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Daniel J. Sherman, *French Primitivism and the Ends of Empire, 1945-1975*. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2011. xii + 248 pp. £29.00. (hb). ISBN 978-0-22675-269-3.

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The 1970s coincided with the end of the period that Jean Fourastié dubbed the *Trente Glorieuses* and shortly predated the beginning of the Mitterrand era. It remains a relatively under-explored decade. It is, however, to understandings of this period that Daniel Sherman's *French Primitivism and the Ends of Empire* contributes substantially: it deflects analyses of these years away from their customary reading through the optic of 1968, and considers them instead from the perspective of the rapid and almost complete collapse of the colonial empire that preceded the May events. Sherman challenges the ways in which those transformations (variously sociological, political, ideological, cultural and literary) that characterized France under Pompidou and Giscard are customarily located in the wake of the May '68 rather than in the wider context of decolonization, a process often presented by this stage as something occurring elsewhere. Already in the 1950s, however, Jean-Paul Sartre had claimed, in his important 1956 essay "Le colonialisme est un système," that the role of the anti-colonial struggle was to free "à la fois les Algériens et les Français de la tyrannie coloniale,"[1] and the work of a number of recent scholars—most notably, in France, those associated with groups such as ACHAC—has sought to explore further the extent to which France itself may be interpreted, even must be interpreted, as "postcolonial." [2]

It was arguably Anglophone scholars who were instrumental in opening up this line of enquiry. Key studies by Kristin Ross and Herman Lebovics, both of which are cited in the volume currently under review, explored the resonances in French domestic space of decolonization and its afterlives.[3] Sherman finds shortcomings in the work of both scholars, in Ross for the "mismatch between a sweeping argument and an overly narrow empirical base," and in Lebovics for his emphasis on a "unidirectional portrayal of decolonization as a shift of technocratic expertise and styles of authority from overseas to the metropole" (p. 6). Presenting different vectors and drawing on an eclectic base of evidence, the objectives of *French Primitivism and the Ends of Empire* are different, for the book seeks to explore not so much the implications and impact of an empire "brought home" (to borrow Lebovics's terms), as the continued entanglements of metropolitan and formerly colonized spaces in the context of a chronologically post-colonial primitivism, a phenomenon characterized not least by "the complex interweaving of politics and discourse" (p. 6). The material with which Sherman engages is refreshingly diverse, ranging from visual artefacts to nuclear testing in the Pacific, from *art brut* to glossy magazines, and his analyses depend on the deployment of an equally wide spectrum of disciplinary perspectives and intellectual voices (amongst the latter, most notably those of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Michel Leiris, who provide a clear connection between a number of the cases studied).

Sherman's method depends in part on the highly effective telling of stories, and his study opens with the account of a set of events clustered between the autumn of 1966 and the spring of 1967: de Gaulle's visit to French Polynesia in September 1966; the integration into several couture collections in January 1967 of visual motifs from African art; the opening in April 1967 of a thematized exhibition at the Musée de l'Homme on "Arts primitifs dans les ateliers d'artistes;" and, in the same month at the Musée des Arts

Décoratifs, the first public exhibition of Jean Dubuffet's extensive collection of outsider art. For Sherman, these events encapsulate in very different ways the rapid evolution of modernity in post-colonial France. More than this, however, they also reflect "the pull of something different, a kind of past, tradition, or otherness, that together cloud the picture of postwar France's embrace of modernity" (p. 3).

Central to the study that follows is the idea that, although each period or generation has its own particular engagement with primitivism, the persistence of this particular cultural phenomenon in the two decades after the end of colonial empire--in the context of the consolidation of semi- and neo-colonial power where overseas departments and territories remained--encourages an understanding, in a new light, of the ways in which modernity remains intertwined with colonialism. Sherman defines primitivism flexibly as "at once a discourse, a myth, a fantasy, part of a larger colonial or neo-colonial apparatus, and a metaculture" (p. 5). He engages with previous work on the phenomenon, most notably Victor Li's on the "neo-primitivist turn,"^[4] but takes these analyses in new directions, not least by building on considerations of the philosophical and the aesthetic in order to permit a scrutiny in parallel with the emergence of a post-imperial polity and with the consolidation of market capitalism with which this coincided. Post-colonial primitivism is haunted by persistent colonial pre-histories, is characterized by a propensity to adopt various forms, and can be identified with a reliance on multiple modes of operation--the result being that it becomes, in Sherman's exploration, a means of "untangl[ing] the complex imbrications of the colonial legacy, rapid social and political change, and the politics of French culture in a period in which its own dominance was largely displaced by that of the United States" (p. 7).

