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In the museum of man: race, anthropology and empire in France, 1850-1950

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BOOK REVIEW

In the museum of man: race, anthropology and empire in France, 1850–1950, by Alice L. Conklin, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2013, xiii + 374 pp., US\$26.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-8014-7878-9

Despite their best attempts to retreat to the safety of the ivory tower, academics are continuously engaging with their cultural and political context. This was particularly the case in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The vast expansion of schooling and higher education in Europe, the multiplication of new disciplines, and the polarised politics of the period made it impossible for academics to ignore both the unprecedented pressure under which they operated and the far-reaching implications of their work. And, while this was true of almost every field of study, it was especially pronounced in anthropology. This was a discipline whose contours were scarcely defined in the mid-nineteenth century and whose development was intimately intertwined with the greatest ideological movements of the age: nationalism, imperialism and fascism.

Inevitably, this meant that anthropological theories were used to elaborate some of the twentieth century's most dangerous ideas about human development, race theory, and imperial subjugation. Worse still, some anthropologists acquiesced in the manipulation of their theories and enthusiastically trumpeted the discriminatory, racist or anti-Semitic aspects of their ideas – a move that reached its apogee with the fascist regimes of the 1930s. With such a tangled past, it is hardly surprising that decolonisation and the postmodern turn in the 1970s and 1980s sent the discipline of anthropology into a protracted period of soul-searching. Were anthropologists really the handmaidens of imperialism? Did they create and endorse the racial theories that underpinned fascism? Was their supposedly “objective” fieldwork simply another orientalist gaze on the “Other”? These are questions that continue to haunt the discipline up to the present day. But, as Alice Conklin makes clear in her book, these questions should not simply be of interest to anthropologists. They are also of prime importance to anyone concerned with the history of ideas and the history of science. Indeed, one of the most exciting aspects of the book is the rich discussion of how academics take responsibility for their actions and how the apparently esoteric pursuit of “exotic” civilisations can have profound social consequences.

The subject of Conklin's study is easily delineated: she is interested in the development of French anthropology between 1850 and 1950. The seven chapters take the reader from the theoretical foundations of late nineteenth-century ethnology, racial science and physical anthropology, through to the engagement of a young group of ethnologists during the Second World War. She gives texture to this chronological structure by focusing simultaneously on a specific set of individual anthropologists – most notably Marcel Mauss, Paul Rivet and Georges Montandon – and one key institution – the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. These underpin the book's three main themes: the debates surrounding the meaning and professionalisation of anthropology as a discipline; the growing relationship between anthropology, museums and the general public; and the political implications of anthropology, above all in the interwar years.

In each of these areas, Conklin gives us a wealth of new insights. She provides a detailed account of the competing anthropological schools in late nineteenth-century France, and shows clearly how Mauss and Rivet's commitment to a “total” methodology ultimately dislodged its competitors in the 1920s. She offers a complete narrative of how anthropology was institutionalised – first in a variety

of institutes, university departments and museums – and finally in the Musée de l’Homme (opened in 1938). This spectacular space was inspired by British, German, American and Soviet museums, and aspired to be the most modern centre for the study of anthropology in the world. Yet the context in which it opened was highly volatile. The rise of fascism and the concomitant success of eugenicist policies inspired by racial science meant that the new generation of young anthropologists who were being trained by Rivet and Mauss could not avoid the political consequences of their work.

In some of the most interesting passages in the book, Conklin describes how these young scholars – who were the first to pioneer the ethnographic field method in France – negotiated the toxic political climate of the late 1930s. Their stories make for powerful reading. Almost all of them did their fieldwork in parts of the French Empire but, while they relied heavily on the empire to complete their research, they also began to doubt the benevolence of imperial conquest and the simplistic developmental typologies that were still *de rigueur* amongst anthropologists. With the fall of France in 1940, they faced an additional dilemma: whether to resist a Nazi occupying force that had elevated racial science to a terrifying policy of extermination or escape to foreign countries. For the most part, they became involved in the French Resistance – whether in metropolitan France or overseas – with the result that some were executed as “traitors”, killed on the front line or deported to labour camps. Many of these young anthropologists held true to the principled critique of racism that they had fought so hard to bring to public attention before the war – and, on occasion, they died for their ideals.

A key paradox nevertheless remained. On the one hand, Mauss, Rivet and their disciples believed that their progressive anthropology would demonstrate conclusively that there was no “scientific” basis to racism. On the other, their ideas and practices – in particular, the organisation of the displays in the Musée de l’Homme – were wedded to hierarchical racial typologies from which they were unable fully to detach themselves. It was only after the horrors of the Second World War that anthropologists in 1950 would come together to write the famous UNESCO race statement, which declared that “for all practical purposes ‘race’ is not so much a biological phenomenon as a social myth”. In the preceding half-century, attitudes were more fluid and few were willing to commit to such an obviously social constructivist position. It is to Conklin’s credit that she has been able to recreate this fluidity so faithfully; through her meticulous archival work, she reveals individuals who were both visionaries and dependant on the academic status quo.

It is in navigating this tension that the book succeeds handsomely. Conklin is an astute reader of sources and she has deftly brought together a sometimes bewildering cast of characters into a unified story about the networks, constraints and acquaintances that defined the production of knowledge in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century France. It is perhaps a shame that she does not occasionally venture more into the realm of ideas, especially because of the theoretical implications of her subject matter. One would have wanted a clearer sense of how Mauss and Rivet’s ideas developed, even if this is something that has been discussed elsewhere. Likewise, it would have been nice to see how this case study fits into larger topics in global history such as the emergence of human rights, concepts of global governance, or ideas of French republican empire-building that were the subject of Conklin’s first book. Hopefully, there will be space to consider some of these issues in future publications. For now, however, we will have to make do with an illuminating and penetrating monograph that deserves a readership well beyond the restricted world of French historians.

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