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**France in Oceania: History, Historiography, Ideology**

When Stephen Henningham and I began our research on Oceania, in the mid-1980s, the French territories of the South Pacific had temporarily captured public attention. Violent clashes between *indépendantistes* and loyal-

ists pushed New Caledonia to the brink of civil and colonial war, the sinking of the *Rainbow Warrior* in 1985 indicated French determination to remain a Pacific power, nuclear testing proceeded apace in Moruroa despite regional condemnation, a riot in Tahiti in 1987 led to the burning of shops in Papeete and threatened a greater conflagration in French Polynesia, and geopoliticians warned about military menaces in a region proclaimed to lie in the new political and economic center of the world.

A decade later, the situation has changed dramatically. The various factions in New Caledonia grudgingly cohabit under the auspices of the Matignon Accord of 1988, a moratorium on French nuclear tests has remained in place since 1992, France's Polynesian islands muddle through economic difficulties and political infighting thanks to large French hand-outs, the Pacific capitals have mended fences with Paris, and no one much discusses the international role of the islands. All is perhaps not quiet on the South Pacific front, and various commentators warn about potentially explosive situations. Yet, the islands have sunk back into the relative obscurity and insignificance that have been their lot. One example: the situation in New Caledonia was critical in the midst of the 1988 French presidential elections, and the right-wing parties used the Ouvéa hostage incident in a desperate, though unsuccessful, attempt to secure electoral advantage. The South Pacific has played no role whatsoever in the 1995 presidential elections in France. Both French candidates and French voters have their gaze steadily fixed on other horizons.

Dr. Henningham's and my works made efforts to respond to a certain neglect of the French South Pacific islands in scholarly literature and to counter some of the more polemical works that had appeared. As Paul de Deckker and Michel Panoff note, our works indeed differ. Mine, for instance, focused more on a metropolitan French perspective, undoubtedly in line with both my training as a historian of France and my feeling that the French position on the South Pacific (although often very badly presented) was frequently misunderstood in the region. Dr. Henningham took a more regional and political approach, nourished by his diplomatic experience in the South Pacific and his collaboration with experts in Pacific studies in Canberra. Both of us, however, were concerned with a central paradox: Why had France "stayed on" in Oceania when the supposed "logic of history" demanded decolonization? As Colin Newbury says, we both found the answer more complex than many commentators thought--it was not just "a simplistic regression in 'colonialism' in an age of 'independence.'" "

Much of the explanation lay outside the Pacific. Between my *France in the South Pacific, 1842-1940* in 1990 (London: Macmillan; Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press) and *France and the South Pacific since 1940* in

1993 (London: Macmillan; Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press), John Connell and I published *France's Overseas Frontier: Départements et Territoires d'Outre-Mer* in 1992 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). It is a study of France's ten remaining overseas "possessions"--the Pacific territories, Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon in the North Atlantic, Martinique and Guadeloupe in the Caribbean, French Guiana in South America, La Réunion and Mayotte in the Indian Ocean, and France's claim on part of Antarctica and various sub-Antarctic islands. It showed that the maintenance of French sovereign presence in Oceania was not a unique case of French influence outside Europe; the French overseas departments and territories have played a significant place in French international perspective--in rhetoric and policy-- since the decolonization of the rest of France's empire in the early 1960s. a

This suggests that the history of the French islands, and indeed the other islands of Oceania, must be seen in a broader context. Culture contact, colonialism, and the sequels to colonialism mean that a strictly island-oriented approach to the history of the South Pacific must remain inadequate. Although local conditions, strategies, and maneuvers by island groups and episodes of collaboration and resistance--well investigated by local historians, ethnographers, and ethnohistorians--must be understood in order to decipher the history of the islands, so must the wider context, as Oskar Spate so well demonstrated in his magisterial works on Oceania. Decisions taken elsewhere, concerns current in foreign capitals, and the interests of foreign missionaries, traders, and politicians determined the history of the South Pacific.

