

Liberté, égalité, fraternité... empire

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In his new salvo, Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison seeks to lay bare the imperial essence of the Third and Fourth Republics. His criticism of the myth of a benevolent French empire is achieved at a fairly high cost in terms of nuance and analytical value.

Reviewed: Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison, *La République impériale : politique et racisme d'État*, Paris, Fayard, 2009, 401 p., 23 €

Much as he might dismiss the observation as the reflexive howl of a disciplinary *chien de garde*, it is worth pointing out that Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison works at the confluence of political philosophy and intellectual history. His first book¹, on concepts of citizenship and their limitations during the French Revolution, was described by Peter Sahlins as ‘an intellectual history of dominant perceptions’², and since then Le Cour Grandmaison has returned repeatedly to questions of social marginalization, racism, and the related self-justifications of dominant groups, in particular those of the French state and its elites. Witness his production, since the mid-1990s, of books on the massacre of French and Algerian protestors in Paris in October 1961, and on the political genealogy of internment camps, as well as work on the human sciences and on the interrelationship of politics and philosophy³. His 2005 history of colonial violence, titled *Coloniser, Exterminer. Sur la guerre et l'État colonial*⁴, provoked controversy at a time when French politics was roiled by violent confrontations in the *banlieues*, and divided by the legislative attempt to enforce a more ‘positive’ pedagogical rendition of the country’s colonial past. Emmanuelle Saada’s review of

¹ Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison, *Les Citoyennetés en révolution (1789-1794)*, Paris, PUF, 1992.

² Peter Sahlins, ‘Review of Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison, *Les citoyennetés en révolution (1789-1794)*, Paris, PUF, 1992’, *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 67 No. 2 (June, 1995), pp. 438-440.

³ (éd., avec G. Lhuillier et J. Valluy), *Le Retour des Camps ? Sangatte, Lampedusa, Guantánamo...*, Autrement, 2007 ; (éd.), *Le 17 octobre 1961 : un crime d'État à Paris*, La Dispute, 2001 ; (éd., avec C. Gautier), *Passions et sciences humaines*, PUF, 2002 ; (avant-propos d'É. Balibar), *Haine(s). Philosophie et politique*, PUF, 2002.

⁴ Fayard, 2005.

the book noted its ambition, and its continuities with Hannah Arendt's work on imperialism, but castigated Le Cour Grandmaison for what she characterized as his anti-historical methods, his disregard for chronology and social-political complexity, and his concomitant tendency to homogenize his analysis for easier loading into the polemical cannon⁵.

The myth of the benevolent empire

In this new salvo, Le Cour Grandmaison once again seeks to lay bare the brutal, imperial essence of the Third and Fourth Republics, taking aim at the myth of a benevolent French colonial system. In a breakneck, at times hectoring, *tour d'horizon* he achieves this goal, after a fashion, but at a fairly high cost in terms of nuance and analytical value. Le Cour Grandmaison's sources consist almost exclusively of books, articles, pamphlets, speeches, and manifestos produced by 'numerous [...] politicians of varied partisan stripe, and/or reputable academics belonging to a variety of disciplines, all convinced that the metropole and the French population could not live and progress harmoniously without an empire' (p. 278)⁶. While perennials such as Albert Sarraut, Joseph Chailley-Bert, and Paul Leroy-Beaulieu figure prominently, Le Cour Grandmaison has also read promiscuously in the colonialist literature, across a period from the 1870s to the 1950s. The bulk of the book is taken up with the exposition and dismemberment of the arguments and assumptions of this purportedly unified discourse.

The theoretical framework applied to the material derives from a range of thinkers, including Spinoza, Pierre Bourdieu, Carl Schmitt, and Reinhart Koselleck, but Michel Foucault (p. 92, 215, 249, 327-8, 368) is the preeminent influence. Le Cour Grandmaison, for example, leans heavily upon Foucault's celebrated concept of a 'regime of truth' (p. 251), in this instance, one constructed by Third Republic colonialist discourse. Thus conceptually mounted, Le Cour Grandmaison gallops across the decades of this 'regime's' supremacy, with his analysis unhindered by any notable concern for chronology, or for the detailed tracing of intellectual paternity and political division. As Le Cour Grandmaison frames it, regarding the persistence of those themes he identifies as integral to this intellectual-political 'regime': 'Such permanence cannot be explained by the lazy notion of influence, but rather by the existence, over a certain period of time, of a kind of intellectual and political configuration

⁵ Emmanuelle Saada, 'Review of Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison, *Coloniser. Exterminer. Sur la guerre et l'État colonial*, Fayard, 2005', *Critique internationale* no. 32, 2006/3, pp. 211-216.

