

# The Illusions of Colonial Schooling

by Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch

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**What motivated French colonisers to found schools in the Maghreb and Sub-Saharan Africa? Carole Reynaud-Paligot shows how their superiority complex ended up overcoming their meritocratic ideals and dreams of diversity.**

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Reviewed: Carole Reynaud-Paligot. *L'École aux colonies. Entre mission civilisatrice et racialisation, 1816-1940*, Paris, Champ Vallon, 2020, 347 p., €25.

*L'École aux colonies* ("School in the Colonies") is a serious and useful evaluation of the history of French-style colonial schooling. Its central question is posed right away, in its introduction: what were the motivations of the colonisers in founding these schools? Were they driven by an element or illusion of Christian philanthropy, republican humanism, meritocratic idealism? This book shows that these currents of thought, which were undeniably influential at the start of the story, would progressively break down under the pressure of a sense of racial superiority that was increasingly invoked within the context of European colonisation, and was driven by a desire to dominate the populations of the Empire.

## The Rise of Racism

The book follows the chronological progression of a growing dissonance between education and racism, breaking it down into phases that are defined by successive colonial policies: a promising start, with the enduring illusion of the "fusion of races" that was dear to Faidherbe in French West Africa (*"Afrique occidentale*

*française*" or AOF) and then to Jules Ferry in Algeria. The latter chose, for a while, to favour the Kabyle experiment of modernising an "indigenous" Arabo-French state-run, non-denominational school system. These ideas were implacably demolished as the increased presence of the colons, followed by the arrival of their families under the Third Republic, led to an opposition to the "progressive" tendencies of the civilising "Arab kingdom" that were still strong under the Second Empire. Algeria then became the "republican laboratory" of this regression in terms of a possible "racial" diversity in the primary and secondary school systems. The colonies saw the triumph of a near-exclusive objective of providing a practical and professional education reserved for indigenous people. African resistance to this trend was particularly marked in Senegal, thanks to the presence of the four municipalities that had been governed by French law since 1917.

In the 1930s, following the rise and culmination of "scientific racism", French decision-makers held a strong conviction that "psychological determinism" limited the intellectual capacities of colonised people. All of these arguments, which it is important to connect to later work by Delphine Peiretti-Courtis on the manufacture of racial prejudice viewed within the "scientific" context of the period<sup>1</sup>, is based on thorough and solid documentary evidence.

## Interesting Aspects and Flaws

The book as a whole is quite descriptive, but its central argument is solid and always given centre stage. The French agents of educational policy are very well presented and characterised. We would have liked to find out more about the African agents, even if this is a more difficult task. There were many of them in AOF and in Senegal, and their role was far from negligible. Everything concerning the 19th century is fascinating, and often new; the 20th century suffers a little from being better-known. The author's investigation starts with Senegal being recovered from the British in 1816. We might have wished for a few words on what came before, since the French established themselves in Saint-Louis du Sénégal in the middle of the 17th century, as did generations of Creole city-dwellers. This was therefore hardly a completely blank slate.

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<sup>1</sup> Delphine Peiretti-Courtis, *Corps noirs et médecins blancs. La fabrique du préjugé racial, XIXe-XXe siècles*, Paris: La Découverte, 2021.

The parts of the book that go into the most depth deal with AOF from its beginnings, with Algeria and secondarily with Tunisia in North Africa, and, with a less thorough dive into the archives, Indochina and Madagascar. In contrast, French Equatorial Africa ("*Afrique équatoriale française*"), which appears quite neglected when compared to the efforts that were made in AOF, is only granted half a page (p. 336). And yet this question has been explored in quite a few doctoral theses in France as well as in Gabon and Congo<sup>2</sup>.

The book is at once highly erudite and contains several disarming omissions. It includes numerous and precise footnotes, but nothing is said about its research methods and sources. We might tolerate the absence of a bibliography at the end of the book, since the footnotes compensate for this. However, the absence of a table of acronyms leaves the reader guessing where the archives come from - archives that are numerous and useful, but whose references will be elliptical for the uninitiated. We come across, indifferently, references to the CAOM ("Centre des archives d'outre-mer", which became the ANOM several years ago, and is located in Aix-en-Provence), but also, in a less intelligible manner, references to the Fonds RSTNF/ Indo or to the "Mi", which must come from microfilms from the Archives du Sénégal duplicated in Paris. In short, a brief presentation of the clearly numerous archives that were consulted would have been welcome for readers who may otherwise be left a little disorientated.

On the other hand, any books referred to are well-indexed, even if we are missing a few classics, such as the ancient but still unrivalled book by G. Welsey Johnson on Senegal<sup>3</sup>, or Pascale Barthélémy's work on the *École normale des filles* in Rufisque<sup>4</sup>. The numerous reports that came out of the conferences held during the *Exposition coloniale internationale* ("Paris Colonial Exhibition") of 1931 are barely referred to, and that of the Guernut commission set up by the Front populaire is not elucidated either.

Ultimately, this is a serious synthesis that will prove indispensable for any historian of colonisation. It stops in 1940, at the moment when colonised people were getting ready to deracialise their school systems.

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<sup>2</sup> See Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, "Access To Higher Education In French, Africa South of The Sahara", *Social Sciences*, no. 10, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> *The Emergence of Black Politics in Senegal: The Struggle for Power in the Four Communes, 1900-1920*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1971.

<sup>4</sup> *Africaines et diplômées à l'époque coloniale, 1918-1957*, Rennes: PUR, 2010.

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