aspirations were dashed, especially with the rejection by the Euro-American powers of Japan's demand for an explicit statement in favour of racial equality, a new impetus was given to anti-Western radicalism. The global institutionalization of racial politics culminated in the 1920s, with the imposition of intense forms of racialized immigration exclusion by the Western powers and their colonies.

Overall, this is a stunningly good book, written with a clarity and directness that is all too rare in contemporary academic prose. While one is never in doubt that it is the work of two committedly egalitarian scholars, it eschews moralism in favour of analytical complexity. Figures who are deeply unsympathetic from almost any contemporary standpoint, such as Bryce or Jan Smuts or Teddy Roosevelt, are nevertheless rendered in a way that makes their thinking comprehensible.

I have a few, relatively minor criticisms. In the book, anti-colonial actors tend to be presented in a rather unitary way. The authors give a great deal of weight to W. E. B. Du Bois' early and advanced anti-colonial positions but, before the First World War, Gandhi's more reformist vision of empire was perhaps more typical of Asian and African intellectuals. And the elements of scepticism about nationalism itself among some important Asian intellectuals are somewhat neglected. A consideration of Rabindranath Tagore's critique of nationalism, and an engagement with the anti-modernist elements in the thought of Gandhi, might have served to introduce greater complexity into the picture. There is also, at the end of the book, perhaps too bland an account of the triumph of racial egalitarianism in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. It can be argued that, in practice, 1948 actually saw a retreat from the League of Nations' attempts to protect oppressed groups, in favour of an acceptance of the claims of national homogeneity. The Declaration, after all, followed shortly after the horrors of Indian partition, which signified that the end of colonialism was not necessarily the dawn of a new era of global justice.

I suspect that the book will be greeted with a certain amount of puzzlement by some of its readers. For all the calls for transnational history that we hear, historians are still very much invested in national frameworks of explanation. A book that so radically departs from such comfortable ground – and the narratives (often of a highly moralistic kind) that play out on it – is disconcerting. But to do transnational history is to disrupt such comfortable familiarities, and this book is one of the few that genuinely moves beyond thinking within the framework of the nation-state.

The devil's handwriting: precoloniality and the German colonial state in Quindao, Samoa, and Southwest Africa

By George Steinmetz. Chicago studies in practices of meaning. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. Pp. xxviii + 640.78 b/w illustrations, 6 maps, 3 line drawings. Hardback US$90.00, ISBN 9780226772417; paperback US$33.00, ISBN 9780226772431

Reviewed by Gesine Krüger
Department of History, Universität Zürich, Switzerland
E-mail: g.krueger@access.uzh.ch

doi:10.1017/S1740022809003027

Using social theory as the starting point for a new history and a new understanding of colonialism does not offer a shortcut, but neither does it take the reader on a detour. George Steinmetz is both a committed sociologist and a passionate historian, and his rich and challenging study on German colonialism in Samoa, the Chinese province of Quindao, and Southwest Africa not only provides a fruitful merging of three influential theoretical approaches (Edward Saïd, Pierre Bourdieu, and Homi Bhabha) but also demonstrates the lasting value of 'grand narratives' and comparative approaches in colonial studies. Nonetheless, avoiding a bird's eye view, Steinmetz 'does not attempt to identify any singular, general model of colonial rule' (p. 3). On the contrary, *The devil's handwriting* is founded on the obvious and crucial differences of colonial rule in the three colonies under investigation, ranging from preservation to extermination, and from idealization to disdain. 'Native policy' is therefore the central analytical object, the most important field of investigation in Steinmetz's study: 'Native policy encompasses the core activities that differentiate the modern colonial state from other state forms' (p. 41). He is concentrating on four major questions and basic assumptions, that is, the influence of 'precolonial ethnographic discourse and representation'; the importance and mechanisms of 'symbolic competition among colonial officials for recognition of their superior ethnographic acuity'; the (often underestimated) 'colonizers' cross-identification with images of the colonized'; and, finally, different 'responses by the colonized' (p. 2).