⁶ All translations are my own. My thanks to Matt Watkins for his invaluable help with this review.

within which men, facing similar difficulties, reacted through the categories, and entailed solutions, of their times' (p. 277).

So what constituted this 'intellectual-political configuration' or 'regime of truth'? Le Cour Grandmaison argues that the Third Republic, from its origins, and particularly from around 1900 through to World War Two, should be understood as an imperial republic. In this polity, a powerful, prestigious, and cross-disciplinary intellectual apparatus sanctioned, and in turn drew strength from, an equally potent, cross-partisan political consensus on the benefits of imperial expansion, exploitation, and unequal rule. Across four sprawling chapters, he then seeks to describe the 'concepts, representations, books, discourse, and practices of the era of imperial construction' (p. 32)⁷.

The opening chapter details how the trauma of 1870 encouraged French colonial propagandists with the result that, in the following decades, a series of state, para-state, and educational institutions emerged to cement the imperialization of France and its republican system, thus reinforcing the intellectual and political victory of a racist, hierarchical 'national-patriotism' over an egalitarian 'universal-patriotism'. With Woolfian flair, Le Cour Grandmaison identifies 1910 as the moment beyond which a majority of the French public – Jean Jaurès and Georges Clemenceau among them – accepted the virtue and importance of imperial rule over 'inferior' peoples. Subsequently, World War One reinforced the perceived importance of colonial rule and resources, for metropolitan economic and military survival.

Assimilationism vs associationism

Le Cour Grandmaison then doubles back to explain how, around the turn of the century, advocates of 'associationist' imperial rule – the argument that colonial rulers should co-opt and govern through local elites, leaving local culture broadly unchanged the better to obtain stability and meet economic goals – attacked 'assimilationist' doctrines. This was done principally by characterizing the latter as anachronistic, leftist expressions of a naïve universalism that aimed to raise all people under French rule to the level of metropolitan citizens. The associationists considered these assimilationist 'aims' – which they overstated for polemical effect and which had not been put into practice on any scale during the period

⁷ Le Cour Grandmaison's attention is much more focused on concepts and representations than on practices, and in this respect his approach recalls Gary Wilder's recent book on the logic of 'colonial humanism'. See Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State. Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005.

of their supposed intellectual hegemony – unsustainable in the face of the scientific ‘realities’ of a hierarchical world. Le Cour Grandmaison then traces the importation of such views into metropolitan life through analysis of the treatment of North African immigrants, who were segregated and pathologized initially on the basis of race⁸, and subsequently through learned disquisitions and political attacks on the allegedly inassimilable ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ of Islam. Finally, at the close of chapter two, in a brief attempt to assess social practices, Le Cour Grandmaison discusses the everyday violence of colonial life, touching, under the aegis of Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire, on the discriminatory language, dress, and attitudes that helped sustain political control from West Africa to Indochina.

Subsequently, Le Cour Grandmaison returns to the main elements of the colonial regime of truth. He focuses, in greater detail, on the doctrines that bolstered French imperialization, especially the proliferation of pseudo-scientific and pseudo-Darwinian ideas among colonial writers and politicians. These notions served to justify violent conquest as a form of global progress, and again facilitated the characterization of universalist, egalitarian ideals as soft-headed and dangerously naïve. These influences, Le Cour Grandmaison explains, also assisted at the intellectual-political marriage of social Darwinism in the metropole with ‘imperial Darwinism’ in the colonies. The fruits of this alliance included a trans-disciplinary theory that endorsed the expropriation of *indigène* lands for the benefit of European settlers. These last were deemed a social menace in the metropole but, once overseas and buttoned down by the moral influence of white wives and state surveillance, could, in theory, become muscular agents of progress.