The chapters that follow explore a series of interlocking histories that reached a conclusion in the decade following 1966-1967: the inauguration of the Galerie culturelle at the Musée National des Arts et Traditions Populaires [ATP] and the African galleries of the Musée des arts africains et océaniens [MAAO] in 1975; the major exhibition of Gaston Chaissac's work in 1973 and the opening in Lausanne of the Collection de l'art brut in 1976; and the first formal recognition of a degree of political autonomy in French Polynesia in 1977. The chronological focus maintained throughout the study remains a tight one, but the geographical range is wide, suggesting resonances, refractions and feedback loops that underline the extent to which an understanding of postcolonial cultural formations must be multi-directional and multi-linear. The second chapter on the ATP makes this clear. Here, Sherman studies the development of a "primitivizing complex" in French ethnology, drawing in this analysis on the vector described by Lebovics, that of repatriating the colonial to a metropolitan context (p. 18). He makes it clear that the ATP along with the Musée de l'Homme, also originally founded in the 1930s--despite the role of colonialism in their development--served as vehicles for an understanding of human diversity that may now be understood as anti-exoticist as well as anti-racist. Sherman rejects, however, any claim that their inauguration constituted a radical epistemological break, not least because he describes the extent to which the collecting practices and museological manoeuvres with which they were associated had firm colonial overtones. The salvage ethnography with which, especially in the post-war period, the quest for artefacts in the regions of France was accompanied reveals a reliance on a discourse of loss and on a process of temporal distancing comprehensively identified in colonial contexts by ethnographers such as James Clifford, Johannes Fabian and Jean Jamin.^[5]

Sherman describes a divergence between the modernity of the new museum in which the collections of the ATP were installed in 1975 and the persistent distancing mechanisms evident in its actual museological practices: "the ATP put on view a world without the very structures of contact from which it had emerged, both proximate--local *enquêtes*--and systemic--colonial science" (pp. 50-51). This association of the domestic with the primitive is extended in the following chapter into a consideration of the persistence of the primitive in the domestic--the idea of the accumulation of artefacts associated with consumer capitalism is introduced via a reading of Perec's *Les Choses*.^[6] Drawing on lifestyle and design magazines of the period, Sherman shows how these publications fashioned taste and projected aspirations and anxieties clearly associated with the end of colonial empire. The methods in play in this

arena are not those of museological obfuscation, but the construction of fantasy through interior decoration and the assemblage of objects of non-metropolitan provenance. Part of Sherman's argument depends on the shifting status of artefacts linked to colonial cultures, no longer seen as ethnographic exotica or high art objects, but transformed instead into evidence of new processes of mass consumption and wider distribution. The transformations were also firmly contextual, for the transfer of the Algerian War of Independence in the early 1960s to French soil meant that a previous "colonial" style of interior decoration was no longer attractive and was to be replaced by alternative fantasies, for which the new "association style" proved to be an effective vehicle. African masks, objects from the Pacific and abstract paintings were juxtaposed in a way that hid the colonial past of the works and artefacts on display, whilst articulating what Sherman dubs "modernity with a human face" (p. 83).

In seeing such a style as a "psychocultural fantasy" (p. 85) that effectively denies the physical conflict with which the end of colonial empire was associated and displaces this into the clash in domestic space of juxtaposed objects, Sherman detects parallel processes in the institutional space of the MAAO, where an aesthetic approach eclipsed any desire for ethno-historical contextualization and began to replicate the assumptions and practices of collecting in the artistic marketplace. Although in the following chapter, on the collection of European *art brut*, he focuses on a very different set of objects, questions persist regarding the role of the market in making a trope of primitivism in a modernist frame. Focussing on the collecting practices of Jean Dubuffet and on the changing status of the work of an outsider artist such as Gaston Chaissac, Sherman suggests that this form became yet another way for "primitivism to reinvent itself in response to colonialism's crisis" (p. 113). Through analysis of exhibitions, he tracks the shift from systems of circulation and exchange (that initially avoided the conventional procedures of the art market) towards an institutionalization of *art brut* that saw the naïve transformed into the primitive).

What is perhaps most striking in Sherman's multi-layered analysis, however, is his ultimate association of Chaissac's interest in the totemic with a "primitivism deeply rooted in the apparatus of European colonialism" and the "indelibility of empire as a structure of consciousness" (p. 151). At the same time, the active and often protectionist primitivization of the practitioners of *art brut*--as opposed to their treatment as primitivists--is shown to create resonances with the museological practices associated earlier in the study with the ATP, and to reveal a re-inscription of certain domestic art, artists and artefacts into the frame of a colonial primitivism that continued to exist in conflict with, and yet as a constitutive element of, the forces of modernity. As Sherman concludes, "[I]n both discursive and operational form, primitivism, as art brut and Chaissac's career demonstrate, is riddled with contradictions, particularly in its inevitable entanglements with the market and with regulatory instruments such as museums" (p. 152).

