

***Review:* ISABELLE MERLE
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Nicholas Thomas's analysis of colonialism--a vast and difficult subject--is extremely stimulating, not only on account of its critique of certain theoretical texts but also as a result of the concrete examples that it explores. Before addressing the core issues, it is necessary to state that the book's perspective is of particular interest for a French historian specializing in New Caledonia because it locates colonialism in a contemporary context. It is not only a matter of reflecting on the colonial past, but also of analyzing interpretations taken both from strictly academic contexts and from more popular works intended for the general public. By placing the primary focus on culture, Thomas goes beyond the classical analysis of neocolonialism, which is based on political or economic approaches. He addresses ideas conveyed through literature, film, art exhibitions, and even political militancy. His analysis explores the way that the formation of national identity and memory is being influenced by reevaluation of indigenous culture in North America and Australasia, citing, for example, the impact of films like *Dancing with Wolves* and movements such as New Age primitivism.

France has a different experience because of its past as a colonial center ruling its territories from a distance. Even though decolonization has put paid to a certain number of debates, in France colonialism should not be

considered as an object of study belonging entirely to the past. It is noteworthy that in recent years there has been a renewal of interest in the colonial past, reflected in a growth in university research and books and films intended for the general public, some of which reveal a strong sense of nostalgia. The effects of the economic recession, memories of lost grandeur, post-colonial disillusiones concerning Third World countries--in light of all these, questions are asked about the causes of the renewal and the various rereadings of the past that have been presented. From the same perspective, there is value in reconsidering the events that erupted in New Caledonia in 1984, the violence they provoked locally, and the intensity and aggression they triggered within the French political scene. These recalled, overtly or otherwise, the memory of previous conflicts and in particular that of the Algerian war.

Thomas's analysis of the links between the past and present serves to underline the continuity of discourse on "the other," the roots of which he finds in *L'Histoire Naturelle* of Buffon and in the descriptions left by eighteenth-century explorers. Out of this emerged a new type of categorization that defined "the other" through focusing on his or her difference, specific traits and physical and behavioral qualities as well as a search for the essential nature of "the other." This essentialist conception has thoroughly permeated anthropology; Boas rejected evolutionism and swapped the notion of race for that of culture but retained this descriptive logic, based on "the naturalization of the distinctive," a logic also found in Geertz and Dumont. This model of ethnological interpretation, which is questioned today by a number of anthropologists,¹ was opposed in every respect to the modes of understanding prevalent in premodern Europe. Referring to the interpretation of Johannes Fabian, Thomas recalls the assumptions of a religious representation of "the other" that relied not on the description of specific attributes but on comparisons that stressed the absence of European Christian values. The "heathen" were not characterized in anthropological terms but presented as incomplete and imperfect beings who had to be converted and transformed. Thomas thus shows the connection between such a perspective and the missionary discourse which, in infantilizing "the other," sought to discover in the "primitive" a supposedly pure being ready for conversion.

The example of the Protestant minister Maurice Leenhardt, who had significant influence on New Caledonian ethnography, reveals another mode of thought: belief in a fundamentally mystical Kanak, who lived in primitive state, ignorant of good and evil and predisposed by nature to receive Christ. More religious than the Christians, the Kanaks would at one time have known God but would have then forgotten him, and the role of

the missionary was to draw upon that original sense of the divine in order to reorient them toward the Christian religion.² Leenhardt's view was not the infantilism of the native, but a belief in a primitive and fundamentally mystical world that represented a fertile field for the growth of Christianity. Leenhardt saw Kanak culture as having intrinsic value but nonetheless in need of reform and transformation. He exemplified thereby an incorporative missionary discourse opposed to an essentialist anthropological model based on reification of difference, a fixed conception of a society resistant to change and evolution. a

In returning to the origins of scientific discourse, Thomas reiterates a critique already developed in his previous work *Out of Time* (Cambridge, 1989), in which he argues against an ahistorical and atemporal anthropology that is unable to account for social transformations, colonial confrontations, resistance and exchange, and the emergence of hybrid identities. Colonialism is used here by Thomas as a resource to question ethnographers and force them to rethink their categories. Colonialism was a global phenomenon that touched virtually all regions of the world, and anthropology cannot continue to represent societies as totalities, closed in upon themselves and independent of the context in which they found themselves and the historical development through which they passed.

