

H-Diplo ESSAY 304

Essay Series on Learning the Scholar's Craft: Reflections of Historians and International Relations Scholars

19 January 2021

On Learning the Historian's Craft

<https://hdiplo.org/to/E304>

Series Editor: Diane Labrosse | Production Editor: George Fujii

ESSAY BY ALICE L. CONKLIN, THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

Becoming an intellectual historian of France's modern overseas empire, and its legitimating discourses, was perhaps overdetermined in my case. I was born in a small Midwestern town near Peoria in the late 1950s, and my family of seven (the fifth sibling was still in utero) moved to the Netherlands for five years when I was five. My father was a manufacturer's representative, peddling American-made work gloves at a time when mighty little companies were still thriving in rural Illinois alongside odiferous family-owned hog farms and acres and acres of corn. In the 1960s, European nations were just beginning to develop the North Sea oil reserves, and their workers were my father's target market. Within a couple of years of our arrival in The Hague, my parents decided to send their twin daughters (I was one of them) to the *Lycée français*, on the theory that learning a foreign language was a good idea and that French was a more "useful" language to acquire than Dutch.

A true Anglophile thanks to his attachment at the end of World War II to the British Field Service in Burma, my father had no love of the French. My mother, a librarian, liked trying out her rusty college French on us. But mostly my sister and I inhabited our own French world during school hours, driving each other on as only inseparable and competitive identical twins can. We spent three years in the French system, long enough to emerge not only with fluency but a French way of seeing the world stamped upon our impressionable young minds. I remember when our mother took us to Paris for the first time in 1967. We waited in the long line outside the Petit Palais in the rain to see the treasures of Tutankhamun during their inaugural world tour. Although billed as "The exhibition of the century," viewed by a record-breaking number of visitors, what really sticks in my mind is that in Paris we were finally able to purchase what every French child in our school already had: individual *ardoises* (slates) and sponges in their plastic containers, for copying and memorizing whatever the teacher wrote on the board. In many ways I still inhabit that world, albeit with the goal of understanding what as a child I simply absorbed, and now I use an *ordinateur* rather than an *ardoise*.

It was only during my college years that I discovered French history as opposed to French culture. The obvious path throughout high school for someone with strong French skills was to take advanced French classes, and I entered Bryn Mawr College with that mindset still firmly in place. But the faculty there had recently created an interdisciplinary French Studies major, because their small but distinguished History Department (six professors in all, as I recall) included two French scholars. While several French literature professors (themselves French) totally intimidated me, the eminent New-Zealand born, Cambridge-educated historian of the French Wars of Religion, J.H.M. Salmon was a revelation. At the time I was clueless about what it meant to be a historian and was just happy to attack whatever assignment I was given. John Salmon was a pipe-smoking, tennis-playing, down to earth *bon vivant* who offered small classes that combined graduate students and undergraduates, for which reading knowledge of French was a prerequisite. I took his course on the wars of religion and found myself soon writing a paper on the massacre of twenty artisans in 1580 based on xeroxes of primary sources from the French archives – the same topic that Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie made famous two years later in his micro-history *Le*

Carnaval de Romans.¹ John's assumption seemed to have been that his students would know more or less intuitively what to do with this material. I have never forgotten the lesson of that course, i.e. that kindness combined with unquestioned confidence in students' ability to do graduate level work as undergraduates in fact encourages students to do just that. I didn't do particularly well on that paper, but it did wake me up. By my senior year I was reading Marc Bloch's *The Historian's Craft* and becoming convinced that I wanted to become a fully paid-up guild member.²

Yet even before I met John Salmon, Bryn Mawr's other French historian had also opened new doors for me, this time onto the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – which is where I really thought I belonged. Alain Silvera was born in 1930 into the French Jewish community of one of the most cosmopolitan outposts of the British empire, Alexandria, Egypt. He had graduated from Victorian College (modelled on the English public school of Rugby; Edward Said attended its sister school in Cairo), and then from the *Ecole Normale Supérieure*, Cornell and Harvard. His education thus reflected the unique blend of British, French and Arab influences that characterized the professional classes and moneyed elite of Alexandria before World War II, and the global ascendance of the United States research university by 1945. Silvera was a terrible lecturer but a spell-binding conversationalist, and I took to dropping by his office on a regular basis. He suggested the topic that ultimately became my Honors thesis, one that I now recognize reflected not simply his professional interest in Europe's influence on the Middle East, but his personal trajectory. Entitled "Mirage in the East," the thesis tried to explain in French how France, given its hegemonic cultural influence in Egypt for close to a century, "lost" out to the British there in 1882. Not really satisfied with what I had produced, I convinced myself that I "wanted" to do better.