The final chapter develops many of the themes already described, touching, in somewhat jumbled fashion, on metropolitan fears of ‘white decline’ while ranging back and forth from 1870 to World War Two in pursuit of the discourse of the *bagne* (colonial prison camp). In closing, Le Cour Grandmaison sketches a comparison between European colonialists’ demand for an ‘imperial living space’ (*espace vital impérial*) and the later, Nazi *Lebensraum* of Eastern Europe, concluding that, despite the influence of various colonial models on Nazi plans for expansion, a qualitative gap separated the essentially repressive prisons and massacres of Cayenne and Sétif from the exterminatory ambitions of Babi Yar

⁸ See for a specialist approach Clifford D. Rosenberg, *Policing Paris. The Origins of Modern Immigration Control between the Wars*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2006. For a detailed study that provides a highly nuanced view see Mary Dewhurst Lewis, *The Boundaries of the Republic: Migrant Rights and the Limits of Universalism in France, 1918-1940*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2007.

and Auschwitz. This epilogue is framed as a necessary correlation to the definition of the colonialists' 'imperial living space', and also as a blow against 'partial interpretations' (p. 282) that cast Hitler as an ideological original, but these justifications do not adequately account for a hasty detour that brings little new information to an established debate⁹.

Yet, all that said, the book has manifold and welcome virtues. First, Le Cour Grandmaison, clearly determined to intervene against the inequalities, hypocrisies, and discriminations of contemporary France, rarely misses an opportunity to directly relate past and present. He seeks, especially in a targeted conclusion, to demolish the myths of colonial benevolence and glorious achievement with which the Sarkozist electoral hook has latterly been baited. This outraged, polemical style includes a refreshing willingness, compared with more cautious historians, to assert provocative equivalences between past and present. Thus, for instance, in a discussion of inter-war immigration law and the demonization of North African migrants to the metropole, Le Cour Grandmaison laconically condemns 'the same causes, the same effects, and the same dramas as today, already apparent then' (p. 147)¹⁰.

Second, Le Cour Grandmaison's method rightly follows the likes of Frederick Cooper, Gary Wilder, and Todd Shepard in insisting on the analytic integration of metropolitan and colonial history¹¹. As David Bell noted recently, while 'roughly half of all [doctoral] dissertations on French history in North American universities focus on the empire', colonial questions do continue to get marginalized in new treatments of modern France, even those by major names in the field¹². Third, Le Cour Grandmaison gestures repeatedly and correctly in the direction of the international and inter-imperial nature of European colonial rule and the significant degree of shared knowledge, assumptions, and ambitions that characterized it¹³. For instance, there are useful reflections on how the reputations of the British and Dutch

⁹ See, for example, Jürgen Zimmerer, 'Die Geburt des "Ostlandes" aus dem Geiste des Kolonialismus. Die nationalsozialistische Eroberungs- und Beherrschungspolitik in (post)kolonialer Perspektive', *Sozial Geschichte*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2004, 10-43.

¹⁰ For a detailed analysis of the relationship between past and present for one group in contemporary France see Claire Eldridge, ' "We've never had a voice": memory construction and the children of the Harkis (1962-1991)', *French History*, vol. 23 no. 1, March 2009, pp. 88-107.

¹¹ See Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History*, University of California Press, 2005; Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: the Algerian War and the Making of France*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2008. Cooper has characterized France as an 'empire state', Wilder has seen it as an 'imperial nation state', Shepard has argued that until 1962 'France' was not widely understood to refer to the hexagonal metropole.

¹² Bell makes this point in a review in *The New Republic*, April 1 2009, of Robert Gildea, *Children of the Revolution: the French, 1799-1914*, Harvard, Harvard University Press, 2009.

¹³ For a useful disaggregation of 'transnational' and 'international' approaches to research see Patricia Clavin 'Defining Transnationalism', *Contemporary European History*, vol. 14 no. 4, (2005) pp. 421-439.

empires were mobilized in French colonial discourse. Fourth, his broad approach allows him to touch on topics often left to one side in more narrowly-focused discussions of republican empire, for instance, racial segregation in French colonial churches (p. 199).

