

Reviews of Books

Ruptures postcoloniales. Les nouveaux visages de la société française. Edited by Nicolas Bancel, Florence Bernault, Pascal Blanchard, Ahmed Boubeker, Achille Mbembe and Françoise Vergès. Paris: La Découverte. 2010. 539 pp. €26.00. ISBN: 978 2 7071 5689 1.

Postcolonialism is rarely far from the surface in contemporary French politics. When François Hollande announced the composition of his first cabinet in May 2012, the nomination of Christiane Taubira as the *garde des Sceaux* was greeted with particular hostility by the right. Some pointed to her 'lax' attitude towards criminals and suggested she would 'undo' Sarkozy's efforts to tackle delinquency. But others made clear the underlying reason for their opposition: they suspected her of wanting to 'undermine France' with a 'communautariste' and 'esclavagiste' vision of history. The implication was that the *député* from French Guiana, whose campaign in 2001 led to the official recognition of slavery as a 'crime against humanity', was not quite French—and certainly not French enough to handle a position as Minister of Justice.

This episode captures in a nutshell almost all the major themes—race, memory, slavery, the status of the *outré-mer*, delinquency – that have dominated literature on French postcolonialism. In France itself, much of this work has been promoted by a group of academics called ACHAC (Association pour la Connaissance de l'Histoire de l'Afrique Contemporaine), whose primary aim has been to place postcolonial questions at the heart of French intellectual life. Since the early 2000s, they have commissioned a series of major academic conferences and exhibitions, published numerous books, and produced a range of documentaries on race, colonialism and immigration. These have all demonstrated a willingness to engage with Anglo-American postcolonial theory. Indeed, ACHAC have worked tirelessly to bring non-French scholars of imperialism to the attention of the French academy and their media-savvy approach has ensured that they have become the pre-eminent standard-bearers of a postcolonial critique *à la française*.

There is much to be said for these attempts to question France's postcolonial conscience, especially since it has restored a welcome sense of engagement and debate to a French intellectual scene that has struggled to cope with the atrophy of Marxism. Unfortunately, this kind of *histoire engagé* always runs the risk of endless repetition for political effect and it would not be unfair to say that ACHAC have been reproducing the same arguments for more than a decade. This tendency has been exacerbated by a fondness for large collaborative projects—and correspondingly large edited volumes. *Ruptures postcoloniales* is no exception: it includes 36 contributions spread over more than 500 pages. This means it suffers acutely from the usual issues that afflict edited volumes.

Above all, there is the problem of consistency. The book is divided into two parts – 'L'héritage postcoloniale' and 'La France postcoloniale'—but neither of these has much coherence. While some contributors chose to write sustained essays, others opted for something akin to a 'literature review'. There are even three interviews, one of which

appears to have been adapted into prose. The length of the contributions varies from five to twenty-five pages and the number of approaches on display is bewildering. There are suggestive but truncated biographies of supposedly key figures in postcolonial thought such as Abdelmalek Sayad, Albert Memmi, Aimé Césaire and Franz Fanon; there are scarcely-concealed (if rather amusing) diatribes about the French academy's unwillingness to incorporate a postcolonial approach; and there are a number of chapters on immigration, race and blackness, all of which adopt different theoretical perspectives.

The best contributions are those that retain some connection to empirical investigations, such as Herman Lebovics's thoughtful ethnography of the Musée du Quai Branly, Alain Tarrus's overview of transnational migrant networks and Benjamin Stora's straightforward chronology of Franco-Algerian tensions since the late 1990s. Even so, these are not enough to prevent the sense of dispersion and fragmentation. To an Anglo-American audience, many of the debates about the relative merits of postcolonialism will seem tired, and even French readers will find that the majority of contributors have developed their main arguments more effectively in previous monographs. One feels it is time for ACHAC to return to the more unified approach that served them so well in their seminal essay *La République coloniale: essai sur une utopie* (2003).

This latest volume, then, should not be read for its penetrating and original analyses. Its significance lies in its sheer diversity. It gives us a snapshot of an emerging intellectual landscape. As Murphy and Forsdick remind us in their chapter, while postcolonialism in the Anglo-American world emerged from the study of literature, in France the battle is being fought in history, politics and sociology. For this reason alone, the many arguments and disagreements contained within the pages of this book make it a valuable document. It has evident shortcomings for contemporary scholars, but future historians will no doubt use *Ruptures postcoloniales* to show that French postcolonialism was very much alive and well in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

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