

Anti-Colonialism

On 14 February 2017, the centrist French presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron appeared on Algerian television and acknowledged that France had committed ‘crimes against humanity’ during its 132-year colonisation of Algeria. Macron’s words were widely reported at home and abroad, for the starkness of his portrayal of colonial violence seemed genuinely ground-breaking or shocking, depending on one’s political standpoint. The seemingly inevitable backlash that Macron’s statement provoked in certain parts of the media, from the political parties of the centre- and far-right and, in particular, from *Pied-noir* groups, illustrates the profound colonial nostalgia that has become increasingly visible in France since the dawn of the twenty-first century: for instance, François Fillon, Macron’s centre-right rival for the presidency, delivered campaign speeches in which colonialism was recast as France ‘sharing its culture’.

Just as prevalent, but far less remarked upon, however, is a popular form of anti-colonialism that is as old as colonialism itself. In this chapter, I situate Macron’s statement within this long but neglected history of anti-colonialism (focusing on opposition to France’s nineteenth-century empire). I do so not to herald Macron as a contemporary champion of anti-colonialism —as the storm raged after his comments, he beat something of a rhetorical retreat, and subsequent comments on African women following his election tell a rather different story— but rather to illustrate that the triumphalist celebration of empire has never been the sole response to colonialism in France. In many instances, it is not colonialism *per se* that has been opposed by French anti-colonialists but rather its violent excesses; that is, anti-colonialism has emerged as an indignant response to what is seen as the Republic’s failure to live up to its ideals, with Republican Universalism invoked as a principle to be upheld rather than critiqued (Murphy, 2005). One can see such a stance in the words and

actions of the Socialist President François Hollande (2012-17) who went further than any previous head of state in acknowledging the violence of French colonialism: for example at Thiaroye in Senegal, site of the massacre in December 1944 of at least 35 (and probably far more) *tirailleurs sénégalais* (see chapter on the *tirailleurs* in this volume); or Sétif and Guelma in Algeria where, in the summer of 1945, tens of thousands were murdered by the French army in brutal reprisals after violence accompanied VE Day celebrations. A more radical and sustained critique of empire, mainly but not solely the work of French colonial subjects (or their descendants) —for instance, the *Indigènes de la République*, launched in 2005, or the now annual *Semaine anticoloniale et antiraciste*, which has close connections to many left-wing intellectuals associated with the PCF— has denounced imperialism as inherently violent and incapable of being reformed, and it has castigated Republican Universalism as an ethnocentrism that dare not speak its name.¹ This chapter will trace both lineages of French/Francophone anti-colonialism.

From the conquest to the First World War

In one of the first histories of the French anti-colonial tradition, Charles-Robert Ageron traces the surprising range of anti-colonial voices that emerged in the period from the creation of the Third Republic to the First World War, that is, at the very same time as the Republic was setting out to conquer its vast empire in Africa and Indochina.² These included figures from across the political spectrum: economic liberals, pacifists, radical Republicans (including the future wartime prime minister Georges Clemenceau), conservatives and

¹ *La Semaine anti-coloniale et anti-raciste*: ‘Sortir du colonialisme’:

<http://www.anticolonial.net/>; *Les Indigènes de la République*: <http://indigenes-republique.fr/>.

² Ageron’s text was the first in a series of histories of anti-colonialism: see also Biondi (1992).

nationalists, socialists (not least, the highly influential Jean Jaurès), anarchists and syndicalists, Catholics and some high-profile authors (including Anatole France). Although later largely forgotten, the existence of such anti-colonial critiques should come as no surprise as, in democratic societies, there is rarely unanimity about overseas military adventures. Once the conquest has taken place, however, opposition often retreats to the margins: with 'our boys' militarily engaged on the ground, to support the anti-colonial cause can be deemed tantamount to treason.