A monochromatic picture of the colonial past

But burly problems crowd around these virtues. Le Cour Grandmaison overstates the originality of his hitherto ‘ignored’ (p. 176, 215) sources and discoveries. The importance of pseudo-scientific ideologies, juridical discrimination, and gender politics in the constitution of French colonial rule, for example, have been much studied¹⁴, as evidenced, in part, by Le Cour Grandmaison’s own footnotes. Moreover, his contention that a ‘dedisciplinized’ approach is necessary to study a colonialist ‘regime of truth’ that relied on various fields of inquiry, and his claim that today’s researchers are, in the main, blinkered by disciplinary parochialism and a metropolitan, microscopic focus, do not disguise the fact that his own work is, in many respects, a traditional intellectual history of colonialist thought, albeit one with a sprawling, polemical purview and an unusually developed exegetical flair. Consequently, we do not learn nearly enough about the wider reception and adaptation of the texts studied, nor indeed, beyond the potted authors’ biographies provided in the footnotes, do we hear much of the wider social, economic, and political context¹⁵. Although he cites the protests of a handful of anti-imperialist voices, speaking out in parliament, the press, academic settings and even, as subjects, in the colonies, Le Cour Grandmaison, despite perfunctory attempts at qualification, nevertheless concludes that an essentially unchanging, monolithic intellectual-political axis in favour of colonial expansion, racial hierarchy, and brutal exploitation dominated the ‘imperialized’ Third and Fourth Republics from start to finish.

In order for the ‘regime of truth’ thus brandished by Le Cour Grandmaison to persist plausibly throughout the period examined, its character is necessarily stated in terms so general as to render the assessment both unobjectionable and analytically toothless. Equally, despite token warnings against making such a leap (p. 92), Le Cour Grandmaison’s exegetical

¹⁴ See generally, but on gender especially, Frederick Cooper and Ann Stoler (eds.), *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, University of California Press, 1997 ; for older surveys of colonial ideology and organization Raoul Girardet, *L’Idée coloniale en France de 1871 à 1962*, Table Ronde, 1972 ; Stuart M. Persell, *The French Colonial Lobby, 1889-1938*, Hoover Institution Press, 1983 and Charles-Robert Ageron, *France coloniale ou parti colonial?*, Paris, PUF, 1978.

¹⁵ For an integrated analysis of a top-down, ideological offensive, albeit in another context, see Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan*, W.W. Norton, 2009.

technique and choice of sources encourage the reader to conclude that colonialist doctrine was concocted in Paris, immediately consecrated as law in parliament, or as elite common sense at conferences and in prestigious publishing houses, (p. 22, 52), and then translated directly into imperial reality. The lived experiences of the colonized, the specific power relationships that characterized diverse colonial situations¹⁶, and the varieties of ways in which colonial knowledge was produced¹⁷ are thus substantially marginalized. Greater attention to the role of business and agricultural interests, for instance, would have revealed the stubborn presence of complex, changing and divided views on the role of the state, the market, and metropolitan-Algerian privilege in the imperial economy¹⁸. These issues are amplified by the book's style, in which protracted, bravura dismemberments of colonialist ideas, bombastic rhetorical questions, and sarcastic redeployments of Sarkozist slogans¹⁹ cannot long occlude overall disorganization and a regrettable timidity on the behalf of his editor. This last is most egregious at the book's end, where the lengthy detour into Nazi ideology and 'thanatopolitics' gets tacked on without any real explanation.

In closing, *Le Cour Grandmaison* rightly deplores how the contemporary illustrators of an edifying, politically useful, colonial 'golden legend' despise the rigorous production of 'precise [...] complete' historical knowledge, and contemptuously ignore those who protest against the 'enslavement of Clio' for partisan ends (p. 373-4). Unfortunately, in his determination to paint over the shining fresco produced by these villains, *Le Cour Grandmaison* has himself produced a monochromatic picture of the colonial past.

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¹⁶ See Emmanuelle Saada, *Les Enfants de la colonie : Les métis de l'Empire français entre sujétion et citoyenneté*, Paris, La Découverte, 2007.

¹⁷ See Emmanuelle Sibeud, *Une science impériale pour l'Afrique. La construction des savoirs africanistes en France 1878-1930*, Paris, Éditions de l'EHESS, 2002.

¹⁸ See Hubert Bonin, Catherine Hodeir, Jean-François Klein (eds.), *L'Esprit économique impérial (1830-1970). Groupes de pression et réseaux du patronat colonial en France et dans l'empire*, Publications de la SFHOM, 2008.

¹⁹ The colonial doctrine of associationism is summarized as, '*en dépensant moins, parvient à gagner plus*' p. 126 (spend less but yet make more) and the logic of the protectorate system '*dominer moins pour dominer mieux*' p. 24 (dominate less to better dominate).