

H-France Forum

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Alice L. Conklin, *In the Museum of Man: Race, Anthropology, and Empire in France, 1850-1950*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2013. 392 pp. Notes and bibliography. 79.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8014-3755-7; 26.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8014-7878-9 (pb).

Review essay by J.P. Daughton, Stanford University

Alice Conklin has pulled off an impressive feat. With the writing of *In the Museum of Man*, she has produced a book that will immediately become essential reading for academics in a variety of fields. For historians of race, Conklin provides a detailed, convincing account of how French anthropological thought shifted from a late nineteenth-century acceptance of racial differences as physical, immutable realities to the near-complete rejection of race as a meaningful scientific category by the end of the Second World War. Cultural historians have much to learn here about the presentation and popularization of scientific discourses about human difference both in texts and on display at the Musée de l'Homme. Students of empire will find a judicious and thoughtful reassessment of the complicity of anthropology in colonial expansion. For scholars interested in the development of French anthropology, and the social sciences more broadly, *In the Museum of Man* will likely be the standard reference for years--and possibly decades--to come.

And, remarkably, that is just the beginning. The book also provides much valuable insight into a range of other subjects--racism, politics, institutional culture, Vichy and the Resistance--of fundamental interest to any student of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century France. Adding to Conklin's singular achievement is the fact that *In the Museum of Man* is also simply a very good read.

Much of the book's success hinges on its brilliant conception as a story at once grand and intimate. It is first and foremost a history of ideas--and big ideas at that--as it traces the way a "science of man" took shape in French academic circles from the 1850s until 1950. The intellectual journey departs at a moment when the science of man was closely linked to the work of physicians and naturalists who viewed "primitive" societies through the disciplinary lens of physical anthropology. But soon the story turns to the influential, if slow, rise of a new way of seeing. A sociocultural anthropology grew out of and ultimately critiqued older racial sciences such as anthropometry and craniometry. Behind the lead of Paul Rivet and Marcel Mauss, a new wave of curators and scholars increasingly approached "primitives" with a keen desire to document and study the linguistic, historical, and cultural distinctiveness of societies. Conklin demonstrates the inherently political nature of this new approach: most practitioners of ethnology defined their work as anti-racist and informed politically by the Left. The story ends with many of this generation denouncing Vichy racism and emerging from the war helping to inform the 1950 UNESCO statement that race was more social myth than scientific fact.

While this intellectual tour is vast and sweeping, Conklin keeps it intimate by following a cast of diverse characters who run the spectrum of human qualities--innovative, misguided, idealistic, egotistical, rebellious, opportunist, and even murderous. She portrays the complexity of changing disciplinary views of race deftly and with great nuance. Even people like Rivet and Georges Henri Rivière, who were at the forefront of redefining race at the Musée de l'Homme, faced deep institutional and political challenges in critiquing longstanding scientific ideas. And they faced competition from other approaches, such as Georges Montandon's "racist ethnology" (pp. 170). A mountain of research brings the book's characters to life, making their professional

goals, personal strengths and weaknesses, and moral resolve and follies a compelling structure to support the bigger story.

Because *In the Museum of Man* is so tightly constructed, rigorously argued, and deeply researched, the questions that came to this reader's mind all rest around the edges of the story. So, for the purposes of this forum, the following observations are aimed at provoking a discussion about some of the ways in which Conklin's clarity of insights about the history of anthropological thinking might be contextualized within broader and decidedly messier parallel phenomena. They are in no way meant to diminish the book's formidable achievements or to suggest inherent weaknesses.

In the Museum of Man steadfastly focuses on the rise of ethnology as imagined and promoted especially by Marcel Mauss and his followers. As a central feature of collecting knowledge distinct from both physical anthropology and armchair theorizing, ethnology was, says Conklin, a "new scientific method," one based on "*in situ* contact with so-called primitive societies." Mauss's students became "ethnology's pioneering foot soldiers" as they ventured, often to French colonies, in search of societies to study (p. 3).

While there was much new about the Maussian approach to ethnology, ethnographic writing had a much longer history in France than Mauss and Rivet's efforts—and indeed than anthropology as a discipline. As early as the seventeenth century, religious missionaries produced ethnographic studies of the societies they encountered. Alexandre de Rhodes, for example, promoted what was then a new approach to evangelizing that required missionaries to speak local languages, become fluent in cultural practices, and knowledgeable of "primitive" myths and belief systems. In the 1660s, three apostolic vicars from the Missions étrangères de Paris *walked* much of the way from Paris to their destinations in East Asia with the goal of documenting and describing the societies they encountered along the way to help future missionary efforts.

Ethnography thus became a central component of missionary work. By the late nineteenth century, missionary ethnographies had become mainstays of evangelizing; they were published and widely disseminated, garnered prizes, and became the subjects of ethnographic displays, even at colonial expositions. While certainly not all, many of these missionaries did not ascribe racially immutable characteristics to the people they lived and worked among. Maurice Leenhardt, the Protestant missionary in New Caledonia in the early twentieth century who was championed by Mauss for his pioneering work on notions of the sacred, worked squarely within this longer tradition.

