

Michael Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism*

Cambridge University Press: New York, 2015, \$96, hardback

344 pp, 978 1 107 07305 0

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## CAPITAL OF PARIAS

In 1945 France ruled a vast colonial empire, second only in size—and in brutality—to the British. But whereas Britain disposed of its empire without any serious repercussions for domestic politics, France fought two savage colonial wars, in Indochina and Algeria, before withdrawing defeated in the early 1960s. Between 1946 and 1962, France was permanently at war, apart from a brief interval of a few months. Those conflicts dominated and eventually destroyed the Fourth Republic, and gave France the constitution it retains today. The country still lives in their shadow: the Front National would be quite incomprehensible without the Algerian background. When ignorant demagogues blame ‘immigrants’ for all of France’s ills, they forget that many French Muslims are descended from those who came to the metropolis when Algeria was still part of its national territory. One important aspect of this history, which Michael Goebel’s fascinating study brings to our attention, is that the revolts which finally brought an end to the French empire were to some extent prepared in the very heart of French imperialism, the city of Paris. Goebel, who teaches at Berlin’s Free University, has a background in Latin American history: his first book, *Argentina’s Partisan Past* (2011), addressed the role of Argentine historiography in the construction of a national identity. Here, he argues that migration to France’s colonial metropolis was the ‘social bedrock’ for the formation of an anti-imperialist consciousness that transformed the world after 1945. Indeed, he goes so far as to claim that the very concept of the ‘Third World’—a term coined in the 1950s, which had an enormous influence on political thought in the following decade—actually originated

among the migrant activists of the 1920s and 1930s, with the ‘idea of an anti-imperialist solidarity spanning several continents’.

In the early 1920s, Nguyễn Ái Quốc—later known as Hồ Chí Minh, the Vietnamese Communist leader and hero of countless demonstration chants in the 1960s—was the French-based editor of *Le Paria*, a newspaper aimed at the victims of colonialism, whether migrants in France or those back home. One of those radicalized by a French Communist Party (PCF) election campaign in the same decade was a young Algerian factory worker, Messali Hadj; he became one of the founders of the Étoile Nord-Africaine, from which all subsequent movements for Algerian independence developed—though by the 1950s Messali himself would be embroiled in a tragic and murderous feud with the leaders of the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN). If these two men are the best-known, Goebel also presents us with an impressive roll-call of anti-imperialist activists who lived in Paris during the interwar years and acquired much of their political outlook there. From Algeria there was Ferhat Abbas, later a leading figure in the FLN. From Vietnam, alongside Hồ, came the Trotskyist militant Tạ Thu Thâu, who had a real following in the 30s and was murdered by the Việt Minh in 1945. Senegal contributed Lamine Senghor, one of the PCF’s most remarkable black organizers and writers until his premature death in 1927. Others came from countries that had not been colonized by the French. Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping were among the Chinese ‘worker-students’ in Paris at the time, while Indonesia sent Arnold Mononutu, who later played an important role in organizing the 1955 Bandung conference of newly independent Afro-Asian nations. Latin America supplied the Peruvian Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui, not to mention two of his compatriots, the writer César Vallejo and the politician Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre. In addition to such prominent figures, Goebel has also identified some important characters who had been largely written out of history, such as the remarkable activist Hadj Ali Abdelkader, a regular contributor to *Le Paria*, who, as one of the few North African workers to have French citizenship, stood as an election candidate for the PCF and founded the Étoile Nord-Africaine together with Messali Hadj. He remained a practising Muslim while serving on the PCF’s Central Committee.

By the end of the 1920s, there were one hundred thousand non-Europeans living in Paris, more than in any other European city. During the course of World War One around three quarters of a million colonial subjects had been brought to France as soldiers or workers; although an ungrateful nation did its best to repatriate them, some stayed or came back. Many of the others were students, but there were also many North African workers at Renault’s car plant and other large factories: one source claims that by 1930, around a quarter of the workforce at Renault-Billancourt hailed from overseas. The immigrant population included

Chinese worker-students like Zhou and Deng who combined their studies with spells of factory work, and thus had direct contact with French and migrant workers. Naturally, immigrants from particular countries formed their own clusters. But there was a great deal of interaction between the various national groups, who learnt from each other as they slowly developed strategies for combatting imperialism.