Whereas the previous three chapters focus on Francophone European arenas--i.e., France and Switzerland--and explore primarily questions of museology, art and design, the final chapter shifts to one of the foundational sites of French primitivism, Polynesia, in order to consider the ways in which these contradictions and entanglements played themselves out in this location in the fields of politics, tourism and heritage. Whilst it remained an Overseas Territory, French Polynesia was subject to rapid and radical transformations during the period in question. One of the first Club Med villages outside the Mediterranean was opened in Tahiti in the 1950s, signalling the beginning of a process of democratization of travel to the Pacific made possible by jet aircraft. With an expansion of tourism came an expectation that the local version would stage for visitors a version of local "authenticity." As Sherman comments, "[W]estern understandings of Polynesians prevalent in the 1950s denied them both memory and history, but accorded them something both timeless and under threat: cultural tradition" (p. 157).

Cultural tradition was associated not so much with exoticism as with primitivism, a manoeuvre whose implications were at least two-fold, revealing contradictions apparent elsewhere in other instances of

use of the phenomenon. The construction of Polynesia as isolated and detached from modernity served as justification for the rapid acceleration of modernization through the introduction of technology (not only the exploitation of the latest advances in mechanized travel, but also the development of a nuclear testing programme). Yet primitivism simultaneously allowed the marketing of the Pacific as a site of escape from unattractive aspects of modernity—in Sherman’s terms, “the primitive proved just as potent as a brand...as it had been as myth” (p. 190). Through the study of cinema and other material traces of tourist cultures, he explores the impact of leisure travel—“both a force for change and a potential source of disorder” (p. 173)—on local politics and society, and also considers the ways in which developments in tourism evolve in parallel to those in the nuclear testing. Both cultural shifts, in their at times contradictory entanglements with primitivism, constitute clear legacies of colonial rule and reflect the growing globalization that followed in the wake of empire: “If jet air made Polynesia accessible to tourists, nuclear testing made the territory’s remoteness both relative and, in terms of its relation to the conflicts and tensions of the modern world, irrelevant” (p. 190).

The originality of Sherman’s study is that he presents primitivism not as a nostalgically evoked remnant of past colonial cultures and of the mindset that underpinned them, but as a “live force in French culture” (p. 192). By this he means the primitivism operated as a dynamic and key element in those manoeuvrings in evidence in France and in the wider French-speaking world as the Francosphere adjusted to its often troubled post-coloniality. In his conclusion, Sherman moves away from his principal frame of reference to consider the persistence of a discourse of primitivism in subsequent controversies, not least those surrounding the opening of the Quai Branly in 2006 or associated with Nicolas Sarkozy’s *discours de Dakar* the following year. In considering these musicological and political cases as well as political upheaval in Tahiti during the Chirac presidency, or the major exhibition of Gaston Chaissac in the Jeu de Paume in 2000, *French Primitivism and the Ends of Empire* both maps and plumbs the complexities and contradictions of a persistent phenomenon that—to borrow the terms used by Robert Young to describe hybridity—“changes as it repeats, but also repeats as it changes.”^[7] It strikes me as unwise to speculate on the changes and repetitions we may or may not witness in post-Sarkozy France, but what remains clear, as Sherman himself concludes, is “the continued potency of primitivism within what remains of a distinctly French cultural politics” (p. 211).

NOTES

[1] Jean-Paul Sartre, “Le colonialisme est un système,” in *Situations V: colonialisme et anti-colonialisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 64.

[2] See Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel and Sandrine Lemaire, eds., *La Fracture coloniale: la société française au prisme de l’héritage colonial* (Paris: La Découverte, 2005), and Pascal Blanchard and Nicolas Bancel, eds., *Ruptures postcoloniales* (Paris: La Découverte, 2010). On the notion of a “postcolonial Europe,” see Graham Huggan, “Perspectives on Postcolonial Europe,” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 44/3(2008): 241-249, and Étienne Balibar, “Europe, an ‘unimagined’ frontier of democracy,” *Diacritics*, 33/3-4(2003): 36-44.

[3] Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), and Herman Lebovics, *Bringing the Empire Back Home: France in the Global Age* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004).

[4] Victor Li, *The Neo-Primitivist Turn: Critical Reflections on Alterity, Culture and Modernity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).

[5] “Salvage ethnography” is a form of ethnography devoted to salvaging traces of what remains of a culture before that culture has entirely disappeared. The term has been used to critique nineteenth-

century ethnographers and later anthropologists for their complicity in the destruction of the cultures they seek to document. See Jacob Gruber, "Ethnographic Salvage and the Shaping of Anthropology," *American Anthropologist*, 72/6(1970): 1289-1299.

[6] See Georges Perec, *Les Choses: une histoire des années soixante* (Paris: René Julliard, 1965).

[6] Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 27.

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