

## REVIEWS OF BOOKS

### COLONIALISM IN AFRICA

*Colonies de peuplement: Afrique, XIX<sup>e</sup>–XX<sup>e</sup> siècles.*

By Joël Michel.

Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2018. Pp. 418. €25.00, paperback (ISBN: 978-2-271-08802-4).

doi:10.1017/S0021853720000092

**Key words:** North Africa, Southern Africa, East Africa, colonialism, white settlement.

Research on colonialism and its memories is booming again in France. From history to museum studies, from literature to cultural studies, from migration activism to anti-immigration politics, it seems that the topic is everywhere in the public sphere. In this context, historians have opened new lines of inquiry that shed light on the agency of Africans even as they largely remained subjects during the colonial encounter. Other historically-minded scholars have deployed the analytical concepts of race, gender, or the body to explore how colonialism affected and interpellated contemporary processes. The book under review suggests that these innovative histories are limited by certain blinders. The point of departure of Joël Michel, the author, is that while the historiography of colonialism has found new life, settlers are hardly visible. His task is to remedy this omission.

Adopting a comparative framework, the book provides a historical survey of European settlements in North Africa (Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco), Southern Africa (South Africa, Rhodesia, Namibia, Angola, Mozambique), plus a few forays into Kenya and the Belgian Congo. Using a thematic approach, the author relies on the extant secondary sources to reconstruct the stories of essentially 'white tribes' in Africa. Chapter One rightly reveals that Africa was the settlement destination of last resort for most European candidates for emigration. When ultimately lured into a settlement scheme in Africa, many would-be settlers actually returned home after a few years. This process resulted in thinly-peopled and insular settler colonies on the continent. Chapters Two and Three appear to be the core sections of the book in terms of argumentation. Structured around the issues of land and labor, they show that agriculture was key to the project of European settlement in Africa. Etymologically, this emphasis was the essence of colonialism. It also turned out to be the prime source of antagonism with local communities and polities, for the appropriation by Europeans of land meant expropriation for the indigenous people. Yet, in a valuable comparative gesture, Michel underlines that such expropriations took place unevenly. In some colonies, there was not much land seizure; in others, there was vast outright dispossession. Following a similar logic of comparison, the author shows that, in some colonies, Europeans allowed Africans to cultivate the same products as the settlers; in others, Europeans strictly forbade Africans from doing so. In the case of the latter, the prohibition forced many Africans into working on plots owned by white settlers. While some Europeans, notably poor whites, hired themselves out as laborers, the bulk of the labor

force was thus made up of Africans (and some South Asians) in the agrarian economies that emerged out of settler colonialism.

At times, the European settlers coerced the labor of Africans. In South Africa, for instance, forced labor and even slave labor were rampant. This practice relates directly to the issue of violence, a theme taken up in Chapter Four. Here, we are reminded that colonial violence was both institutionally and socially condoned, whether in North Africa or in Southern Africa. Colonial laws dispossessed the local populations, subjected them to unjust regulations, or simply kept them at bay. A more diffuse form of violence was the collective humiliation that was meted out to entire communities. In many ways, as Chapter Five reveals, racism and the othering of local peoples fed this endemic violence that was both multi-faceted and systemic in colonial territories. Aided by the state or metropolitan lobbies and backers, as Chapter Six demonstrates, the settlers came to dominate in what turned out to be 'islands of white' in Africa (60–3). While at times tensions sprung up among the various constituent parts of the settler communities and the colonial state, racial democracy worked to smooth out major problems. This process is revealed in Chapter Seven, where Michel shows that, while the presence of poor whites posed a threat to settler colonialism, the institution of a *Herrenvolk* democracy ensured that white supremacy prevailed (239–41). But the edifice came crumbling down after the Second World War. In the age of decolonization, as Chapter Eight shows, it became clear that settler colonialism would not reach its full maturation in Africa.

On the whole, Michel's book is a useful scholarly work because it goes beyond the study of a particular settler colony to offer a comparative and continent-wide overview of settler colonialism. Yet if Michel's main objective was to write settlers back into the new historiography of colonialism in Africa, his aim is only partially met. Although we do learn much about settlers, their communities, dreams, and disappointments, colonialism was constituted by a set of relations that brought colonizers *and Africans* into a social and economic system — and that dimension of these historical processes remains underdeveloped in the book. In other words, detailed and insightful analyses of the colonial encounter are hardly offered. A great deal could have been learned from a connective approach which would explore the interactions between settlers and Africans. Additionally, the heavy focus on comparison sets to the side the numerous instances of trans-territorial exchanges among the various settler colonies in Africa. Finally, there is ground to argue that a certain racial frame constrains Michel's historiographical effort at redress. Otherwise, how can we understand that the black settler experiments in Liberia and Sierra Leone were not addressed in a book that claims to deal with settler colonialism in Africa? Thus, while often insightful, the narrative of this book reads like another history of white people in Africa.

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