

INTRODUCTION

FRENCH COLONIAL HISTORIES FROM BELOW

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In exploring 'French colonial histories from below', this special issue draws together the overlapping concerns of colonial historians and practitioners of history from below with the experiences, perspectives, and historical agency of groups subordinated by the dominant structures of capitalism and empire. 'History from below' has, of course, a distinguished tradition among historians of metropolitan France. Whether inspired by the British Marxists or the French *Annales* school, the desire to salvage the histories of the anonymous, often illiterate masses of French peasants, workers and *menu peuple* has given rise, since the late 1970s, to a rich and varied body of work that encompasses quantitative analyses of popular politics, reconstructions of working-class and peasant *mentalités* and microhistorical accounts of particular people or places.¹ French historians interested in everything from daily life in a medieval Pyrénéen village to the crowd in the French Revolution have long embraced what Lucien Febvre (one of several scholars credited with coining the term) described in 1932 as 'history viewed from below and not from on high'.²

The field of colonial history, particularly scholars working under the direct or indirect influence of the Subaltern Studies movement in South Asia, has shared this suspicion of top-down historical approaches. The manifesto that introduced the *Subaltern Studies* journal in 1982 opened by denouncing the 'elitism' of a historiography that 'fails to acknowledge, far less interpret, the contribution made by the people *on their own*, that is, *independently of the elite* [British or Indian] to the making and development' of modern India. The necessary

As editors, we would like to thank all the contributors to this special issue who, in addition to producing excellent scholarship, have been a pleasure to work with at every stage. We hope they are as pleased with the outcome as we are. We would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers of this special issue for their constructive and insightful comments.

¹ The quote is, of course, E. P. Thompson's famous exhortation in *The Making of the English Working Class* [1963] (New York, 1966), 12.

² 'Albert Mathiez: un tempérament, une éducation', *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, 18 (1932), 576. For a broader overview of history from below: J. Sharpe, 'History from below', in P. Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (University Park, PA, 2001), 25–43. Prominent examples in the field of French history include G. Rudé, *The Crowd in the French*

corrective to this failure, the manifesto argued, was to acknowledge the existence of a political realm in which ‘the principal actors were not the dominant groups of the indigenous society or the colonial authorities but the subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of the labouring population and the intermediate strata in town and country—that is, the people’.³ The group’s members thus turned their attention to the political ideas and actions of workers, peasants and petty bourgeois in both colonial and postcolonial South Asia. Members of the Subaltern Studies collective have specifically rejected any genealogical debt to European history from below, but the two movements nonetheless had a common preoccupation with “rescuing from the condescension of posterity” the pasts of [...] socially subordinate groups’.⁴

Contemporary scholarship in French colonial history rarely engages so explicitly with the need for attention either to the lower orders of society or to the realms of social history, however. The powerful renaissance of interest in French Empire since the late 1990s has been shaped more by Foucauldian/Saidian postcolonial theory than by Subaltern Studies, leading to a focus on imperial ideologies, colonial discourses and knowledges, and policymaking and practices of rule.⁵ The primary exception is Caribbean history, where the centrality of slavery and the Haitian Revolution—and perhaps the influence of broader comparative perspectives—have compelled scholarly attention to focus on enslaved workers, the Black peasantry and revolutionary crowds in the colonial context. In the influential 1985 volume *History from Below: Studies in Popular Protest and Popular Ideology in Honor of George Rudé*, the few essays addressing the French colonies all deal with the Caribbean.⁶ Carolyn Fick, a student of Rudé’s and the author of one of those essays, made perhaps the most concerted effort to apply the concepts of history from below to the study of French colonialism, seeking to ‘illustrate the nature and impact

Revolution (Oxford, 1967); E. Leroy Ladurie, *Montaillou, village occitan de 1294 à 1324* (Paris, 1975), translated by Barbara Bray as *Montaillou: Cathars and Catholics in a French Village, 1294–1324* (London, 1978); and N. Z. Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA, 1984).

³ R. Guha, ‘On some aspects of the historiography of colonial India’, in R. Guha and G. C. Spivak, *Selected Subaltern Studies* (Oxford, 1988), 37, 39–40. For an overview of the history of Subaltern Studies: D. Ludden, ‘Introduction: a brief history of subalternity’, in D. Ludden (ed.), *Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical History, Contested Meaning and the Globalization of South Asia* (London, 2002), 1–39.