The most prominent and most violently polemical anti-colonialist of this period was Paul-Etienne Vigné, who wrote under the pen name P. Vigné d'Octon. Originally a committed colonialist, Vigné served as a military doctor accompanying French troops on punitive expeditions in Senegal and Guinea; horrified by what he saw there, he resigned his army commission and launched a career as an anti-colonial writer. From 1893-1906, he served as a Radical deputy to the French parliament, where he railed against military excesses in Madagascar and West Africa, reserving particular ire for the infamous Voulet-Chanoine mission, recently fictionalized in the graphic novel, *La Colonne* (Dumontheuil and Dabitch, 2013-14). The mission set off from Senegal to what is today Chad in order to confirm the borders of France's colonies in central Africa. Instructed by the Ministry for the Colonies to 'live off the land', the two French junior officers led their 'infernal column' across the African interior, carrying out numerous massacres and destroying entire villages. Like Conrad's Kurtz, in *Heart of Darkness*, Voulet and Chanoine appear to have 'gone rogue', even murdering a French colonel sent to put an end to their carnage. Vigné d'Octon writes in *La Gloire du sabre*, however, that far from being exceptional, their extreme violence was made possible by the very nature of the conquest of Africa.

The interwar period

During the interwar period, European colonialism generally appeared unassailable: the 1931 *Exposition Coloniale* —famously the sole site of colonial memory in Nora’s *Lieux de mémoire*— celebrated France’s vast empire and attracted over 30 million visitors over the course of its six-month run. Opposition to the event was minimal, although the Surrealists published a tract, ‘Ne Visitez pas l’Exposition Coloniale’ [Don’t Visit the Colonial Exhibition], in May 1931, and in September opened an anti-colonial exhibition, ‘La Vérité sur les colonies’ [The Truth about the Colonies], with the support of the French Communist Party (Palermo, 2009). Compared to the millions of visitors to the *Exposition Coloniale*, an estimated 6,000 visited the Surrealists’ counter-exhibition, a fact often used to illustrate the weakness of the anti-colonial movements of the period. Marginalised though they may have been, these movements forged alliances between the colonized and French nationals that continued to shape Third-Worldist and anti-globalization activism in the postcolonial period: chief amongst these alliances was that between anti-colonialism and communism.

The creation of the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) at the Congrès de Tours in December 1920 launched a new front in the opposition to empire, as the Communist International (Comintern) committed its affiliated national parties to a resolutely anti-imperialist stance. Nguyen ai Quoc, the future Ho Chi Minh, delivered a stirring critique of empire in Tours, although tellingly he was the only colonial subject whose voice was heard.³ A few months later, the PCF created *L’Union Intercoloniale* (UIC), with the aim of providing a forum in which a broad transcolonial front against empire might develop. In 1924-25, the PCF carried out its most sustained anti-colonial campaign when it organised resistance to the colonial war in the Rif Mountains of Morocco. Although ultimately unsuccessful, the Rif campaign saw French communists and colonized activists, in particular the Senegalese

³ During his time in France, Ho Chi Minh would author the seminal anti-colonial text, *Le Procès de la colonisation française* (1925).

veteran of the First World War, Lamine Senghor, work closely together and some rallies (including one at Luna Park) drew thousands of militants in defence of the anti-colonial cause.

Anti-colonialism and communism enjoyed a turbulent relationship for much of the mid-part of the twentieth century: Aimé Césaire's *Lettre à Maurice Thorez* (1956) captures the frustrations of black/colonial minorities that their cause always remained subordinate to the demands of the central metropolitan party. The PCF has suffered a steep decline in support over the past three decades but its annual *Fête de l'Humanité* in the Parisian suburb of La Courneuve offers a clear reminder of the anti-colonial politics that were central to Communist discourse (if not always actions) throughout the twentieth century: for example, Cuba—at the heart of so many anti-colonial struggles in the 1960s and 1970s—has retained a special place in the sympathies of far-left anti-colonialists.