Goebel paints a vivid and detailed picture of daily life for the various immigrant communities in Paris during the interwar years. There was a rich cultural fabric. Musical performances enabled the migrants to maintain contact with their own native cultures, but also encouraged collaboration across national boundaries. In 1936, a concert to raise funds in support of Ethiopia as it faced Italian aggression brought together West Indian, Creole, Italian and Arab musicians. The author also looks at the way personal relationships developed. Unsurprisingly for the time, the vast majority of migrants were male, students and workers alike. Hence the emergence of brothels specializing in migrant customers, but also, and more significantly, the development of close personal relations between migrants and French women. Entrenched racism meant that, while cohabitation was relatively widespread, marriages were rare. However, a surprising number of those who led anti-colonial movements were married to French women. Lamine Senghor is reported to have said that 'he felt even more bitterly about the condition of Negroes because he was married to a white woman'.

But if Goebel rightly sees the complexities of culture and everyday life as providing an essential context, he also emphasizes the centrality of politics, pointing to the ways in which private life was politicized, and noting that the 'everyday social concerns of colonials in the metropole' were 'interwoven with anti-colonial politics'. For the most part, that meant the politics of communism. It is true that some anti-imperialist militants were attracted by the nationalism of the European far right and showed some sympathy for fascist thought, disregarding its inherent racism. But for young migrants who were seeking an understanding of the world they lived in and a means of transforming it, it was above all the French Communist Party which seemed to offer a way forward. The PCF was founded in 1920; the young Hồ Chí Minh spoke at its inaugural congress. Among the famous '21 Conditions' for any new party to affiliate to the Communist International was one which imposed the following obligations:

Parties in countries whose bourgeoisies possess colonies and oppress other nations must pursue a most well-defined and clear-cut policy in respect of colonies and oppressed nations. Any party wishing to join the Third International must ruthlessly expose the colonial machinations of the imperialists of its 'own' country, must support—in deed, not merely in word—every colonial liberation movement, demand the expulsion of its compatriot imperialists

from the colonies, inculcate in the hearts of the workers of its own country an attitude of true brotherhood with the working population of the colonies and the oppressed nations, and conduct systematic agitation among the armed forces against all oppression of the colonial peoples.

The attraction of communism has to be understood in terms of the contradictions of French imperialism. For the young migrants, Paris offered a liberating experience: there were political organizations, meetings, and also the *cafés maures* serving North African food, where Algerian workers would meet to complain about their working conditions and discuss politics. The cafés proved to be a fertile recruiting-ground for the Étoile Nord-Africaine. The French capital offered contact with intellectuals and activists of the left. France was the homeland of Revolution, which had adopted *liberté, égalité, fraternité* as its maxim and used those principles to justify its 'civilizing mission' throughout the French empire. Yet this self-same empire was profoundly and institutionally racist. Migrant activists were kept under constant, lavishly funded surveillance, and their organizations were heavily infiltrated, to the point of the classic absurdity where undercover agents found themselves submitting reports on other agents—although there could be two-way traffic along this road, such was the force of radical ideas: Senghor started out as a police informer, but was so impressed by those on whom he was informing that he became one of the PCF's most effective writers and organizers.

French racism was most plainly visible in the case of Algeria. Constitutionally, it was not a colony but an integral part of metropolitan France. Yet the great majority of indigenous Muslims who lived there were not French citizens, merely 'subjects' who did not enjoy full political rights. There was a complex procedure for achieving citizenship, including assessment by police and a rejection of the applicability of Qur'anic law. Barely six thousand Algerian Muslims had acquired full citizenship by 1939. The rest were subject to the 'Native Code', in force until after World War Two, which criminalized any form of insubordination or rebellion.