As well as arguing that anthropology should reflect on the question of colonialism, Thomas also says colonial studies should give attention to an anthropological approach in studying societies. In referring to works concerned with colonial representation (Saïd), and more specifically with colonial discourse theory (Bhabha, JanMohamed), the author provides a critique of a certain globalizing vision, which conceives of colonialism as a system of "gouvernementalité" (as formulated by Foucault) that appears entirely coherent, efficient, and organized in terms of a structure of domination and repression. Such studies have the merit of examining in detail the domain of representations and in developing a new reading--from the angle of colonialism--of various artistic, literary, and scientific works. For Thomas, however, these works are less than adequate in that, first, they rely on a trans-historical approach that tends to decontextualize discourses and, second, because they reduce the heterogeneity and contradictions in the world of the colonizers while ignoring the practical effect of the colonial discourse on those colonized. As Thomas stresses, colonialism is far from being "a unitary project but a fractured one, riddled with contradictions and exhausted as much by its own internal debates as by the resistance of the colonized" (p. 51). Moreover, the "colonial discourses" often aimed to influence the general public in the metropole rather than the colonized themselves. "It needs to be acknowledged that the discourse may not have impinged upon indige-

nous consciousness at all, or was at best indirectly related to discourses that were expressed at the site of colonization: to presume imposition is to overstate the importance and effectiveness of imperialism, to forget that imperialists were often arguing with each other or speaking narcissistically to themselves" (pp. 57-58).

I wholeheartedly agree with this deconstruction of the globalizing vision of colonialism that emphasizes the internal contradictions, conflicts, and uncertainties of colonial objectives, having myself developed this type of analysis in my work on New Caledonia (*Expériences Coloniales: La Nouvelle-Calédonie, 1853-1920* [Paris: Belin, 1995]). The colonial plans developed by the French state with respect to New Caledonia represented the product of intense discussions marked by multiple contradictions and disagreements (in France and in New Caledonia). The implementation of these plans revealed all the uncertainties, inconsistencies, and backtrackings of a colonial policy that evolved according to the events and interests of the moment. With respect to the Kanak world, colonial strategies followed a remarkably tortuous path, as they were contested within local representative bodies as well as at the highest level of the state by the colonial ministry. The Kanaks were damaged by the way they were characterized in a racist colonial discourse, which, contributed to a sense of shame about their own identity. They were able, however, to defend themselves by ignoring that alien discourse, choosing to retreat and to veil the complexity of their world just as they have been able, more recently, to rehabilitate Leenhardt's analysis when it was useful for their own purposes.

Thomas proposes to return to an approach that is localized, historicized, and contextualized with respect not only to colonialism but to colonialisms. In rejecting a globalist conception, which is based mainly on discourse analysis, he advocates, to a certain degree, an empiricist approach. For Thomas, this empiricism must avoid simplistic assertions. It must be based on an analysis that links a delicate interpretation of the complexity of "*logiques pratiques*" operating in the field with an interpretation of the colonial discourse that is developed for or in the metropole. Drawing on the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, Thomas seeks to account for the dynamism of actors in the colonial context, their strategies for resisting or exercising power, and their capacity for cultural exchange or appropriation when caught up in projects of social transformation that are sometimes in competition, sometimes marked by internal contradictions, and sometimes subject to contestation or reformulation. Thomas's use of the term "project" has theoretical implications of major significance for the author: "It draws attention not towards a totality such as a culture, nor to a period that can be defined independently of people's perceptions and strategies, but rather to a socially transformative

endeavour that is localized, politicized and partial, yet also engendered by longer historical developments and ways of narrating them” (p. 105).

