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The Empire in French History Teaching. From a Promise to a Burden

Françoise Lantheaume

The French colonial empire was essentially formed in the nineteenth century, for the most part in Africa, Asia and the West Indies. Composed of territories and populations with diverse statuses, subjected to colonial political and economic development projects, the empire was, until the 1960s, an important topic in education. The space formerly devoted to the empire in curricula and textbooks testifies to its importance, as does the effort displayed in them to keep abreast of colonial affairs, hewing fairly closely to the current situation at the time. Until the beginning of the wars of independence, the history of the empire (involving conquest, exploitation, relations between the empire and metropolitan France) was the focus of a narrative that served the aims of a national cohesion that was battered and bruised by political and social divides, the various revolutions of the nineteenth century being just one expression of these divisions. A different 'us' was being created, combining ideas of national and imperial grandeur. Education seemed to be a way to forge a common awareness of 'us', and this concept, however heterogeneous and non-egalitarian, displaced the other – the potential enemy to be dominated – outside of mainland France.

Which Kind of School Narrative for the Colonial Empire?

The colonial empire has played various roles for France, with economic and political ones being the most often emphasised. However, beginning in the last decades of the nineteenth century, the empire also served as an antidote to the fear of decadence and division haunting the French, who dreaded a return to the *ancien régime*'s 'unconstituted aggregate of disunited peoples' (Mirabeau), or to post-revolutionary divisions. The colonial project had federated otherwise antagonistic forces. According to the view long held by the majority, the empire was advantageous to both concerned parties. On the one hand, it benefited metropolitan France; on the other, progress in the fields of economy and education brought technical rationality, that is, the enlightenment that would likely liberate colonised peoples from the 'obscurity' of 'archaic beliefs' and from poverty. The invention of the empire entailed a reorganisation of arguments and imaginaries around a new geographic and symbolic space of reference.

Education accompanied this project, feeding on the process and feeding it in return by enrolling a number of generations in it. This can be seen as an updated reinterpretation of schools' mission on the French mainland: the peasant children of Indochina, Africa and the Maghreb replaced those of Brittany, Savoy and Auvergne, as well as the proletariat of industrialised cities. To educate them, to

make them members of society by means of their sharing of knowledge, values and a common good, this was in short the function of school. The mission of instruction in history was to contribute to what Charles Seignobos calls the ‘political education’ of French children, introducing them to the grammar of republican politics and the vocabulary of modern society.¹ History (and geography) classes, that ‘propaedeutics in the social’,² were organised in reference to a national space, now extended to the empire, and to a specific political form, the parliamentary republic. Knowledge of French ancestors and memorisation of their great deeds and terrible woes were part of the project. Seeing oneself as part of their continuity and the continuity of the nation’s history, respecting the establishment and maintaining a common historical awareness in which the motherland played an important role – these were some of the ingredients of education until, after the Second World War, critical thought began to be promoted in schools and the democratisation of the educational system led to new expectations.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the school’s historical narrative, developed on the basis of institutional injunctions, was in synch with the scholarly knowledge produced by historians, geographers and anthropologists in particular, lending the narrative its scientific legitimacy. For instance, racial hierarchy and the succession of civilisations along an ascending line of progress – both commonplace notions in history and geography textbooks – corresponded to the accepted paradigms in the humanities and social sciences of the time. By way of an example, one of many, professor Antoine Porot (1876-1965), a leading figure of the Algiers school of psychiatry, who was acknowledged for his role in the modernisation of colonial psychiatry,³ and the author of textbooks spanning over half a century, argued for the inferiority of ‘North-African natives’, whom he placed between primitives and ‘civilised’ men (the missing frontal lobe explained their cognitive and psychological characteristics, as well as their pathologies). The fact that the textbooks of future psychiatrists did not abandon these theories until the 1980s testifies to the penetration of non-egalitarian notions in scientific circles.⁴

1 Charles Seignobos, ‘L’enseignement de l’histoire comme instrument d’éducation politique’, in C. Seignobos, C. V. Langlois, L. Gallouedec and M. Tourneur, *L’enseignement de l’histoire. Conférences du musée pédagogique* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale), 1-24. Reprinted in C. Seignobos, *Etudes de politique et d’histoire* (Paris: PUF, 1934), 109-132.