But not right away. I had been far too obsessed with my thesis to contemplate applying to grad school during my senior year at Bryn Mawr. Alain Silvera and the old boy network came to the rescue. The French government and NYU, thanks in great part to the hard work of the political scientist Nicholas Wahl and the vibrant presence of Philippe Roger, had launched an Institute of French Studies in 1978 which granted MAs and a small number of Ph.Ds. Part of France's historic mission to spread its culture, the Institute was also a new departure: a collaborative and interdisciplinary venture to promote both training in and exchange between French and American social sciences. These sciences had historically followed very different paths in each country, with France lagging behind America when it came to generously funding and institutionalizing social scientific research and methods. The short-term goal of the IFS doctoral program was to place their Ph.D.s in French Departments in order to complement more traditional instruction in language and literature. In those flush early days, the Institute had ample fellowships and few applicants, so Nick Wahl phoned around to see whether his colleagues/friends at other schools had eligible students they could send his way, admission practically guaranteed; along with several other women, I was a beneficiary of this new program, which, like so much of the academy even in the early 1980s, was run by older men.

For me, the highlight of the program was the visiting French faculty who rotated in and out that first year at NYU, including the *Annaliste* historian Andre Burguière, the political scientist Jean-Louis Quermonne, and the sociologist Henri Mendras – all pioneers in their fields. During a second year in Paris, we could complete the first year of the French doctorate at the *Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales* if we so chose – with the understanding that we would return to NYU to start the American Ph.D. In Paris, I worked with the North African specialist Lucette Valensi to produce a short intellectual biography of the *Faculté des Lettres d'Alger*, France's most important Orientalist outpost. By then I realized that I really did want to do "all history all the time." I therefore transferred to Princeton's History Department, where a "dream team" of early modern and modern French historians had gathered: Natalie Zemon Davis, Robert Darnton, Arno Mayer, and Philip Nord. My incoming cohort was twelve students, only five of whom completed the program: then, as now, it was a grim job market.

¹ Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Le Carnaval de Romans. De la Chandeleur au mercredi des Cendres (1579-1580)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979).

² Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*. Translated by Peter Putnam (New York: Knopf, 1953).

But what to specialize in? I don't remember when the persistent desire to understand France's modern overseas empire first manifested itself. I do know I was shocked to learn in the Western Civilization course that Bryn Mawr required of all history majors that the country that invented *les droits de l'homme* had helped to carve up the rest of the world at the end of the nineteenth century. The sheer injustice of the "new imperialism" stuck in my craw and surely explains why I wrote the undergraduate thesis that I did. Studying France in North Africa thus seemed the most obvious place to begin as a graduate student, hence my decision to attend Lucette Valensi's Paris seminar, as well as those of the few other French scholars in Paris working on empire in the early 1980s: Charles-Robert Ageron, Fanny Colonna and Henri Brunschwig (himself a student of Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch). But the Princeton Department, like those in most U.S. universities, had no French colonial historian, much less one who worked on the Maghreb; North Africa as a field of study was attached to Near Eastern Studies, and there was no subfield yet in French imperial history comparable to British empire studies. I was often embarrassed to admit that I wanted to study an empire that no one else appeared to think mattered. It certainly wasn't easy figuring out how to do so. But I was extraordinarily fortunate in my mentors, my fellow students, and the timing of my Ph. D. dissertation.