I would venture to suggest that this is even more true of Oceania than of other colonized areas. Without the large populations, extensive land area, and bountiful natural resources of Africa or Asia (or Australasia), the Pacific islands were attractive largely as stepping-stones to other places. The almost eerie links in colonialist rhetoric make the point. In the 1840s, the French government searched for *points d'appui*, support stations for the sailing fleet; in the 1980s, Oceanic lobbyists talked about the strategic importance of the islands as bases for France's nuclear-powered fleet. In the 1880s, Paul Deschanel argued that the opening of a canal through the isthmus of Panama would revolutionize the economy of the world and give the Pacific islands a major place in the new international economic order; a century later, the vogue for the "Pacific Rim" led to similar claims. As Professor de Deckker points out, France, like Britain, had a "world vision," and an investigation of this world vision is necessary to comprehend the history of the Pacific.

Another, and corollary, dimension of the history of the French Pacific

that must be taken into account is what Dr. Panoff astutely calls the sometimes bloody "masquerade" of debate on the Pacific. Domestic politicking in both metropolitan France and the Oceanic territories forms an intrinsic part of such larger questions as nuclear testing and secession versus integration. Political contenders inevitably search for ways to score points in elections, and the Pacific islands have provided one way to do so. Maurice Satineau's fine analysis of New Caledonian politics illustrates how individuals, parties, and publicists can attempt to use faraway developments for their own political benefit.<sup>1</sup> This, indeed, was part and parcel of the longer run of colonial history, as Dr. Panoff adds. Others can get into the game as well, as both defenders of "Greater France" and radicals could champion one or another point of view on Pacific issues. In the territories themselves, the permutations of ideology and strategy reveal the ways in which local politicians, like their counterparts everywhere, try to obtain and retain power. The personal and party political clashes between the FLNKS and the LKS in New Caledonia, as well as among the seemingly countless factions of the anti-independence parties in French Polynesia, are examples.

Moreover, ideologies are seldom so clear-cut as they seem. A close reading of the main *indépendantiste* newspaper in New Caledonia, the FLNKS-sponsored *Bwenando*, published in the mid-1980s, is a case in point. Articles and illustrations ceaselessly called for Kanak and socialist independence, yet the arguments oscillated among three poles. There was constant reference to the precontact Melanesian culture of New Caledonia, the patrimony it represented for present-day Kanaks, and the ways that it could serve as foundation for an independent Kanaky. There was also a regular, and at times ritualistic, invocation of "revolutionary" arguments about throwing off the colonialist yoke, ending capitalist exploitation, and establishing proletarian solidarity with other oppressed groups around the world. Nevertheless, *Bwenando* alluded to French ideas of constitutionalism and representative government, the ideals of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, and continued and amicable ties with France.<sup>2</sup> That mixture of philosophical currents is neither hypocritical nor surprising, but it does show that from historian's point of view ideological lines are seldom so straight as they appear to the protagonists in political dramas and to their sympathizers.

The mixed rhetoric of *Bwenando* points to yet another side of the history of the French islands: their social history. Dr. Newbury rightly points to the profound change created in French Polynesia by the transformation of rural peasantry into an urban proletariat, and Professor de Deckker speaks of the "ambiguities and cultural destabilization" that have occurred because of developments in the region. This is, I feel, very important; in only a generation or two, migration and urbanization, wage labor, the telecommunica-

tions revolution, increasing literacy, representative institutions, and consumerism have made the Pacific islands a greatly different place from what they were at the time of Gauguin and Segalen. The process of what it is now rather unfashionable to call "modernization" has been telescoped into a very short period in the history of the islands of Oceania.

Several things can be said about this social transformation. First, these changes are not peculiar or unique to the French Pacific. Indeed, compared to Hawai'i or such Caribbean islands as Puerto Rico and Saint-Martin, the Oceanic islands have been preserved from some of the worst effects of that transformation; Papeete and Noumea, fortunately, still lack the architectural monstrosity of Waikiki or the murderous crime of Port Moresby. But, secondly, it is dangerous to plead that some of these changes ought not to have taken place at all or that islanders ought not to have the "benefits" of contemporary society that people elsewhere "enjoy"; it is disingenuous that those who listen to the radio or watch television almost every day should bemoan the arrival of these media in the islands and lament that they were somehow not kept safe from Westernization. "Paradise" and "paradise lost" are the oldest, and most tiresome, themes in writing about the history of the Pacific. Finally, it is unfair to blame colonialism per se--in this case, French administration--as the evil purveyor of these changes; comparative studies might show that the same trends, albeit at different speeds, affect independent and "colonial" islands, those of the Pacific and those elsewhere in the world. "Colonialism" and "neocolonialism" have the same result, and attempts to avoid both have met with largely unsuccessful results, or produced bloody consequences, around the world.