Secular examples could be given as well. Nineteenth-century travel and geographical journals and books, as well as many newspapers, were full of detailed, if perhaps amateurish, ethnographic accounts of non-European societies. These often were printed with illustrations or photos of ritual practices, material culture (including tools, dress, and jewelry), and photos of the people themselves. In short, they were not terribly different in theme and content from some of the exhibits at the Musée de l'Homme.

So, the question arises of the "newness" of Mauss and Rivet's approach to ethnography. If placed within a longer tradition of French fascination with documenting the social, linguistic, and cultural dynamics of so-called "primitive" societies, how does the story of anthropological ethnology change? In what ways did a scientific discourse of ethnology break from, build on, respond to, and potentially shape non-academic ways of viewing and understanding foreign cultures? Is there any sense, for example, that the discipline of anthropology changed popular or religious methods of ethnographic representation?

And if not, why not? What is striking about the biographies of some of the book's main characters is that they had no real training in the field of anthropology. In particular, Rivière, as the second-in-command at the Musée de l'Homme, could not have been more out of his element: he was a thirty-year-old "jazz enthusiast" with connections with the art world but no real scientific training when he was hired (p. 105). Is this a story, then, of how social scientific disciplines crafted their professional credentials in part by ignoring other approaches to similar questions? It often can seem like academic disciplines are islands – the question is whether this is an impression created by the academics themselves, and to what end?

At the heart of these questions is the relationship between disciplinary scholarship, academic institutions, and popular perceptions, especially in the Third Republic. Just as there were popular ethnographic traditions in France, there were also myriad popular conceptions of race. The middle section of the book deals in breathtaking detail with the ways Rivet, Rivière, and others researched, designed, and created an "ethnology for the masses" (the title of chapter three). In these pages, there is a painstaking recreation of the lengths taken to study ethnographic museums in the US, USSR, and elsewhere to inform the design of the Musée de l'Homme, which took the place of the older Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro. And the reader gets a vivid sense of what a tour of the Musée looked like. What is less evident, however, is what actual visitors to the museum thought. While the Musée de l'Homme was the center of new ethnological research and the key physical conduit for spreading a new way of understanding "primitive" societies, it is difficult to know what "the masses" made of it.

The Musée de l'Homme was no doubt a vital institution for teaching the French public about "primitive" peoples around the world. But from the late nineteenth century forward, ethnographic museums were but one outlet for information (and misinformation). Reception is one of the great challenges historians face when writing about texts, museums, and other cultural artifacts. And it is possible that archives do not allow us to know exactly how individuals experienced the Musée de l'Homme—it might be wishful thinking to hope that there are files filled with letters from visitors explaining how the exhibits changed their views. But is there any way to measure the public impact of these progressive ethnologists' assertion that race was a constructed idea and not an immutable condition?

This question ties into the related issue of racism. Rivet, Mauss, and others obviously worked in the era of colonial expositions and human zoos. "Primitive" people were also captured by the new medium of the day, film, often in ways far from ethnographic. In the early 1930s, for example, the International Labor Organization received complaints about films being shown to audiences that depicted Africans being attacked and eaten by wild animals. Such appalling spectacles as human zoos and colonial snuff films obviously appealed to much baser instincts and left much different impressions than did a visit to the halls of the Musée de l'Homme.

With such a wide choice of often contradictory accounts of "primitive peoples" on view, it might be asked what impact the Musée de l'Homme and the ethnology it practiced had on wider public notions of racism. Conklin makes absolutely clear that many of Mauss's students took their anti-racism seriously, even growing disillusioned with colonial rule as they witnessed it during fieldwork. She makes an equally compelling case that their scholarly work drove them to view Nazism and Vichy racism with disgust, some even facing firing squads and concentration camps for their convictions. But is there a way to speculate on how these intellectual endeavors might fit—either by reflecting existing trends or shaping new ones—into a broader history of changing attitudes toward racism in French society?

In addressing the relationship between racism and scholarship, *In the Museum of Man* then proves itself to be relevant to contemporary challenges facing the Humanities and Social Sciences today. As a good portion of Conklin's readership will likely be academics, her book raises moral and pedagogical issues pertinent to us all: in what way has serious, institutional, scholarly work shaped public perceptions of people very different from ourselves? Are there, in short, lessons to learn from the accomplishments and mistakes of these French men and women who tried to reimagine what race meant in an age of imperialism and global conflagration?

The fact that Alice Conklin's *In the Museum of Man* raises such fundamental questions about the relationships between ideas, institutions, and public perceptions is a testament to the book's overwhelming success. She should be congratulated for producing a history so informative, moving, and thought-provoking. It is a model for us all.

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