⁴ D. Chakrabarty, ‘Subaltern Studies and postcolonial historiography’, *Nepantla: Views from South*, 1(1) (2000), 9–32, quoting E. P. Thompson’s famous exhortation in *The Making of the English Working Class* [1963] (New York, 1966).

⁵ On the development of this ‘new’ French colonial history: F. Cooper, ‘Decolonizing situations: the rise, fall, and rise of Colonial Studies, 1951–2000’, *FPC&S*, 20(2) (2002), 47–76; G. Wilder, ‘Unthinking French history: colonial studies beyond national identity’, in A. Burton (ed.), *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and through the Nation* (Durham, NC, 2003), 125–43; A. Conklin and J. Clancy-Smith, ‘Introduction: writing French colonial histories’, *Fr Hist Stud*, 27(3) (2004), 497–505; essays in ‘Racial France [Special Issue]’ *Pub Cul*, 23(1) (2011).

⁶ P. Boule, ‘In defence of slavery: eighteenth-century opposition to abolition and the origins of a racist ideology in France’; C. Fick, ‘Black peasants and soldiers in the Saint-Domingue Revolution: initial reactions to freedom in the South Province (1793–4)’, and J. S. Bromley, ‘Outlaws at sea, 1660–1720: liberty, equality and fraternity among the Caribbean freebooters’, in F. Kranz (ed.), *History from Below: Studies in Popular Protest and Popular Ideology in Honor of George Rudé* (Montréal, 1985).

of the popular mentality and popular movements' in Haitian revolutionary politics. Rejecting a historiography that 'treated the masses in a vague, summary fashion, almost as a mere footnote', Fick set out to restore the agency of 'the mass of black slave laborers who participated in this revolution on their own terms and with interests and goals embodying their own needs and aspirations'.⁷ Historians focusing on other parts of the French Empire have taken up classic themes of history from below more sporadically, considering, for instance, the role of banditry, peasant protests and organized labour in challenging colonial domination.⁸ But, perhaps because of the relative marginalization of colonial history within the French academy, such approaches have had relatively limited influence outside the Atlantic context until quite recently.

In the last few years, however, attempts to shift attention towards the ground-level dynamics of colonial societies have shown the power of writing history from the bottom up to shed new light on large-scale historical phenomena, including empire. Inspired in part by work in world and global history, 'bottom-up' approaches have proven invaluable in making the complexities of colonialism legible to specialists and novices alike. As Francesca Trivellato writes of microhistory (one of the most popular and accessible forms of history from below), such approaches are among the ways to 'best portray the entanglement of cultural traditions produced by the growing contacts and clashes between different societies that followed the sixteenth-century European geographical expansion', as well as to challenge pre-existing generalizations about global phenomena such as imperialism.⁹

Of particular note are several recent biographical studies that focus precisely on the connected and entangled nature of French imperialism and the ways that it was experienced, shaped and subverted by individuals and local communities. Following feminist scholars like Julia Clancy-Smith, who has advocated for biography as a means to illuminate the forgotten history of women in colonial contexts, these recent works examine the lives of French female missionaries in the Americas and the Mediterranean, French-Algerian settler women and an enslaved family in the Indian Ocean.¹⁰ They explore

⁷ C. E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint-Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville, TN, 1991), xi, 1.

⁸ J. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven, 1977); D. Prochaska, 'Fire on the mountain: resisting colonialism in Algeria', in D. Crummey (ed.), *Banditry, Rebellion and Social Protest in Africa* (Portsmouth, 1986), 229–52; N. Vinh Long, *Before the Revolution: The Vietnamese Peasants under the French* (New York, 1991); F. Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labour Question in French and British West Africa* (Cambridge, 1996); J. Clancy-Smith, *Rebel and Saint: Muslim Notables, Populist Protest, Colonial Encounters (Algeria and Tunisia, 1800–1904)* (Berkeley, 1997); M. Thomas, 'Eradicating "communist banditry" in French Vietnam: the rhetoric of repression after the Yen Bay Uprising, 1930–32', *Fr Hist Stud*, 34(3) (2011), 611–48.

⁹ 'Is there a future for Italian microhistory in the age of global history?' *California Italian Studies*, 2(1) (2011), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0z94n9hq>.