One can easily see the potential of such an approach. It revisits the colonial terrain in making the interpretation more complex by means of an anthropological analysis that considers the issues of colonial situations, the relations between colonizer and colonized, the diverse strategies of different groups, and the competition and complementarity between different colonial projects. The author insists in particular on the need to analyze in greater depth the world of the colonizer, which, as stressed by Ann Stoler, has never been of primary concern to anthropologists. In fact, the world of the colonizer merits greater attention precisely because it is culturally complex and extremely diverse. One point of major interest in Thomas’s book is the way he pioneers new lines of analysis in a field that was too often divided into, on the one hand, the theoretical approach of “colonial discourse” studies (and more generally of cultural studies) or, on the other hand, a certain type of resolutely empiricist history that he groups rather vaguely under the heading of “conventional history.” In light of this, I would like to address certain issues that arise from the book.

In contrasting an essentialist anthropology and policies of segregation with the evangelical project of incorporation, the author only makes passing reference to the question of assimilation. He refers to “the stereotypic French assimilationist approach,” which is supposedly close to the missionary project because it combines the fundamental recognition of potential human equality with the total denial of indigenous culture (p. 134). In my view, this point requires a more thorough analysis of the specifics of both French and British colonial policy. French policies, in fact, were not always assimilationist, but quite often equivocated between the two poles of assimilation and segregation. British policies, as well, were not always exclusively segregationist and in some contexts conceived of the formation of indigenous elites and the transfer of the colonizer’s values and ways of life to the indigenous population.

The example that the author gives of Fiji is particularly noteworthy on account of the way in which the British sought to maintain society in its traditional state (even though this particular notion of tradition was essentially a construct): they finally imposed a remarkably elaborate social health and welfare program inspired by those developed in Europe in the nineteenth century with the purpose of improving the living conditions of the working class. As the author emphasizes, it was a matter of “a modern and subtle project that proceeded through social engineering rather than violent repression, and appeared essentially as an operation of welfare rather than conquest” (p. 124). This welfare program, beyond questions of visibility and

order, forced Fijians to adopt behaviors that conformed to British values (p. 120). The example would seem to suggest that the author has not given sufficient attention to the ways that official policy in fact involved a complex interaction between segregationist and reformist objectives.

I do find convincing Thomas's analysis of the missionary discourse, which he shows to be based on a vision that stresses the absence of religious values and invokes a child's soul to illustrate the process of conversion. Nevertheless, missionaries were often the first linguists to translate the Bible into local languages and the first ethnographers to observe in detail the norms and customs of the people whom they intended to convert. Thus they participated in the construction of anthropological knowledge and sometimes even took up academic positions in newly established departments of anthropology --as was the case with Leenhardt. This is a paradox that merits further reflection. What would have been the influence of experiences in the field on the preestablished missionary conceptions that had been shaped by the official discourses of the religious authorities? Would not the concrete realities of missionary work have undermined, at some point, the certainties of priests and ministers as they were confronted with the persistence of traditional beliefs and the strength of local cultures? Would not this have given them some sense of their own lack of power?

One could, in fact, question why Thomas does not apply the program that he sets out when he turns to the analysis of concrete examples. His analysis of Fiji, which is particularly interesting, seems to rely strongly on Foucault in describing a particular form of "*gouvernementalité*." This analysis provides a subtle interpretation of a colonial project but leaves unclear the "*logiques pratiques*" and the actors themselves. One would like to know more about the precise context in which this type of project was set up and maintained over the long term. What was the role of London (if there was one) in determining this policy? What were the motivations of the first governor of Fiji, the discussions and debates that took place in local colonial institutions, the attitudes of successive governors toward traditional Fijian society and the welfare project put in place in 1896? One would like to know something about the reactions of the Fijians themselves, which Thomas refers to in passing, but also something about the reactions of the settlers and missionaries. In fact, one would like to see set out more thoroughly "*les structures et les logiques du champ*" --to use the terminology of Bourdieu.

In the case of the missionaries in the Solomons, local details are also left unclear. Who precisely were these missionaries? In what particular context did they work? What sort of resistance did they confront? What kinds of concrete action did they undertake? What were their relations with their ecclesiastical hierarchy? What was their relationship with the other white

settlers? Although Thomas provides a good description of the missionaries' strategy of building up the mission as a total social project, nevertheless his analysis remains at the level of discourse and does not explore the details of its practice. This is perhaps the result of a choice made as to analytical approach, but it is nevertheless impossible to discern how Thomas is applying the type of analysis that he himself proposes.

