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Tony Chafer and Amanda Sackur, Eds., *Promoting the Colonial Idea: Propaganda and Visions of Empire in France*. New York and Hampshire, UK: Palgrave, 2002. xii + 248 pp. \$60.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN: 0333791800.

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In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the pursuit and governance of Europe's so-called "new" colonial empires were of little interest to most people in the home countries, or "metropolises." While there were moments when questions of empire fired popular mobilization, such as agitated British responses to the Boer War, general apathy was the rule. France was perhaps the most dramatic example of the disconnect between the pursuit of overseas conquest and popular political support. A small, isolated, but exceedingly influential *parti colonial* effectively managed to foster the ever expanding empire all the while failing to win over most French politicians or more than a small minority of French people to the charms of imperialism. Indeed, the *parti colonial's* great influence is taken as proof that few others cared enough to interfere in overseeing the empire. Introducing this collection of essays, editors Tony Chafer and Amanda Sackur argue that the new approaches to assessing "the colonial idea" that their volume highlights accept key elements of the traditional historiography. Instead of a repudiation of claims that summons to support or celebrate empire mattered little, they offer possibilities for meaningful reevaluations.

Since the 1980s, historians looking at the British empire have explored the roles that popular culture and popular attitudes played in the new imperialism. Historians of the "new" imperial history "straddle the boundaries of imperial, social, and cultural history" and embrace insights from other disciplines (p. 3). Their sources are wide-ranging, the ephemera of mass marketing, all forms of literary production, as well as records of popular entertainment, education, and religious activity of varying sorts that "projected images of race, empire and jingoistic nationalism" (*ibid.*). According to Chafer and Sackur, the key figure in this reevaluation of the "relationship of the British to their empire" is John MacKenzie, although they also tip their hats to Linda Colley's argument that "trade and empire were crucial to the emergence of a specifically British identity" (*ibid.*).^[1] The editors suggest that the insights of these British historians and, above all, their methods together offer models for French history. Rather than looking for explicitly imperialist, racist, or jingoistic pronouncement, such approaches work to identify what, as MacKenzie states for Britain, "had become so familiar as to be barely noticed."^[2]

The "Introduction" points convincingly to similarities between French and British Empires that make recent approaches to the latter suitable for thinking about the former, while also outlining key differences. Unlike Italy and Germany, each had a long history of overseas imperialism, which made empire "easily available as a symbolic unifying force" (p. 5). Although the French differed from the British in their understandings of the nation and national identity, the ordinariness of empire worked similarly for both to ground redefinitions of the state and national identity. Indeed, it was the very incapacity of empire in France, as in Britain, to mobilize political passions that allowed it so to shape popular understandings. Although the question of French identity in the post-Sedan and post-Communard Third Republic was even more at issue than in contemporary Britain, Chafer and Sackur also detail why the connection between French imperialism and national identity was less direct. The

priority given to revenging the loss of Alsace-Lorraine and concerns about economic weakness made more difficult popular acceptance of imperial endeavors. This initial reticence, in turn, may have contributed to making the “integrative and unifying role” of empire more durable in France (p. 6). While the editors focus on the interwar period, their explanation could be usefully extended to the period of decolonization as well.

In spite of this strong introduction, the revised conference papers that compose the body of this volume in no way pursue the post-MacKenzie model for the study of the “colonial idea” in France. Principally the articles discuss forms of propaganda produced by the French government and “scientific” authorities. A number of them are very good, and I will discuss their specifics shortly. Only a minority venture beyond this standard terrain to examine popular culture and cultural products *tout court* as sources, most notably Owen White’s examination of responses to an essay contest in a women’s magazine on the topic “Would you marry a man of color?” and Penny Edwards’s admirable study of the roles that images of Joan of Arc and Marianne played in redefinitions of gender in colonized Cambodia.

The best of the articles, I would suggest, evoke the influence of the historiographical shift the editors have chosen to ignore, which is to say the famed “linguistic turn,” most particularly the influence of Edward Said’s path-breaking *Orientalism* and his later book, *Culture and Imperialism*.^[3] In the volume’s only reference to the literary critic, Robert Aldrich describes Said’s point as being “that colonial references are omnipresent in British and French art and literature, politics and daily life” (p. 211). Granted more, much more, could be said about Said’s argument, but the absence of any other mention of the guru (despite himself) of postcolonial studies is itself intriguing. Besides pushing French historians to attend to the truly impressive scholarship of John MacKenzie, which would be a fine model for rethinking the connections between the history of France and the history of the French Empire, the editors seem eager to allow historians doing the kind of work they embrace to escape from the shadow (or the taint?) of Said and other thinkers associated with theory-based cultural and postcolonial studies. A more explicit evocation of MacKenzie’s own book-length critique of Said would have been useful.^[4]

It is, however, post-“linguistic turn” approaches that undergird most of the most interesting contributions to *Promoting the Colonial Idea*. They focus on institutions and understandings about empire in the metropole or in the colonies, relying on a (usually implicit) Foucauldian approach.^[5] White, in explaining his own method, nicely summarizes such an approach as presuming that “the difference in attitude between those who answered ‘yes’ and those who answered ‘no’ could be quite minimal.” His suggestion is that what needs analyzing are the underlying questions to which “yes” or “no” both responded (p. 136).