2 Antoine Prost, *Douze leçons sur l’histoire* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1996), 26.

3 Jalil Bennani, *La psychanalyse au pays des saints* (Casablanca: Le Fennec, 1996).

4 Antoine Porot, *Manuel alphabétique de psychiatrie* (Paris: PUF, 1952); Antoine Porot and Côme Arrii. ‘L’impulsivité criminelle chez l’indigène algérien; ses facteurs’, *Annales médico psychologiques* 90 (1932), 588-611; Antoine Porot and Jean Sutter, ‘Le primitivisme des indigènes nord-africains; ses incidences en pathologie mentale’, *Sud médical et chirurgical* (15 April 1939), 129-135.

The decolonisation movement disrupted the established historical narrative and its application in schools. This was all the more true insofar as two phenomena posed a challenge to the education system, and did so with increasing urgency starting in the 1970s. First, the circulation of new scientific approaches – cultural anthropology and the new historiography – changed the understanding of colonised peoples, of history as a whole and colonial history in particular. Second, there was the co-presence, in schools, of the children and (in the late twentieth century) grandchildren of the protagonists of a history filled with ‘sound and fury’. In addition, the modification of the teaching aids that textbooks embody transformed the production of the resources that teachers could draw on to render French colonial history and its reception intelligible to pupils with different and sometimes conflicting historical backgrounds. Consequently, what was defined as memorable and teachable was revised. How did the interpretations of the colonial empire evolve in history education throughout the twentieth century? Such is the central question of the present study.

In order to answer this question, we proceeded to analyse a corpus covering the years 1923 to 2004⁵ and made up of official directives, institutional supporting documents and seventy-three secondary school (*lycée*) history textbooks. Our analysis sought to single out the various changes the formal curriculum had gone through. Two surveys, carried out with about forty teachers in an interval of more than ten years, provided several elements for understanding the actual nature of the curriculum.⁶ The present analysis adopts the viewpoint of sociologists who believe that curricular contents have a certain autonomy with respect to both scholarly knowledge and educational directives

⁵ Our first study about the teaching of the history of the empire was carried out as part of the ‘Groupe d’études sociologiques’: Françoise Lantheaume, *La définition des contenus d’enseignement en histoire: critique et valeurs, histoire et mémoire*, summary report, typescript (Paris: INRP/GES, 2000). The second study, which focused on Algeria, was the subject of my doctoral thesis: Françoise Lantheaume, *L’enseignement de l’histoire de la colonisation et de la décolonisation de l’Algérie depuis les années trente: Etat-nation, identité nationale, critique et valeurs. Essai de sociologie du curriculum*, doctoral thesis, École des hautes études en sciences sociales, typescript, 2002. The data collected have since been completed and updated in various articles, some of which are quoted below.

⁶ The first survey addressed the teaching of the history of the Algerian War in a secondary school in the ‘zone of priority education’ (*Zone d’Éducation Prioritaire*) (1996); the second addressed the teaching of colonialism in secondary schools after the introduction of the *socle commun*, or ‘common foundation’ (2007-2010). The former was carried out as part of a DEA postgraduate study at Université Lyon 2; the latter was a joint research study (UMR) in education and politics (Université Lyon 2/Institut National de Recherche Pédagogique).

and instructions, while remaining related to the state of society and to the outcomes of social interactions.⁷

Three tendencies can be identified in the teaching of French colonial history. These correspond to three stages (the two more recent ones partly overlapping), with the inevitability of events and developments standing as an element of continuity between the three. These three periods in school history of the French colonial empire can be defined as the stage of promise, followed by the stage of withdrawal and reconfiguration, and, in turn, by the stage of the burden, repentance and recognition.

The Promise Stage

The French colonial empire of the twentieth century, conceived as a projection of republican universalism, held the promise of a 'greater France' with attractive economic benefits and enhanced symbolic and political grandeur for the country. These elements were associated with the expansion of western civilisation (republican for some, Christian for others, or sometimes both at the same time). In this phase, which runs from the early twentieth century to the 1960s, a continuity with the Roman empire might be asserted. For instance, some textbooks explained that France did to Algeria what the Romans had done to it, that is, conquered the land, as some textbooks explain, for its good.

