagement with my book’s arguments, and for their thought-provoking and incisive comments. Their suggestions and framings have made me reflect in new ways on the questions that I explored in this book and on their intersections with the rich scholarly literature on empire, politics, and memory. We often describe scholarship as a conversation when we explain the research process to our students; I am grateful for the opportunity to continue that conversation in this forum.

NOTES

[1] Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

[2] Christina Carroll, “Defining ‘Empire’ under Napoleon III: Lucien-Anatole Prévost-Paradol and Paul Leroy-Beaulieu,” *Journal of the Western Society for French History* 41 (2013): 48-61.

[3] Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: History, Theory, Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment against Empire* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003); Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).

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