Some of the contributions rely on wholly different methodologies. In the first of three sections, “The Empire and Popular Opinion,” Gilles de Gantès offers a social history of “Migration Trends to Indochina,” which he believes may reveal the popularity of this colony among average French people. The article focuses on the small number of people from the metropole and from other French colonies who went to Indochina. For de Gantès, far more than organized propaganda or any “representation” of Indochina, it was social networks linked to certain cities and to the army that shaped the rhythm and the profiles of settlers. Isabelle Merle’s “Drawing Settlers to New Caledonia: French Colonial Propaganda in the Late Nineteenth Century” combines a study of government publicity campaigns to encourage metropolitans to emigrate to New Caledonia with an examination of how actual conditions in the colony countered such efforts. Misinformed by propaganda, many new arrivals took the next boat back to the metropole. Those who stayed were embittered against the government, and the end result, Merle argues, was to encourage already widespread French mistrust of the colonial world. Merle’s article is a nice piece of social history that offers non-francophone readers an entry to her important study of colonialism in New Caledonia.^[6] Along with articles by Pascal Venier, Catherine Atlan and Jean-Hervé, and Odile Goerg, these articles typify the dominant French school of colonial history: a focus on statistics and state actors; a strict division between metropole and empire; no attention to

theories of or questions about representation, subjectivity, identity, or the production of knowledge.

Part two, "Representations of Empire," has two particularly strong articles by Neil MacMaster and Penny Edwards. MacMaster studies "an interrelated group of neo-Mauresque or 'Arab' style buildings constructed in Paris during the inter-war period" to analyze their explicit goal of promoting imperialism and their "concealed segregationist and policing functions" (p. 71). Maghrebian nationalists quickly picked up on the latter. In 1926 Messali Hadj, an Algerian worker and political activist living in the metropole, joined a protest at the inauguration of the Paris Mosque that decried the exclusion from the Mosque of most Muslims in Paris. One month later he founded the most important interwar Algerian nationalist group, the *Etoile Nord Africaine*, which in the 1930s attacked the very idea behind the proposed Franco-Muslim Hospital. It was to be reserved for North Africans as if, Hadj stated, "we were of an inferior, plague-ridden race" (p. 77). It opened in 1935.

For those who prefer not to teach explicitly "theoretical" work, Edwards "Propagender': Marianne, Joan of Arc and the Export of French Gender Ideology to Colonial Cambodia (1863-1954)" would be an ideal article with which to introduce students to the use of gender as a category of historical analysis. While showing how France used gendered depictions of Cambodia to vouch for their political domination, Edwards also explores how such efforts were twinned with the hard work France did to force Cambodians to assume the natural characteristics of men and women. "The very idea of the nation-state as the sacrosanct unit of moral and political belonging was new" in Cambodia, Edwards argues. The same was true of the bourgeois "binary of femininity and masculinity" and "the embodiment of this European gender cleavage in costumes, coiffures and the cult of domesticity" (pp. 116-117). Edwards uses the impressions of European visitors in Cambodia to trace the emergence of such a gender binary in literature and art.

The first four articles of part three, "The Empire and Science," by White, Alice Conklin, Emmanuelle Sibaud, and Véronique Dimier are all very good. Both White and Conklin explore themes each raised in previous work on French West Africa to examine, for White, metropolitan understandings of miscegenation, while Conklin compares natalist-inspired medical policies in West Africa and the metropole.[7] She argues that, while natalism was a motor for policy making in West Africa, the differences between the terms *faire du noir* and *faire naître* captured a key distinction between a form of natalism in the West African context that was wholly "group" oriented in comparison to metropolitan plans that were supposed to produce individuals. By showing how women in the metropole, historically denied recognition as individuals, were increasingly depicted as part of the group "mothers," Conklin highlights the possible comparison between policies aimed at colonial subjects and policies that defined the treatment of metropolitan women. Rather than a direct comparison, she is most interested in examining the "symbiosis" of the metropolitan-colonial relationship.

Emmanuelle Sibaud, in "Negrophilia,' 'Negrology,' or 'Africanism'? Colonial Ethnography and Racism in France around 1900," begins her analysis of representations of sub-Saharan Africans at the 1900 Universal Exhibition. This starting point, she argues, does not show us what the French thought; rather, the public was invited to examine representations that "took a position" amidst "French metropolitan controversies" (p. 156). Her article delineates competing "scientific" claims to describe the peoples of Africa and connects the methods, adepts, and audience of each to the practice of French colonialism and debates in the metropole about the colonies. Finally, Véronique Dimier lays out the debates in the interwar period and after between British and French writers over French methods of colonial rule. The birth of the League of Nations and the mandate system it oversaw encouraged British critiques of the "French" system of "direct rule" of their colonies in comparison with the "indirect rule" favored by Britain. French writers denied that there was a fundamental difference, insisting that the French, too, pursued a form of indirect rule. Dimier's mapping of the debate is subtle and will push scholars of imperialism to continue questioning their categories of analysis.

LIST OF ESSAYS

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- G. de Gantés, Popular Enthusiasm for Empire in France
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- R. Aldrich, Colonial Paris: Traces of the Empire in the Paris Landscape

NOTES

[1] See, among other works, John M. MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Popular Opinion 1880-1960* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1984); and Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992).

[2] MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire*, cited in Chafer and Sackur, p. 4.

[3] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993).

[4] MacKenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory, and the Arts* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), esp. chps. 1-2.

[5] For a useful introduction to recent works, anglo- and francophone, in French colonial history that rely on post-linguistic turn or “cultural” approaches, see Daniel J. Sherman’s review essay, “The Arts and Sciences of Colonialism,” *French Historical Studies*, 23 (2000): 707-72.

[6] Isabelle Merle, *Expériences coloniales: La Nouvelle-Calédonie (1853-1920)* (Paris: Belin, 1995).

[7] See Owen White, *Children of the French Empire: Miscegenation and Colonial Society in French West Africa 1895-1960* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press 1999) and Alice L. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University, 1997).

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