The history taught (geared towards events, politics and feats of war) devoted considerable space to the history of France, which included the history of the colonial empire. In this framework, colonial conquest is the subject of detailed narratives. It has its heroes and counter-heroes (such as Bugeaud and Abd-el-Kader), and its groups of prototypical actors (missionaries, colonisers, military men, indigenous peoples), who are presented in a uniform way. The victims are the French soldiers killed in combat, the only casualties for whom numbers are provided in the textbooks. Conquest is a source of bravery: in addition to natural obstacles, native populations did not always prove very cooperative, as indicated in the Malet-Isaac textbook with regard to Algeria, 'Bloody revolts had to be quelled'.⁸ The impersonal 'had to be' indicates necessity and the absence of responsibility; the repression is a defence against revolts, which are qualified as 'bloody', while the repression itself is not characterised. The violence of

⁷ Jean-Claude Forquin, *Les sociologues de l'éducation américains et britanniques. Présentation et choix de textes* (Paris, Brussels: De Boeck University, 1997); Viviane Isambert-Jamati, *Les savoirs scolaires: enjeux sociaux des contenus d'enseignement et de leurs réformes* (Paris: l'Harmattan, 1990); Françoise Lantheaume, 'Solidité et instabilité du curriculum d'histoire en France: accumulation de ressources et allongement des réseaux', *Education et sociétés. Revue internationale de Sociologie de l'éducation* 2 (2003), 125-142.

⁸ Albert Malet and Jules Isaac, *Cours d'Histoire Malet-Isaac pour les classes de philosophie – mathématiques* (Paris: Hachette, 1939), 172.

conquest is justified. Nevertheless, excesses are sometimes condemned when they appear as hindrances to the spread of civilisation's benefits. The Malet-Isaac, the textbook most commonly used, testifies to this conception of a so-called 'progress-oriented' colonisation.

In all the textbooks, colonised peoples are described in terms of their physical, even psychological characteristics, which are associated with the environment they live in (geography playing a creative role in the matter),⁹ and have no other history than one marked by madness and violence or exoticism, as in the images of the corps of Amazons (women warriors) of King Béhanzin (1889-1894) in Dahomey (which became Benin in 1975). The Amazons made a strong impression on French soldiers, and their memory is perpetuated in the textbooks with a mixture of exoticism and apprehension. The colonial empire thus embodies the promise of a renewed imaginary. However, between the 1960s and the 1980s, the struggles for independence led to a gradual reconfiguration of the historical narrative.

Withdrawal and Reconfiguration

A certain withdrawal can be observed in the history of the empire, mainly with regard to the conquest, which is either soberly addressed on a European scale, or omitted. Decolonisation gains entry into curricula and textbooks, first marginally, then in a surer, more pointed manner. New historiographical approaches facilitated and fostered this transformation. Thus, history seen over the long term (the *longue durée*), cultural history, history of the present time and postcolonial history changed the representation of the colonial empire, France's actions and their impact on colonised societies.

Overall, criticism of Eurocentric teaching, especially in the name of third worldism, produced a more critical discourse without questioning the ineluctable character of both colonisation and decolonisation. New approaches emerged, addressing new objects of study. These include the demographic and economic impact of colonisation, forms of decolonisation, the chequered economic role of the empire, and cultural encounters as characteristic of the colonial conquest. On the whole, however, curricula and textbooks devoted less space to the empire, now regarded as the sign of a past that needed to be shaken off. It is the European project, replacing the colonial one, that was highlighted. With its promise of peace and prosperity, the European project allowed one to turn the page on a not-so-glorious past. The spread of the treatment of colonial history across various themes and stages of the curriculum, and the withdrawal of the theme of conquest, are both indicative of this change.

⁹ Manuela Semidei, 'De l'Empire à la décolonisation à travers les manuels scolaires français', *Revue française de science politique* 1 (1966), 56-86.