Luck comes to those who prepare its way: maybe. I still remember my minor fields' oral exam at Princeton with Natalie Davis and the Kenya and Egypt specialist, Robert Tignor – an atypical exam configuration in a Department that had only one Africanist and where the prestige field was Early Modern and Revolutionary France. I had prepared minor field lists in Early Modern France and Colonial Africa for the exam, clinging to my identity as a French historian while slowly developing some expertise in Sub-Saharan Africa. Natalie Davis asked me how a study of Early Modern Europe was helping me to understand the history of Modern Africa; I had not anticipated the question but the three of us suddenly began making connections. It was an exciting rather than grueling hour, a reminder, as I tell my own students, that the mixing of fields and gifted mentors can be very 'good for thinking.' But I still needed to find a dissertation topic. Arno Mayer suggested I look at the French '*mission civilisatrice*' but argued he couldn't possibly advise me. Phil Nord taught me everything I needed and wanted to know about nineteenth and twentieth-century France, but was not yet tenured. As I floundered, a third-year student working on modern Senegal with Robert Tignor, Jim Searing, came to the rescue: why not look at the Government General in Dakar, which determined French policy for all the francophone West African colonies? With that decided, Bob Tignor gamely took me on as an advisee too. Jim went on to become one of the most respected francophone Africanists of his generation, and I soon took the plunge into archives in Dakar as well as Paris.³ Another valuable takeaway from graduate school for me, then, was how much we learn from our peers as well as our professors. When all is said and done, I left Princeton with a deep knowledge of four hundred years of one European country's history, a superficial knowledge of the recent history of one part of the African continent, and no clear idea of how to market myself or my work.

And this is where timing can be everything. Edward Said's *Orientalism* was over ten years old, and postcolonial studies was taking hold. Suddenly there seemed to be interest in learning more about the 'liberal' colonial state, its forms of knowledge, and its practices.⁴ Historians of francophone Africa were surprisingly receptive to such work. Frederick Cooper and I first met when we worked side by side in the colonial archives in Paris in 1984-85, he researching his monumental study of labor and decolonization in British and French West Africa as I explored the forced labor policies that the civilizing mission discourse sanctioned.⁵ While we shared the reading room with young Africans preparing *thèses*, Fred and I were the lone American scholars mining these sources at the time. The broader field of French history had long exiled the few experts on

³ James F. Searing (1953-2012). He authored *West African Slavery and Atlantic Commerce: The Senegal River Valley, 1700–1860* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993) and "*God Alone is King*": *Islam and Emancipation in Senegal; The Wolof Kingdoms of Kajoor and Bawol, 1859–1914*. (Social History of Africa Series) (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2002).

⁴ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

⁵ Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

overseas colonies to a tiny subfield of their own; William Cohen, only sixteen years my senior, had felt that exile keenly⁶. But now historians of France post-1870 were becoming more excited about the topic (and no one more so than Phil Nord)—while wondering if they were “competent” to evaluate such work. In this context I began turning my dissertation into my first book, *A Mission to Civilize: the Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa (1895-1930)*.⁷ It took six years to complete, in part because it fell between several stools, and in part because I had my own vision of what the book needed in order to be “French and African” – to be honest, my gold standard was Philip Curtin’s classic study, *The Image of Africa*.⁸ I remain grateful to my colleagues at the University of Rochester who let me take the time I needed to write the work I wanted, one that synthesized multiple literatures as much as it drew on new evidence.

The book was part of a wave of scholarship in French history, often referred to now as “the new colonial history,” which began to come into its own in the late 1990s and has been flourishing ever since. Reflecting many different “turns” at once – cultural, linguistic, memory, transnational, global – the “colonial” turn in the French case is also explained by the simple fact that the long-standing dearth of work on empire has allowed younger scholars to find in the subject something new and significant to say. If American historians helped to seed this upsurge of French empire studies, it is because colonialism haunts their national imaginary. The United States began as a British colony that practiced slavery, became a republic that upheld it, and remains a de facto segregated nation. How could the violence of European imperialism not have undergirded republican experiments on the Continent in similar ways? A new generation of historians in France itself has also been critical in acknowledging France’s colonial past, making for a particularly rewarding transatlantic exchange of ideas and methodologies. I believe that the explosion of scholarship on the Haitian Revolution and the French Atlantic in the last twenty years draws from the same wellspring as the recent work on the ‘new imperialism.’ It is, and has been, an exciting intellectual journey.