¹⁰ Among other works: 'The House of Zainab: female authority and saintly succession in colonial Algeria', in N. Keddie and B. Baron (eds), *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender* (New Haven, 1992), 254–74; 'The "Passionate Nomad" reconsidered: a European woman in *l'Algérie Française* (Isabelle Eberhardt, 1877–1904)', in N. Chaudhuri and M. Strobel (eds), *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance* (Bloomington, IN, 1992), 61–78.

women's roles in building the modern French Empire and the ways that ordinary people navigated the intersecting power dynamics of race, gender, class and freedom in colonial contexts.¹¹ Individuals, as Sue Peabody writes of the enslaved woman Madeleine and her children, 'inhabited a microcosm of the wider changes transforming the French global empire', and their stories can tell us a great deal about 'the complex, varied, and locally particular manifestations' of French colonialism.¹² Although the contributors to this special issue range beyond specifically biographical approaches, they are all concerned to some degree with the ways that looking at colonialism from below 'draws out the intricate negotiations that situate empire in place'.¹³

In keeping with the tradition of history from below, the six contributions to this special issue are united by the authors' desire to recover voices left out of the historical narrative and to excavate the particular dynamics of French colonialism in specific sites. Articles by Nathan Marvin and Jennifer Palmer expose the means by which intersections of race, gender and citizenship (or lack thereof) could challenge established hierarchies of power in the eighteenth-century slave colonies of the Indian Ocean and the Caribbean. Both historians use judicial records to delve into the experiences and strategies of women who sought, not always successfully, to create opportunities and exercise privileges by exploiting the contradictions embedded in the colonial system, particularly with respect to questions of property. Moving forward to the late nineteenth century, Christopher Church charts an environmental history from below centred on fire and its potential as a weapon in the hands of notionally free but still highly exploited Antillais sugar workers seeking to improve their material and social conditions. Strategies of resistance are central in Caroline Campbell's exploration of Amazigh (Berber) peoples' experiences of and responses to French military violence during the conquest of Morocco (1903–34). Campbell also reflects on the 'entanglements' between the Amazigh and junior French officers, which were intimately bound up with the two sides' very different understandings of violence in this era.

Meike de Goede analyses the physical and discursive violence experienced by members of the minority Matsouanist religious sect at the hands of nationalists in the French Congo during and after decolonization. Her article reminds us of the enduring centrality of violence even through to the end stages of French Empire, while her focus on a marginalized religious community in French Equatorial Africa also highlights the uneven state of our knowledge about French imperialism. If de Goede emphasizes that colonial political

¹¹ S. Curtis, *Civilizing Habits: Women Missionaries and the Revival of French Empire* (Oxford, 2010); P. Lorcin, *Historicizing Colonial Nostalgia: European Women's Narratives of Algeria and Kenya, 1900–Present* (New York, 2012); R. Rogers, *A Frenchwoman's Imperial Story: Madame Luce in Nineteenth-Century Algeria* (Stanford, CA, 2013); S. Peabody, *Madeleine's Children: Family, Freedom, Secrets, and Lies in France's Indian Ocean Colonies* (Oxford, 2017).

¹² Peabody, *Madeleine's Children*, 4.

¹³ D. Agmon, *A Colonial Affair: Commerce, Conversion, and Scandal in French India* (Ithaca, NY, 2017), 17.

conflict transcended neat boundaries between colonizer and colonized, Itay Lotem's study of the Indigènes de la République (IR) movement reveals similar fractures at work in the more familiar territory of postcolonial metropolitan France. Lotem maps clashes between this group of anti-racist memory activists and other French minority communities, especially Jews, in the early 2000s. Focusing on Houria Bouteldja, IR's charismatic and controversial spokeswoman, Lotem teases out the questions posed by her provocative stance regarding the racialization of different minority communities and the roles played by gender and class within these debates.