The history of the islands is, therefore, a *métissage* of indigenous and foreign, traditional and modern, reality and rhetoric, local concerns and international contexts, epiphenomena and structural changes, *histoire événementielle* and the *longue durée*. These are the issues that I (and, I think, Dr. Henningham as well) was trying to explore.

Both of our books tried to cover developments in the French Pacific up until the time of writing, and also to use the sources then available. The release of new archival materials--the French archives enforce a thirty-year delay for access to primary documents--will undoubtedly bring to light new information about the French in Oceania and may reveal important new dimensions to such controversial subjects as the attempts to stifle Pouvana'a O'opa's and Maurice Lenormand's movements in the 1950s. But research by historians and others is already deepening our knowledge of such issues as French nuclear testing, the economic and demographic situation of the islands, and the role of religion in Tahiti. <sup>3</sup> Much of the new research is being done by students and scholars at the French University of the Pacific in

New Caledonia and Tahiti, and one can hope that this institution will play a key role in furthering research on the territories.

Two recent theses bode well for French research on the South Pacific. Jean-Marc Régnauld's doctoral thesis, defended at the French University of the Pacific in early 1994, provides an exhaustive examination of the political and institutional history of French Polynesia since 1945. Particular chapters trace the evolution of political institutions and the organization and ideology of different political parties, especially the pro-independence Ia Mana Te Nuna'a and the Tavini Huira'atira. Régnauld also examines in detail the history of arguments on nuclear testing. Régnauld's sources were the position papers, tracts, and other materials of the various parties (including considerable unpublished material), press reports, and interviews. He argues that in the "French Polynesian model" that has prevailed since the democratization of local institutions after the Second World War, political activity is more a question of clientelism, personal networks (including family links), and even personality cults than of ideology. The ideology that appears in party platforms is largely secondhand and, as shown by the traditionally radical rhetoric of the Polynesian *indépendantistes*, is often ill-adapted to the realities of the islands. Régnauld says that from the 1940s to the 1980s, the French government did everything possible to forestall political and administrative autonomy. Even the setting up of local municipal councils in 1972--a previously unexplored subject (and a lacuna in my own book) to which he devotes considerable attention--was an attempt to silence demands for greater self-government. Recent developments, such as the autonomy statutes of the 1980s, have given renewed vigor to clientelism in local politics. The masses in French Polynesia, Régnauld concludes, are "indifferent" to the French yet work out a *modus vivendi* that provides them with significant advantages. <sup>4</sup>

Isabelle Merle's thesis, presented at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris in 1993, examines French settlers in New Caledonia from the 1880s to the 1920s; it draws on archival materials in both the territory and France, a quantitative survey of convicts, interviews with their descendants, and government records on projects for French colonization of the island. She convincingly suggests that French settlement was closely connected with the "social question" in nineteenth-century France and a misguided attempt to turn urban criminals into sturdy antipodean peasants. She traces the fortunes--or, most often, misfortunes--of the *transportés*, especially after they completed their sentences. Many were required to remain in New Caledonia, but rather than forming a pioneer yeomanry they became a poor, itinerant, and despised fringe population, developing a dislike for the Noumea bourgeoisie and hatred for the Melanesians alongside whom they lived. Merle thus traces the genesis of French settlement and

explains how the failure of that project to live up to its expectations patterned the subsequent history of New Caledonia.<sup>5</sup>