In conclusion, I would like to return to several points of debate that emerge from this work. I am still not clear about the place that Thomas accords to history as a discipline among those disciplines that address colonialism. It seems to me that the author tends to reduce history (which he refers to as "conventional history") to nonreflective empiricist practice, an accusation that seems somewhat unjust. Not only are there many works of quality on the Pacific, Africa, and Latin America, but many of these also show a real capacity for methodological reflection that connects with that of anthropology. (Examples are the works of G. Denig on the Pacific, S. Gruzinski and N. Wachtel on Latin America, and more broadly the historical reflection produced by Africanist historians either in English or French.)

As a consequence of focusing his discussion on anthropological perspectives and on studies of colonial representations, Thomas reduces colonialism, in my view, to the single question of "the other." The core of the text is the author's concern with indigenous society, an area that he describes brilliantly with respect to Fiji and the Solomons, which he also addresses through the story of Prester John as well as through his examination of various contemporary questions. I feel this premise is limiting. The colonial process, of course, did not have as its primary concern the contemplation of "the other." By that, I mean that any examination of the culture of colonialism cannot leave out discussion of the social, economic, and political aspects of European society in expansion, without at least explaining why this narrower focus was taken. To take an example, one can return to the case of New Caledonia, which, as explained previously, became an experimental domain for colonial projects that followed a logic of "social" colonization. The main issue in New Caledonia involved the idea of settlement. This idea closely related to certain fundamental questions that haunted the French nineteenth century, including the threat of criminality and the condition of the "working class" or "dangerous class"--what was called "the social question." Following the model of its Australian neighbor, New Caledonia was destined to receive a mixed population of convicts and "respectable" migrants. At the heart of the project was the fundamental question of the land, which was to be offered to convicts and migrants to establish a "regenerated" society in the image of an idealized French countryside. In this context, the Kanaks represented

blind spot that the official policy refused to acknowledge, as was the case with Aboriginals in Australia or Native Americans in the United States. The remarks that Thomas makes with respect to the uncertainties of the colonial projects, the discussions and disputes they engendered, the difficulties of putting them into operation, and the incoherence as well as the reformulation of the projects are eminently applicable to the dynamics of settlement in New Caledonia. These dynamics were the result of a policy both complex and remarkably vacillatory. Certainly, the Kanaks were eventually taken into account by the early ethnographies and local policies, but they were also marginalized with respect to a large portion of the colonial agenda. No analysis can afford to ignore the local colonial context or the connection with the metropole.

Another example involves other aspects of colonialism's culture, the question of "*espace*" (land/territory), the irrepressible desire to conquer the land, to transform it, to develop it. There was in nineteenth-century colonialism a feeling of omnipotence with respect to the entire world (which was not a reality, of course). This sense of omnipotence was directed to both the appropriation and the transformation of the land itself. The natural environment had to be changed, as rationality was denied to any indigenous modes of land use. Nature had to give way to European demands. The colonies were seen as empty space on the map in need of new boundaries, new topography, new roads, towns, villages, and landscaping. If the Europeans had been able, they would have changed the flow of the rivers. Such an effort to reshape the land fed off the growth of geographical knowledge that accompanied the emergence of geographical societies and the academic discipline itself.

Such examples show the continuing interest of colonial studies and especially the domain of "colonialism's culture" opened up by Thomas's work.

NOTES

1. Concerning French works, see the classic by G. Balandier, *Sociologie actuelle de l'Afrique Noire* (Paris: PUF, 1955). Cf. M. Augé, *Symbole, fonction, histoire: Les interrogations de l'anthropologie* (Paris: Hachette, 1979); J.-L. Amselle and E. M'Bokolo, *Au coeur de l'ethnie: Ethnies, tribalisme et Etat en Afrique* (Paris: Edition la découverte, 1985); A. Bensa, "De la micro-histoire vers une anthropologie critique," in *Jeux d'échelles, la micro-analyse à l'expérience* (Paris: Gallimard Le Seuil, 1996). All but Bensa are available in English translations.

2. See A. Bensa, "Quand les Canaques prennent la parole: Entretien avec Pierre Bourdieu," in *Chroniques Kanaks: L'ethnologie en marche*, Ethnies 18-19 (Paris: 1996).