The interwar period also witnessed uneasy alliances between anti-colonial nationalists and French socialists, many of them associated with the Ligue des droits de l'homme. Félicien Challaye's *Un livre noir du colonialisme* (1935) is a compelling account of the excesses of colonial rule. Challaye and others like him were reformers: they were anti-colonial in the sense that they were against colonialism as it was actually practiced. What they wanted was for France to truly fulfil its civilizing mission and deliver on the promise of assimilation. Similar denunciations of colonial violence occurred in various written forms in this period. When the investigative journalist, Albert Londres attacked colonial practices in Africa in *Terre d'ébène* (1929), he was following hard on the heels of the novelist, André Gide, who had just published his *Voyage au Congo*, which depicted the abuse meted out by certain colonial officials to the indigenous populations (similar ground is covered within the fictional narrative of Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit*). Although Gide never proposed any systematic critique of colonialism, his book provoked a harsh reaction

from right-wing nationalist critics, for whom the empire must always be defended as evidence of France's greatness (a stance still clearly visible today in the response to Macron's comments cited above).

From decolonization to anti-globalization

The period after the Second World War was the highpoint of French anti-colonialism, as the 'vieilles colonies' of the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean became full departments of France and the newer colonies of Africa and Asia pushed for their independence —violently in the cases of *l'Indochine française* and Algeria. In the writings of Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi, Abdelkhebir Khatibi, Edouard Glissant, amongst others, there emerged an enduring tradition of anti-colonial discourse (Forsdick and Murphy, 2009): Césaire's *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1950) and Fanon's *Les Damnés de la terre* (1961) have become globally recognised as canonical works of opposition to empire. The Algerian War of Independence was understandably at the heart of the most heated anti-colonial debates. Shocked at the levels of violence unleashed by the French state, figures such as Maurice Audin and Henri Alleg stepped forward to denounce the military's systematic use of torture. The philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre went further, lending his (intellectual) support to the Algerian cause and arguing in the essay 'Colonialism is a system' (2006 [1956]) that the liberation of empire would also lead to the liberation of Europe from the 'racist humanism' that had informed its encounters with the colonised world over the preceding centuries of European expansion. Others associated with Sartre's *Les Temps Modernes* went still further and actively supported the FLN: Francis Jeanson created a network of 'porteurs de valises' who transported suitcases full of money on behalf of the Algerian resistance. The principal members of the *Réseau Jeanson* were captured and tried in September 1960: their actions were defended in the *Manifeste des 121*, a wide-ranging manifesto signed by 121 French

intellectuals, academics and artists criticising France's conduct in Algeria and declaring the cause of the Algerian people to be the cause of humanity.

Anti-colonialism has not solely been centred on the relationship between France and its external empire, however, as French regionalist movements often 'proclaim solidarity with, and draw inspiration from' their Francophone (post)colonial counterparts (Williams, 2003: 102). The dominant national narrative recalls the educational policies of the Third Republic as the spread of the universal ideas of the Republic —liberty, equality, fraternity and secularism— to the backward, Church-ridden provinces of Brittany, Provence and other peripheral regions. It was the Third Republic that made French the language of the entire Hexagon: in 1870, it was estimated that approximately 20% of the French population did not speak French at all, while a further 30% only spoke French as a second language. Understandably, a quite different memory of this process has survived amongst a significant minority in these regions, which emphasises the profound sense of linguistic and cultural dislocation it occasioned. The Algerian War played a central role in stirring up a profound *prise de conscience* in France's regionalist movements, and the term 'internal colonialism' was coined to describe their relationship to the French state. They turned to the writings of Césaire, Fanon and Memmi to theorise their own position and they found clear connections between certain colonial practices and educational policies in the regions, not least the shaming of schoolchildren for speaking their native language within the space of the Republican school. Where regionalism had previously been perceived as a right-wing, reactionary force, opposing the social gains of the French Revolution, the transformative period of the 1960s led to the creation of a militant, left-wing regionalist movement, through groups such as the *Comité Occitan d'Etudes et d'Action* and the *Front de Libération de la Bretagne*. The practical fruits of this mix of anti-colonialism and regionalism are visible

today in the presence of regional languages on bilingual road signs as well as in a significant number of schools.