Much remains, as the tried and true phrase has it, to be done. One particular area needing work is social history.<sup>6</sup> As Dr. Newbury remarks, there is almost no serious material on the minority groups in New Caledonia (despite Dorothy Shineberg's long-awaited study of ni-Vanuatu migrants), although Vietnamese, Indonesians, and Polynesians have played an important role in the territory's history. Surely the French colonial archives (and the Dutch archives, in the case of the Javanese) would yield useful information. Gérald Coppenrath's fine study of Tahiti's Chinese only covers the period up to 1967;<sup>7</sup> yet since that time, the Chinese have continued to play an important economic role in Tahiti and the outer islands and, since they became French citizens, have also had a distinct political life. Studies of urbanized Melanesians and Polynesians are only just beginning, but it would be good to have historical monographs on such groups as outer-island migrants to Tahiti (even before the nuclear boom) or Melanesians who worked in the mines or domestic service in New Caledonia. The history of women in the islands (whether indigenous or migrant) remains largely to be written. Some of the types of study pioneered by French social historians quite long time ago--on the history of the family, marriage strategies, and child-rearing--have not yet been applied to the Pacific; they might enlighten us on such areas as *métissage*. Areas that have more recently gained interest could be particularly pertinent to the Pacific; one is the study of collective violence and its place in society.<sup>8</sup> Another is the history of the environment--a perfect area for research on the French islands.

Not all has been said about the political history of the territory, especially the relations between politics and other areas of life. Dr. Newbury also rightly points to the interest of a study of the political leaders of the territories, the ways in which their backgrounds formed their opinions, the alliances and clashes among them (by place of origin, religion, training), and the networks through which they marshaled support. There is no good full-length study of religion and politics in New Caledonia (a parallel to Saura's study of French Polynesia), nor is there a thorough study of the missionaries *tout court*, with the exception of James Clifford's excellent account of the ethnologist-pastor Maurice Leenhardt.<sup>9</sup> A study of the press in the territories since the Second World War would also be fascinating in showing how political opinions are formed, manipulated, and reflected; a study of the handling of Oceanic affairs by the metropolitan press would provide a good complement.

The economic history of the territories has not received great attention. There is no good history of nickel mining or transport (whether by sea or by

air). A study of retail trading networks would tell us much about relations between the territories and overseas markets, between primate cities and isolated villages and islands, and between the different ethnic groups involved in marketing. Someone could write a history of banking, French financial policy, and the French Pacific franc; the history of tourism (and the "hospitality industry") would be worthwhile, too. The depression of the 1930s also deserves more attention.

Particular times and places still lack adequate coverage. The years between the two world wars, the time when the French colonial system reached its apogee, has not been intensively studied. Kerry Howe's superb book on the Loyalty Islands does not go past the end of the nineteenth century, and Greg Denning's work on the Marquesas Islands ends in 1880; there is not a single thorough historical monograph on the twentieth-century history of the outer islands of French Polynesia or New Caledonia. The number of first-rate books on Vanuatu can be counted on the fingers of one hand, and the number of high-quality studies on Wallis and Futuna is even smaller.

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Comparative studies may be a particularly fertile ground for investigation. More systematic comparisons of the policies of colonizers of Oceania--France, Britain, Germany, Japan, the United States, Australia--would undoubtedly lead to valuable conclusions. They might also pave the way for comparative studies on more focused topics: transport in the islands, the copra industry, women in island societies, the Chinese in Oceania. Comparative studies of Polynesians and Melanesians from the French territories and in other islands would be fascinating. Comparative analyses of dependent countries and independent microstates might underscore some of the advantages and detriments of each status. There could also be fruitful comparisons of the islands of the South Pacific with those of the Caribbean and Indian Oceans.

My own research, as evidenced by the book on French overseas departments and territories, is moving into a comparative direction. I have in press a textbook on French colonial history, and John Connell and I are completing a study of various imperial "confetti" of European nations, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand--there are, perhaps surprisingly, some forty such entities.<sup>11</sup> Two other projects are in a similar comparative vein. I am contributing an article on France and Germany in Oceania to a forthcoming German handbook of the South Seas.<sup>12</sup> A longer-term project on which I have just begun work takes me from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean to study sovereignty and dependency, using as examples the French outposts of La Réunion and Mayotte and the independent states of Mauritius and the Comoro Islands.

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There is, therefore, no dearth of subjects for study--and if the field of



history has not been particularly well served, there have been even fewer contemporary studies of the geography, anthropology, and economics of the French Pacific islands. Yet there is no lack of documents, including those of the French overseas archives in Aix, the national archives in Paris, the magnificent navy archives in Vincennes, the newly-housed archives in Papeete and Noumea, and materials in Australia, New Zealand, Britain, and elsewhere. Various types of material are available, from government reports to private papers, statistical series to memoirs and letters. Perhaps a vital source to exploit as soon as possible are the testimonies of the people who have participated in the momentous events in the South Pacific since the Second World War; many are still living but are aged, and time is short to collect oral histories.