The first organization to emerge was the Union Intercoloniale, formed by the PCF in 1921, which published *Le Paria*; other groups and newspapers soon followed. Initially, their demands were rather modest. The migrant activists worked closely with France's working-class movement, seeing it as their natural ally. Many had developed personal relationships with French activists; they often believed that reform was the way forward, rather than a complete break with Paris. The demand for national independence crystallized gradually in the face of French obduracy. In 1919, Vietnamese activists were demanding an amnesty for political prisoners, freedom of the press and more schooling for natives, rather than an end to empire. Not long after, Messali Hadj had to be pressured by the PCF to make freedom for Algeria

into one of his main demands. For many migrants, economic questions were more important than what must have seemed the remote prospect of independence. Algerian workers in France could not collect child benefits if their children lived in Algeria, since it was deemed to be a 'foreign country', in defiance of the constitutional orthodoxy. Colonial ex-servicemen also received lower pensions than their French counterparts. Migrants expected their organizations to fight on such immediate questions.

Few among these activists could have envisaged the savage conflicts that were to erupt in Indochina and Algeria after 1945. Arguably, if France had made some timely concessions in the 1930s, those horrific wars could have been averted. But French imperialism was too deeply rooted, and the political mainstream—including most of the left—was wholly committed to maintaining imperial rule. Vietnam's constitutional nationalists argued for a gradual transition to independence, based on the principle of universal rights embodied in the French republic. The authorities responded by suppressing their newspaper and branding them as 'anti-French agitators'. French imperialism thus squeezed out the middle ground and brought more radical elements to the fore. By rejecting and repressing those who advocated moderate reform, Paris paved the way for a bloodier future.

We should be grateful to Goebel for a study which casts important light on the roots of post-war anti-imperialism and illuminates our understanding of France's troubled era of decolonization. But if the author has opened up some important fields of research, he has not produced the definitive analysis. In particular, I have two major reservations about his approach. Firstly, his main sources of documentation are government and police archives. Nobody can doubt the value of the material to be found in such archives, and historians such as George Rudé have made valuable use of them. Yet as Goebel himself concedes, there are problems with records of this kind: above all, the perspectives and prejudices of those engaged in surveillance work. The police who observed the migrant activists had little comprehension of what their victims were actually doing, and their perceptions were often distorted by racist and anti-communist views. They were also stuck rigidly within the imperial mindset. Neither the police nor their political masters had any inkling that the French empire would crumble to dust in the twenty years following World War Two. While Goebel does not share the myopia of his sources, and is actually rather cautious about intruding his own political values, he often shows a less than wholly empathetic approach to his subjects—referring to migrant activists as 'ethno-political entrepreneurs', for example. *Le Paria* and the later Communist and anti-imperialist newspapers attracted some very talented writers. It would have been better for Goebel to have let them defend themselves in their own words, instead of presenting them through the observations of police spies.

A study of the interwar anti-imperialist press would be a valuable contribution to our understanding of this period.

Secondly, Goebel is often insufficiently rigorous in his approach to chronology and periodization, taking the years between 1918 and 1939 as a single bloc and jumping from one date to another. This is unfortunate, because the main political protagonist he is concerned with, the PCF, underwent a very marked evolution, both in policy and in personnel, during those two decades. The newly founded PCF of the early 1920s, when *Le Paria* was first launched, was a lively if somewhat erratic organization, with significant internal divergences. Many of those who played a key role in founding the party and building it in its early years, notably those from a syndicalist background, later disappeared as the influence of first Zinoviev, then Stalin, became stronger; as a result, they have largely been written out of history. The same holds true for several of the leading anti-imperialist activists.

The period of the Popular Front, a decade later, was very different. The PCF was now firmly under Moscow's control, and its overriding priority was anti-fascism. As Goebel shows, the migrant community in Paris played its part in the great mobilizations against fascism and in support of the Popular Front. But the subordination of all other political tasks to this imperative seriously compromised the PCF's anti-imperialism: it ceased to demand the independence of Algeria, for example. For those springing from colonial territories, things looked rather different. French workers quite naturally opposed fascism, because it would mean the destruction of their hard-won rights and liberties. But to a great extent, colonial subjects did not enjoy these rights and liberties in the first place, and the overwhelming focus on anti-fascism did not reflect their interests in the same way. Without a sense of the PCF's evolution, the argument about relations between the party and the various movements for colonial independence all too easily collapses into a discussion of nationalism and communism as abstract types. Nonetheless, Goebel has revealed some fascinating material; let us hope it will be a stimulus to further research.