But am I still a French colonial historian? My subsequent work has taken me in a quite different direction – one that has foregrounded the question of race rather than civilization in French intellectual and political life. I expected my second book to trace the colonial origins of the discipline of cultural anthropology in France, a project that grew organically out of my first book. Instead I began studying a different kind of institution than a French colonial one – an ethnographic museum in Paris, the *Musée de l’Homme*. But that museum and its colonial outposts, much to my surprise, housed human remains as well as artifacts. Physical anthropology, racial science and Durkheimian cultural anthropology, I discovered, were epistemologically and institutionally entwined in France through World War II in ways that historians had not sufficiently recognized. In the officially color-blind French Republic, “race” like “empire” has long been a taboo subject; France since 1870 might have judged other cultures inferior on civilizational grounds, but that – or so I have often been told – is not the same thing as biological racism. As a result, studies of the idea of “race” as a historically constituted marker of identity in France and its empire have been left largely to historians of science and historians of antisemitism. I soon found myself being drawn into those fields, too, as I tried to make sense of the confusing presence, meaning, and eventual politicization of a supposedly neutral representation of the ‘races of man’ in a ‘republican’ museum stuffed full of colonial artifacts and publicly opposed to fascism.

⁶ William B. Cohen (1941-2003). His works in colonial history were pathbreaking: *Rulers of Empire: The French Colonial Service in Africa* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1971) and *The French Encounter with Africans: White. Response to Blacks, 1530-1880* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1980)

⁷ Alice L. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: the Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa (1895-1930)* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

⁸ Philip Curtin, *The Image of Africa: British Ideas and Action, 1780-1850* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964).

The resulting work, *In the Museum of Man: Race, Anthropology, and Empire in France (1850-1950)*, has made me more curious than ever about the transnational history of race.⁹ Researching the book also opened my eyes to the value of comparative work, as I followed the circulation of an international scientific object in the making; I now see a more globally connected world than the one I had first glimpsed while writing only about France and West Africa. In that spirit, my current research seeks to recover one of the many new discourses of internationalism that emerged from the wreckage of the Second World War: that of a “one world” that was free of racism, embodied in the founding of UNESCO in 1945, to be located in Paris. The city of Paris has figured large in accounts of black internationalism, from the 1919 Pan African Congress to the First International Congress of Black Writers and Artists in 1956. But by the 1950s it was also home to a multi-racial internationalism of “race experts” seeking to use social scientific know-how to help explain and eradicate prejudice on a world-wide scale. Black and white American sociologists of race relations dominated this field of study, unequally for obvious reasons. But could their knowledge—forged in the peculiar circumstances of systemic American racism – hope to translate into a universal “grammar” of anti-racism after the Holocaust and in the maelstrom of decolonization struggles? What race expertise did French and francophone intellectuals and activists either bring to, or acquire from, UNESCO’s efforts to mount an international anti-racist campaign from – but also in – the French capital?

I asked above if I was still a colonial historian. I might also have asked if colonial historians are by definition also international ones, since I am writing this *égo-histoire* for H-Diplo. I’m not sure what these labels mean any more as we are all (well, almost all) transnational now. In my case, I began connecting France to the broader world only after I was firmly rooted in that one corner of the imperial republic where I started long ago. That decision to study the French empire can be traced in turn, first to my own early “encounter” as an American child with French, and second to the fact that when I started college French history was riding high in the academy. The fact that I am now studying how a word like race—the same, after all, in English and French—traveled without ever meaning exactly the same thing in contexts marked by difference, seems hardly a coincidence. If all history writing is a history of the present, it is also a reflection of how we each came to be a certain kind of historian in the first place.

Alice L. Conklin is College of Arts & Sciences Distinguished Professor of History at the Ohio State University, where she has taught since 2004. She spent the thirteen previous years teaching at the University of Rochester. A specialist in the history of modern France and its empire, she has published two monographs and several articles and book chapters as well as co-authored two works aimed at undergraduates: *France and Its Empire since 1870* (Oxford University Press, 2014 [2010]) and *European Imperialism 1830-1930: Climax and Contradictions* [Cengage Learning, 1998]. Her current project looks at French antiracism in the postwar decade in comparative perspective.

⁹ Alice L. Conklin, *In the Museum of Man: Race, Anthropology, and Empire in France (1850-1950)* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013). A much more lavishly edition appeared in French: *Exposer l’humanité: race, ethnologie et empire en France (1850-1950)* (Paris: Éditions scientifiques du MNHN, 2015).