We can hope that some of these studies will not just find new sources and unearth new information but suggest new interpretations. A recent article on the *Rainbow Warrior* affair, with provocative revisionist views about French and New Zealand motives behind the clash, suggests that definitive explanations have not been advanced on many subjects.<sup>13</sup>

The danger, however, is that the students and academics (particularly in the "Anglo-Saxon" world) will not be available to complete the tasks. Writers in Australia and New Zealand, as well as in Britain and the United States, have been able to provide new and different perspectives on the French islands of Oceania, and some of the pioneering work was done by scholars such as Newbury, Shineberg, Howe, Dening, Connell, Bronwen Douglas, and Alan Ward. Yet the South Pacific is not an area of intense interest for postgraduate students at present; at least in Australia, the difficulties of obtaining scholarships and finding jobs dissuade prospective research students. Some who did write on the French islands (including myself) have moved on to different subjects and areas. There remains a considerable gap between specialists of the French Pacific territories and those whose primary area of study is the "Anglophone" islands; too few works have been translated from one language to the other. The first challenge to a better understanding of the history of the French Pacific territories is thus to find scholars--in both English and French--to do the work.

## NOTES

This article was completed before President Jacques Chirac announced in June 1995 that France would conduct another series of nuclear tests in French Polynesia, a decision that provoked great protest in the South Pacific and elsewhere. Combined with recent demonstrations in New Caledonia, this development shows that the French islands have not ceased to be the center of controversy.

1. Maurice Satineau, *Le Miroir de Nouméa* (Paris, 1987).
2. This is the gist of a paper I presented on "Culture, Politics, and the Campaign for Independence: Kanak Identity in New Caledonia in the 1980s" at the conference of the European Society for Oceanists in Basel in December 1994.
3. Among book-length works, see Jean-Marc Régnauld, *La bombe française dans le Pacifique: L'Implantation, 1957-1964* (Papeete, 1993); Bengt and Marie-Thérèse Danielsson, *Moruroa, notre bombe coloniale* (Paris, 1993); Bernard Poirine, *Tahiti: Stratégie pour l'après-nucléaire* (Papeete, 1992); Poirine, *Tahiti: Du melting-pot à l'explosion* (Paris, 1992); Poirine, *Three Essays from French Polynesia* (Sydney, 1993); Bruno Saura, *Politique et religion à Tahiti* (Papeete, 1993). A useful overview of French Polynesia's history is Pierre-Yves Toullelan and Bernard Gille, *Le mariage franco-tahitien: Histoire de Tahiti du XVIII siècle à nos jours* (Paris, 1992).
4. Jean-Marc Régnauld, "Histoire politique et institutionnelle des Etablissements français de l'Océanie et de la Polynésie française (1945-1992)."
5. Isabelle Merle's thesis is forthcoming as a book under the title *Expériences coloniales: La Nouvelle-Calédonie, 1853-1920*.
6. The following comments are limited to the field of history.
7. Gérard Coppenrath, *Les Chinois de Tahiti: De l'aversion à l'assimilation, 1865-1966* (Paris, 1967).
8. Bruno Saura, *Les Bûchers de Faaité: Paganisme ancestral ou dérapage chrétien en Polynésie* (Papeete, 1990 and 1994), a study of the religious frenzy and violence on one of the Polynesian islands.
9. James Clifford, *Person and Myth: Maurice Leenhardt in the Melanesian World* (Berkeley, 1982).
10. K. R. Howe, *The Loyalty Islands: A History of Culture Contacts 1840-1900* (Canberra, 1977); Greg Denning, *Islands and Beaches: Discourse on a Silent Land, Marquesas 1774-1880* (Honolulu, 1980).
11. These are, respectively, *Greater France: A History of French Overseas Expansion* (London, forthcoming in 1996); *The Last Colonies* (Cambridge, also forthcoming in 1996).
12. Hermann Hiery, ed., *Handbuch der deutschen Südsee* (Paderborn, forthcoming).
13. G. F. Taylor, "Victim or Aggressor ? New Zealand and the *Rainbow Warrior* Affair," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 22, no. 3 (1994): 512-530.