The postcolonial stage is characterised by the gradual filling up of textbooks with documents in place of discussions presenting a particular point of view on the empire. Starting in the 1970s for junior secondary schools (*collège*), and the 1980s for senior secondary schools (*lycée*), new textbooks were drafted by teams of teachers and instructors under the guidance of a university professor. Increasing the number of authors and the range of their backgrounds fostered the development of a greater variety of points of view and greater concern for school instruction. On the other hand, this also deprived readers of a congruent interpretation of the historical sequence of colonialism, something that is associated with the viewpoint of a single author. The history of the empire now resembled a jigsaw puzzle and it was up to teachers and/or pupils to fit together the various pieces.¹⁰ This contributed to a gradual disappearance of the colonial question, despite a new abundance of iconographic documentation, which also served to replace a now impossible discourse about the colonial empire and other controversial subjects.

Analysis of textbooks in other courses of study indicates a lack of uniformity in the treatment of imperial history. In vocational schools, for instance, the history of wars continued to command considerable space for a longer time, and more pages were devoted to Indochina – possibly because the authors considered that its exoticism and extraordinary natural conditions would be more likely to catch the attention of pupils (who, at the time, were predominantly boys). There were also appreciable differences depending on the school networks. Teaching in Catholic schools, for example, stressed the role of missionaries and specific figures such as Charles de Foucauld. Although the textbook authors do leave a distinctive stamp on their work (as in the case of Fernand Braudel, Pierre Chaunu, Jacques Marseille), the greater number of writers makes it all the more difficult to identify an authorial voice.

Finally, a study of the evolution of secondary school curricula and textbooks shows that this more detached viewpoint originated, not in a radical change of criticism, but rather in the margins (the study of civilisations in the 1970s, the cultural approach in the 1980s) and/or in a change of focus and approach (long-term historiography, history of the present day), in the reference to human rights and its replacing national or imperial references, and in the shift of the most heated topics into the historical documents, whether written or visual, which bear witness to the events detailed. This represents a process of cooling down in order to make topics that had become controversial something that could be taught in schools again. The new state of affairs in teaching was characterised by a reconfiguration around Europe (seen as the new future of France) and a more global approach to empires. The colonial empire became a thing of the past, a past that was difficult to come to terms with once its worst aspects had been

¹⁰ Françoise Lantheaume, 'Manuels d'histoire et colonisation. Les forces et faiblesses de la polyphonie de l'auteur-réseau, ses effets sur la formation de l'esprit critique', *LIDIL* 35 (2007), 159-175.

revealed by formerly colonised peoples, but one that was gradually being dealt with in a more critical way.

Burden and Repentance

The colonial empire, a burden which the European perspective would eventually make it possible to relinquish, resurfaced in the 1990s as a moral burden. A compassionate reading took shape, and the category of ‘victims’ grew in popularity. Then, at the very end of the twentieth century and in the early twenty-first century, as a result of the revival of claims of identity and/or memory by groups of actors concerned by colonisation, education came to be influenced by the repentance and/or recognition movement. The French colonial empire was treated as an element of the larger, now outdated historical process of colonisation. Paradoxically, this more general outlook was accompanied, in textbooks, by an endlessly drawn-out present and a disappearance of direct statement by the narrator. The many textbook authors, because of their involvement in other educational spheres (at the end of the 1990s, one third of the authors sat on selection boards and many of them were instructors at the university institute for teacher training, IUFM), formed a network that was jointly involved in producing multiple educational contents.

The new themes associated with the empire – human zoos, mental imagery, colonial culture and memory – highlight a new use of the past in line with current trends, a use that falls between repentance and the rise of the heritage industry, recognition and establishment of identities that are predefined by a given historical experience. However, despite the efforts made to integrate those forgotten by school history, many of them in fact remained overlooked, due to an absence of both precolonial history until recently and specific groups of actors (harkis,¹¹ colonisers, *pieds-noirs*, regiment soldiers); and to the omission of mechanisms specific to the empire (exactions, ‘regroupment camps’, judicial exceptionalism, or institutionalised torture going back to the beginning of colonisation).¹² Furthermore, the recent tendency to emphasise the recognition of victims is not without its own problems.¹³ That is, this category is not always defined in the same manner, and the risk of competition among victims is no

¹¹ Fatima Besnaci-Lacou, Benoît Falaize and Gilles Manceron, eds, *L’histoire des harkis: mémoire et transmission* (Paris: Éd. de L’Atelier, 2010), 178-186.