Herman Lebovics provides a compelling account of the tangled relationship between French regionalism and the anti-colonial, Third Worldist politics of the early 1970s. In August 1974, on the Larzac Plateau in the Massif Central, activists held a Festival of the Third World that mobilized people around a mix of local and global issues. Their placards said ‘NO to French arms sales abroad, No to nuclear tests, No to the extension of military bases, No to the pillage of the Third World’ (Lebovics, 2004: 13). This was the jumbled beginning of what would become today’s ecological and anti-globalisation movements, and it was no coincidence that the Larzac protest movement was the training ground for José Bové who would in 1999 lead an infamous protest to dismantle a McDonald’s restaurant under construction in Millau in the Aveyron region.

The Larzac protests would also create a concrete link between the new regionalism and ongoing anti-colonial struggles in the remains of the French empire. The Larzac protestors had symbolically offered a piece of land to the Kanak people in New Caledonia and, in June 1988, the leader of the Kanak independence movement, Jean-Marie Tjibaou, came to Larzac to formally accept it on behalf of his people. Political upheaval in New Caledonia—in particular, the violence that erupted in the mid-1980s—led to the Nouméa Accord of 1998, which brought peace and a promise of an independence referendum to be held by 2018 (see P. Higginson’s essay in this volume). The ability of the Kanak movement to force the Fifth Republic to cede autonomy to the islands is, as Charles Forsdick argues, ‘a clear indication of the cracks increasingly apparent in the myths of singular identity underpinning French republicanism’ (2010: 182). It also reveals that anti-colonialism can have a contemporary rather than a solely historical relevance.

Conclusion

The long history of Kanak resistance against French rule has been the subject of a number of recent popular fictions, in particular *Cannibale* (1996) by the author, Didier Daeninckx. In the 1980s, Daeninckx had also written a detective novel, *Meurtres pour mémoire* (1983), set against the backdrop of 17 October 1961, when several hundred peaceful Algerian demonstrators were brutally murdered by the French police, many of them beaten and thrown into the Seine. The events of 17 October 1961 have been the subject of numerous fictional accounts; from Michael Haneke's film *Caché* (2005) to Leïla Sebbar's *La Seine était rouge* (2009). These works provide a clear link to the anti-colonialism of the interwar period in their denunciation of the violence of colonialism. Indeed, in many ways, 17 October 1961 has become the emblematic site of anti-colonial memory: for instance, the renowned Franco-Algerian artist, Kader Attia, chose 17 October 2016 as the symbolic date on which to open the playfully titled *La Colonie*, a new arts space in Paris.⁴

After decades of amnesia, there is now official French commemoration of 17 October 1961, although municipal rather than state authorities have been most active on this front. A small plaque stands on the Pont Saint-Michel in central Paris to commemorate those killed there on 17 October 1961. It was unveiled 40 years after that tragic night by the Socialist-controlled Paris town hall, while in 2007 two similar plaques on the Pont de la Gare in nearby Saint-Denis (bodies from the massacre were found in the Canal de Saint-Denis) were unveiled by the Communist mayor. These examples constitute clear illustrations of a still

⁴ In this content, one might also cite the massacre of 9 peaceful demonstrators killed at the Charonne metro station in Paris on 8 February 1962 during a demonstration against the Organisation Armée Secrète (O.A.S.). Its memory was long suppressed officially but finally commemorated by Paris town hall in 2007.

vibrant anti-colonial tradition in France, which might, at first, appear to emerge solely from the centre-left and radical left-wing groups but I would suggest that the response to Macron's comments on colonialism in Algeria reveals that a critique of colonialism may express more widely held views than is often imagined. For a fascinating but little reported outcome of the Macron episode was an IFOP opinion poll which found that 52% of those polled agreed with Macron's statement about the 'crimes against humanity' committed in Algeria, including 35% of those planning to vote for the Front National in the upcoming presidential elections (Smith, 2017). In recent decades, the defence of colonialism has become a keystone of even the moderate right, while the left have been associated with the critique of empire. Could it be, however, that Macron gave voice to an anti-colonialism that is in fact now widely shared in France?

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