Central to all these articles is an acknowledgement of the need for historians, as Christopher Church puts it, to meet historical agents 'on their own terms' as far as possible. In light of the general absence of voices from below in historical records, this means looking to new materials in new ways. Among the source bases mined by our contributors, judicial records—a classic resource for history from below—emerge as a particularly rich repository for subaltern voices. As Nathan Marvin points out, we often know most about people who were illiterate and otherwise left no written traces from documents of their interactions with colonial authorities, especially within the legal system. Historians must, of course, approach such documents with care, since they were composed by those with power, including the power to shape how, where and, indeed, if the words of the subaltern (almost always the accused) appear. Yet, as Marvin, Palmer and Church all show, attentive reading 'against the grain' and wider contextualization can make it possible to extract rich and multifaceted histories from below from documents created at the top.¹⁴

Oral histories offer another means to counter the limitations of colonial archives. Although sixty years have passed since the events of 1958–62, the Matsouanists interviewed by Meike de Goede retain vivid memories of the events they witnessed and participated in at that time. Their testimonies serve not only to preserve a record of an episode and a community that has been erased from mainstream histories, but also to complicate official narratives of a smooth transition to independence in French Congo. Even in the present highly mediatized age oral history serves a critical function, especially where state and organizational records remain under construction and/or off-limits to researchers.¹⁵ Lotem's interviews with Bouteldja and other activists, for example, enable him to reflect critically on the ways in which platform and context shape political messages. Caroline Campbell also draws on oral sources, this time poetry performed by *imdyazen* troubadours and collected by early

¹⁴ For more on legal sources and colonial history: R. Roberts and K. Mann (eds), *Law in Colonial Africa* (Portsmouth, NH, and London, 1991); R. Roberts, 'Text and testimony in the Tribunal de Première Instance, Dakar in the early twentieth century', *JAH* 31 (1994), 447–63; C. Coquery-Vidrovitch (ed.), 'Les femmes, le droit et la justice [Special Issue]', *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 187–8 (2007).

¹⁵ On the importance—and potential pitfalls—of oral sources for contemporary history: M. Rahal, 'Fused together and torn apart: stories and violence in contemporary Algeria', *Hist & Mem*, 24 (2012), 118–51.

twentieth-century French military officers. She pays particular attention to the conjuncture of French intelligence-gathering strategies and individual French officers' personal interests that led to the preservation of these poems. As such, they require the same skilful unpacking as judicial records, but hold out similar potential to open up a window onto the experiences and ideas of colonized populations. Chance plays a role in all historical research, in terms of what materials are and are not conserved, what is and is not accessible. But Campbell's discussion highlights its particularly high stakes in the case of histories from below that seek to overcome historical silences, absences and erasures.

Although organized chronologically, the contributions to this special issue connect and speak to each other in ways that overcome traditional temporal and geographical boundaries in French colonial history. Even as they attempt to recover the voices of individuals who have been written out of historical narratives, the authors seek to challenge those broader narratives in and of themselves by proposing alternative chronologies and stories. This is perhaps most evident in de Goede's argument that Matsouanist testimonies not only contradict the official vision of a peaceful, orderly decolonization process, but decentre the moment of independence itself in the decolonization of French Equatorial Africa. For the men and women she interviewed, the traditional turning points do not map onto the events they regard as personally significant, creating an alternative and deeply revealing chronology. Similarly, the poetry analysed by Campbell shows that while violence was the central preoccupation and defining feature of conquest for Amazigh communities, French military officials treated it as '*secondary* and retaliatory to the overarching objective of occupying and administering an area'. This disjuncture in turn created fundamentally different understandings of the events that unfolded in Morocco between 1903 and 1934.

Collectively, these historians demonstrate the flexibility that could exist within seeming strict colonial systems and hierarchies. In particular, they illuminate the agency that groups and individuals were able to exercise, despite the imbalances of power and the many restrictions imposed by the colonial system. In so doing, they draw our attention to the numerous gaps between imperial imaginations and ideologies and events on the ground. As Nathan Marvin demonstrates, the strict racial definitions envisaged by officials in France ill fit the racially mixed population of the Île Bourbon, where definitions of whiteness often bore little relationship to phenotype. His discussion centres on a woman, Marie Perrot, who broke local taboos by openly stating this fact in order to defend herself in court. By calling attention to the ubiquity of racially mixed relationships, Perrot sought to leverage the malleability of racial categories to her own advantage.

The economic importance of their labour to colonial societies also created openings for colonized people to manipulate and challenge racial hierarchies. Jennifer Palmer shows how some women of colour in the late eighteenth-century French Atlantic took advantage of French assumptions about them

as 'productive labourers' in order to bypass restrictive intersections of race and gender and to stake claims to land ownership, property accumulation and status within French society. A particularly well-documented tactic of twentieth-century anti-colonial movements, using the colonizers' own norms and perceptions to subvert their limitations, is here shown to have been present in the eighteenth century as well. Even as racial categories became increasingly rigid over the nineteenth century, formerly enslaved people found new ways to challenge colonial discrimination. As Christopher Church argues, Antillean sugar workers remained individually exploited and dominated after emancipation in 1848, but were able to wield considerable power as a social class because the Caribbean sugar economy, and thus the fortunes of white planters, depended on their labour.

