

REVIEWS OF BOOKS

CULTURE AND RACE IN THE MAKING OF FRENCH ANTHROPOLOGY

In the Museum of Man: Race, Anthropology, and Empire in France, 1850–1950.

By Alice L. Conklin.

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Alice Conklin's new book invites us to revisit the Museum of Man (*Musée de l'Homme*) at a moment when it is undergoing a difficult transformation. Conklin places an earlier transformation and renaming of the institution dating to 1937 at the heart of the book's lucid and penetrating analysis. Over the past twenty years, numerous studies have enhanced our understanding of the history of anthropology and of the links between racism and imperialism. This book distinguishes itself from that abundant work in two ways. First, she offers a generous and very systematic synthesis of the entire literature, thereby providing both students and nonspecialists with an overview of its main themes. Second, she presents specialists with a painstaking and convincing case that Marcel Mauss and his students gradually constructed a critical imperial ethnological theory and practice, clearing the way for even more trenchant critiques beginning with George Balandier's famous 1951 article on 'the colonial situation'.

Conklin takes a long view, from the 1850s when Paul Broca established the foundations of racial science with the creation of the *Société d'Anthropologie de Paris* (1859), to the beginning of the 1950s when UNESCO assembled an array of experts to counter the pseudo-science supporting racism and to forecast its terrifying political consequences. She examines scientific ideas and the institutions, networks, and practices that gave them life, addressing as well the difficult question of the uses to which those ideas were put, whether consciously or inadvertently. She traces the international circulation of such figures as George-Henri Rivière, the *directeur-adjoint* of the *Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro* from 1928, who sought models of museum renovation on the United States, Europe, and the USSR. She also carefully analyses why, when, and how the colonial empire was called upon to support the gradual institutionalization of ethnology. In other words, Conklin provides multiple perspectives through which to analyze the links between an anthropology that never quite disavowed racial science and the newer synthetic approaches of the interwar university ethnologists. Those multiple perspectives also enable us to understand why those same ethnologists took to the politically empowering terrain of the colonial empire.

Setting aside a simplistic paradigm assuming a deep and blinding racism, Conklin instead emphasizes the deep polarization that emerged in France in the 1920s pitting an academic dreyfusard camp against a racialist camp. The first became institutionalized in 1925 in the *Institut d'Ethnologie* at the Sorbonne where a new cultural anthropology

(‘*ethnologie*’ in French) encompassed all the ‘sciences of man’ including physical anthropology. The second, entrenched in the *Ecole d’Anthropologie*, enjoyed a certain revival of international visibility in the wake of the First World War.

This construction of the field of anthropology in France privileged the rise of cultural anthropology while nevertheless making possible the countervailing and eventually violently opposed trajectory of George Montandon, who features throughout the book. And this was to be costly for the field. Even Paul Rivet, a trained doctor and occupant from 1928 of the Chair in Anthropology at the Museum, eventually abandoned research in physical anthropology. In 1938, in the newly renovated lecture halls of the *Musée de l’Homme*, he mounted an attack on racial prejudice by showing side by side the skulls and material culture of various populations in a bid to make a case for the equal dignity of all cultures. But it is not so simple to change popular perception and the display was sufficiently ambiguous to be read in the opposite manner. Conklin repeatedly reminds us that the projects and presentations of powerful educators teach us very little about what those to be educated actually retain, and she emphasizes the scarcity of evidence for reconstructing how ‘the masses’ responded to a museum that aimed at popular appeal and consequently relied upon imagery that occasionally ran contrary to the intended argument.

The new university ethnology is presented as a science that was useful for the empire, while the *Institut d’Ethnologie* continued to attract colonial funding. Beyond this mutual legitimation, what kinds of links emerged between them? Conklin answers this question by providing a nuanced portrait of the students closest to Mauss: Denise Paulme, Germaine Tillion, Charles Le Cœur and Bernard Maupoil. She brings to life an *avant-garde* that laid the groundwork in the empire while remaining in constant dialog with Mauss, an incomparable teacher. Mauss imbued his students with an intellectual ethic and an approach to societies through attention to material and symbolic exchange that enabled them to surmount the inherent racism of the colonial situation and to develop their own critiques of it. These were in short the first works of an ethnology that was Maussien by conviction and imperial by convenience.

Like all good books this one raises new questions, and I will mention only two here. If the analysis of reception runs up against the absence of appropriate or useful sources, the numerous skulls assembled in the museum in 1938 invite us to recast the question by approaching it through a lens more familiar to anglophone readers. That is, how was whiteness constructed in France? What was the role of anthropometry in its construction? On this issue the lectures delivered at the *Ecole d’Anthropologie* are less relevant, whatever later analysts might argue, than the practical encounter with thousands of conscripted young men subject to measurement. And in the imperial field, it is the conversations of Mauss’s students that draw our attention – thus Maupoil attempted to put Mauss in contact with the Béninois Alexandre Adandé, to no avail. What was the warp and woof of transactions that emerged as the new ethnography was applied on the ground, and to what degree did those contribute to shifts in the perceptions and strategies of various actors? Rejecting simplistic determinism makes it possible, as this book amply reveals, to open our horizons to consider the multiple and shifting threads that make up intellectual history.

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