¹² Françoise Lantheaume, ‘Les difficultés de la transmission scolaire: le lien Algérie-France dans les programmes d’histoire et les manuels en France au xx^e siècle’, in F. Abecassis et al., *La France et l’Algérie: leçons d’histoire. De l’école en situation coloniale à l’enseignement du fait colonial* (Lyon: Institut National de Recherche Pédagogique, 2007), 217-228.

¹³ Françoise Lantheaume, ‘L’enseignement de l’histoire du fait colonial. La voie étroite entre “devoir de mémoire”, politique de la reconnaissance, et savoirs savants’, in M. Crivello, ed., *Les Echelles de la mémoire en Méditerranée* (Arles: Actes Sud/MMSH, 2010), 363-376.

minor one; but above all, historical rigour is undermined when priority is granted to an approach which is more compassionate and emotional than rational and historicised.

Finally, in order to understand the above-mentioned changes, historiographical fashions should be taken into account. Some historians never appear, others only rarely, while the ‘entrepreneurs of memory’ work to construct the narratives of the groups to which they belong, in keeping with contemporary issues and interests.¹⁴ The teaching of history is also a market and some excel at cornering certain sectors.

Conclusion

This brief outline of the secondary school teaching of colonial history in twentieth-century France shows the extent to which the topic is rooted in a social project that integrates a policy of the past. On the other hand, an evolution towards a ‘victim-memorial regime’¹⁵ can be observed in policies pertaining to school-related knowledge. Such an evolution took shape as a mobilisation of scientific, discursive, human and material resources which circulated between different (academic, political, educational, editorial) spheres, and in networks that have a tendency to expand and grow complex. While they support and constitute the curriculum, they are also the source of tensions. An understanding of how the history of the colonial empire is taught cannot forgo studying the characteristics of these networks.

The teaching of the history of the colonial empire has not undergone a brutal revolution, but there are notable differences between the early and late twentieth century. Questions that were once deemed too controversial to be addressed have become almost commonplace. The history of the colonial empire, however, does remain partly subjected to the effects of fashion, and even lobbying.

Teaching practice displays the same logic observed in the prescribed curriculum, where questions relating to controversial memories may only be taught if they are toned down. The topic of colonialism is regularly described as an opportunity to teach tolerance to pupils; yet this is not in keeping with the usual historical approach, whose ends are not grounded in moral edification. This hinders understanding of both complexity and real historiographical, didactic and pedagogical work. In our surveys, teachers who claim to avoid specific subjects related to the history of the colonial empire (for fear of sparking or bringing to light tensions in their class) are essentially the same as those who identify the

¹⁴ Maurice Halbwachs, *La Mémoire collective* (Paris: PUF, 1964).

¹⁵ Johann Michel, *Gouverner les mémoires. Les politiques mémorielles en France* (Paris: PUF, 2010). Part of this analysis was previously explored in Maryline Crivello, Patrick Garcia, Nicolas Offenstadt, *Concurrence des passés. Usages politiques du passé dans la France contemporaine* (Aix en Provence: Publications de l’Université de Provence, 2006), 245-255.

controversy as a phenomenon imported from the public sphere through their pupils. On the other hand, those who take on the topic as a scientific problem and possess the necessary professional resources succeed both in dealing with the questions and debates, and in turning the matter into a tool for historical reflection, critical distance, knowledge and sharing of a common history.

Throughout the twentieth century, in order to produce a public narrative for schools, the teaching of the history of the French colonial empire was repeatedly reworked, and this reworking was determined by both the issues of the day and power relations. Tension continues to exist, however, between an assertive transmission of heritage and the training of critical thought, which is not to be confused with the practice of denunciation. Now the promise has gone, and the burden has been set down, history remains, which traumatised memories must not obstruct.