Steinmetz unfurls his understanding of colonialism – and more precisely of the colonial state – as a 'social field' in the first, introductory chapter, which 'readers who are less interested in theory' (p. xxi) should *not* bypass, as the generous author kindly suggests. There are just too many interesting and sometimes controversial topics and arguments to skip this important part of the work. One might, for instance, wonder why Mahmood Mamdani's model of the 'bifurcal' colonial state, combining racist exclusion and decentralized despotism based on the inclusion of the colonized subject, is not even mentioned, let alone discussed in this chapter, but Steinmetz offers a convincing proposition to explain the colonial state as a 'social field' with '"practitioners" recognizing the same stakes of competition and the same criteria of distinction or signs of honor' (p. 48), and all competing over superior ethnographic knowledge.

I do not fully agree here with Steinmetz's claim of a 'systematic demonization of the Ovaherero' (p. 15), 'monotonously repetitive' and 'univocal extreme' (p. 46). A closer look at the sources reveals a more nuanced picture, especially when visual sources – as Steinmetz proposes – are consulted. Cattle-raising societies have always been praised and cursed at the same time: proud, beautiful, lazy, and unruly. But this small critique does not challenge Steinmetz's major arguments on the 'linkage between ethnographic visions and social divisions' (p. 46) among colonizers and the 'transposition of metropolitan class configurations' (p. 47) as reasons 'why modern colonial empires actually did vary according to the national identity of their European colonizers' (p. 47). Considering the German colonial empire, Steinmetz understands the colonial stage 'as an exaggerated version of imperial Germany's three-way intraelite class struggle' (p. 49), a struggle between the modern economic bourgeoisie, the nobility, and the middle-class intelligentsia both at home and abroad, where colonial officials 'competed with one another for a particular form of "symbolic capital" … that characterized the modern colonial state field' (p. xiv). It is worth discussing whether the colonial state was indeed more or less independent from metropolitan and local interests (p. 31), or whether the states examined in the book did not, in fact, make 'serious efforts to gain legitimacy in the eyes of [their] subjects' (p. 33). Still, after a decade of important discussions on the existence or non-existence of a German colonial *Sonderweg*, Steinmetz's book offers a new approach to analysing German colonialism, without denying colonial genocide but avoiding 'Auschwitz' as the only possible vanishing point.

Chapters 2, 4, and 6 reconstruct and interpret pre-colonial ethnographic discourses on south-west Africa: 'A world composed almost entirely of contradictions' (pp. 75–134); on the 'noble savages' of Samoa: 'A race that all travelers have agreed to be the most engaging' (pp. 243–315); and on China, where a 'Foreign devil's handwriting' fuelled increasing German Sinophobia (pp. 361–431); whereas Chapters 3, 5, and 7 explain varying forms of native policy, comparing 'colonies that were linked to one another in the minds of Germans and German colonial subjects and via circulation of officials and military' (p. xxii). The last chapter, a short conclusion on colonial afterlives, once again emphasizes diversity, the huge variety of post-colonial legacies indicating that 'it would be misleading to lump all modern colonies together under a single description' (p. 511).

This very well-written and attractively illustrated book combines a discerning theoretical approach with different layers of historical evidence, from the colonial metropolis down to the men on the spot. It is, for instance, one of the clear benefits of Steinmetz's analytic approach that he is not puzzling about individual psychological dispositions but – following Homi Bhabha – discusses the desire of the colonizer to identify partly with his colonial subjects as a stunning, yet not fully explored, phenomenon. Apart from many (sometimes intriguing) new insights, even for scholars familiar with the areas under consideration, this book may offer a general framework for further discussions on important issues concerning the almost unlimited, yet always unstable, power of colonial rule, statehood, and ideologies. It also provides a conceptual and theoretical framework for future research, especially for comparative colonial micro-histories. One can only agree with Steinmetz's argument that 'colonialism necessarily redefines indigenous culture in the very act of traditionalizing it' (p. 314). This holds true even for the 'traditional Herero Nation', which was not so much the object but rather the result of the brutal extermination policy, and was clearly co-authored by the surviving Herero. Perceptions of the colonial state by the colonized are more often than not neither resistance nor collaboration, nor something in between, but rather a distinctive modern phenomenon that requires the same careful treatment as Rohrbach's enigmatic reading of the devil's script.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022809003027 Published online by Cambridge University Press