A further theme running through this special issue is the different strategies of resistance used by subordinates in colonial relationships. These ranged from the passive resistance of Matsouanists who refused to engage with a colonial regime and an independence process they regarded as illegitimate, to the highly active but also sophisticated use of fire by Antillean labourers seeking to resist the imposition of exploitative working conditions. For the Amazigh in Morocco, poetry not only spread information about French encroachments but promoted 'communal strength and a sense of solidarity' which could then be mobilized to resist the colonizer. The voice is the weapon of choice for IR spokeswoman Bouteldja, too, as she seeks to break with previous anti-racism strategies and to illuminate colonial continuities at the heart of contemporary French society. Finally, Marie Perrot astutely deployed a range of strategies in her written submission to the court in order to resist the arrest of her slave, and probable lover, Ambroise, as well as the attempts of her male relatives to control her. On the one hand, she exerted her rights as a citizen, and thus her 'white privilege', despite being of mixed race origins, alongside her status as a property owner, demanding that the rights associated with these positions be protected. But she simultaneously emphasized her vulnerability as a single woman to win the judges' sympathy.

As Perrot's case reminds us, we must beware of reifying or homogenizing those categorized as 'from below', since several of the actors discussed in this special issue both possessed and were able to use relative privilege at key moments, even as they remained subaltern in other respects. Perrot, for instance, was disadvantaged as a woman in late eighteenth-century Réunion, but benefited from her status as a 'white' citizen and a property owner. Bouteldja presents a similarly complex picture as a woman and a member of a postcolonial minority community, whose university education, according to her critics, separates her from the socially marginalized communities on whose behalf she claims to speak. In both cases, gender and class intersect in seemingly contradictory ways. Campbell's article can also be read as a comparison between two subaltern perspectives: that of Berber storytellers and junior officers in the French army. The latter were hardly subaltern in terms of colonial hierarchies, but their subordinate position within the French military

hierarchy fuelled perspectives on General Lyautey's 'pacification' strategy that diverged significantly from those of their superiors. Such discussions inevitably call to mind Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper's famous call for historians to move beyond binary categories in their analyses of empire.¹⁶

From this perspective, it is no accident that gender emerges as a central preoccupation for several of the contributors here. It forms the core analytical axis for Marvin and Palmer, who highlight persistent attempts by eighteenth-century women to seize control of their own fates and fortunes. Two centuries later, as Lotem shows, Houria Bouteldja enjoys much greater rights and freedoms, but remains subject to and restricted by assumptions linked to her race, gender and class. Although less central, the significance of gender can also be seen in Church's discussion of the treatment of female arsonists and in de Goede's observation that women Matsouanists' narratives of violence are different to those of men. These pieces show how scholarly attention to women's histories, and the histories of women of colour in particular, and to the dynamics of gender can open up especially productive new perspectives on the complexities of colonial categories and the gaps between ideological prescriptions and practices on the ground.

Finally, while each contribution focuses on specific events and individuals or communities, they nonetheless recall the importance of wider imperial and global contexts in shaping these particular histories. The French and Haitian Revolutions served as lightning rods for heightened anxieties about racial and sexual transgression that underpinned the Perrot court case documented by Marvin. A worldwide downturn in cane sugar prices due to market saturation by beet sugar provided the economic backdrop for the spate of fires across French Caribbean chronicled by Church. In French East Africa, decolonization catalysed a critical shift in Congolese nationalists' views of the Matsouanist movement, from a minor irritant to a threat that required violent removal. Multiple trends in postcolonial French memory politics converged to produce the specific context out of which the IR emerged. Thus, although the historians here may be looking at French colonial histories 'from below', these case studies are never divorced from what is happening above, behind and beyond their horizons. As such, they remain true to the broader goals of history from below, namely to better understand broader historical phenomena by examining the particularities of their most local manifestations.

¹⁶ F. Cooper and A. L. Stoler (eds), *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley, 1997).