

The “science of man”

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Winner of the 2013 David Pinkney Book Prize, Alice L. Conklin’s most recent book takes us on a journey leading to the establishment of ethnology in France and its colonies. Through a biographical approach, she shows how the “general science of man” evolved in the 19th century from the obsessive search for universal laws.

Reviewed: Alice L. Conklin, *In the Museum of Man: Race, Anthropology, and Empire in France, 1850-1950* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

In the 1930s, two French women, Germaine Tillion and Thérèse Rivière, arrived in the Aurès mountains to conduct fieldwork. Both had been trained by Marcel Mauss and Paul Rivet at what became France’s premier institution for the emerging discipline of ethnology, the *Musée de l’Homme* which opened its doors in 1938. Despite the fact that their mission tacitly discouraged inquiry into colonialism’s impact upon local societies, Tillion’s reports contain astute insights into the profound, often unanticipated, shocks that modern capitalism and the colonial state had wrought upon the allegedly “pre-modern” peoples of the Aurès. Suffering from the catastrophic (and global) drought of 1935-1936, the women of the village refused to participate in the annual “traditional” rituals; the French ethnologist and “outsider” grasped the meaning of an apparently small-scale, isolated rebellion. How and why had these two women, and many others like them, both male and female, come to the “science of man,” to *in situ* fieldwork, and professional lives in a national university culture and system that offered scant possibility of advancement or even employment — aside from colonial service? As significantly, how had the majority of young scientists working within the Maussian *cercle* evolved a novel understanding of “race” in an era when that unstable notion was acquiring disturbing political voltage?

A history of the “science of man”

Winner of the 2013 David Pinkney Book Prize by the Society for French Historical Studies, Alice L. Conklin’s most recent work takes us on an important journey motivated by scholarly neglect of the tangled, often tortured, processes leading to the establishment

of the discipline of ethnology in France and its colonies. However, Conklin tackles a much more daunting task: how to write a history of the “science of man,” from an already complicated national perspective as well as an even messier transnational vantage point? And she is attentive throughout to the issue that concerned Mauss himself: how does the study of someone, of the other, of another social group, avoid entanglement in something called subjugation? This book is the product of meditation upon her earlier monograph, *A Mission to Civilize* (1997)¹, which interrogated the idea of “republicanism” simultaneously from the Metropole and the colonies, which broke with scholarly conventions at the time. Thus, these monographs represent a two-volume set, the second representing a deep inquiry into questions encountered in the first book, one of whose principal aims was to uncover the genealogies of the “civilizing mission.”

Employing a biographical and “multi-generational” approach throughout, Conklin first provides a crisp historical treatment of the “general science of man” as it evolved in the nineteenth century from multiple, at times contradictory, positions on the racial question, bedeviled as it was by the obsessive search for universal laws. She also scrutinizes “things”—skulls and bones, as well as cultural and artistic artifacts or objects that had been collected from around the world, and then were observed and catalogued, “read as texts.” Chapter Two covers the three decades from the 1890s to the 1920s that ultimately witnessed the recognition of academic ethnology, which was no easy matter, nor was the outcome pre-determined. To give full texture to the roughness of the “birth of ethnology,” Conklin digs out the biographies of three key figures - Paul Rivet, Mauss, and George Montandon. One of the many strengths of Conklin’s mode of analysis is that she is alert to contingencies; her web-like perspective allows for the play of historical serendipity at many levels—in individual careers as well as in the evolution of institutions or patterns of thought and practice. Linked chapters (Three, Four, and Five) examine the intellectual, social, and theoretical origins of ethnology from three vantage points: the *Musée de l’Homme* itself, racial science, and empire.

The most gripping chapter is devoted to “Ethnologist at War” which debunks the fallacy of the “progressive” anthropologists triumphing over the “bad scientists of the human.” Here the author questions conventional wisdom regarding the “rupture” that divided the 1930s from the 1940s, from Vichy, Occupation, and collaboration. And needless to say, this chapter was perhaps the most difficult to navigate, given that the topic remains highly charged even today. Conklin re-evaluates understandings of distasteful—or worse—figures such as Marcel Griaule and George Montandon through her measured painstaking analysis of contested, incomplete evidence. In this reconsidered narrative of how Vichy challenged intellectuals, we see that Griaule, a despicable self-promoter, had already in the 1930s evinced reluctance, if not implicit refusal, to embrace the culture of solidarity, reciprocity, and research *en équipe* so central to the Maussian world view. The extremes of racist ideology and “science” combined with unfettered academic ambition converge in Conklin’s treatment of Montandon who she argues sought nothing less than to overhaul French academic institutions along racist lines for the future. Thus, more than

¹ Alice L. Conklin. *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa 1895-1930*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998

“mere” collaboration, there existed a “perverse coherence” in his murderous actions and behavior.

“The best ethnographers come from elsewhere”

Scholars of the histories of women, gender, and science will be especially interested by Conklin’s research. She demonstrates how and why this “new” discipline offered unusual opportunities for female intellectuals, including not only formal study and acceptance, but also the possibility of traveling as professionals, seeing the world. At the same time, she unravels the social filaments and networks that ethnology spawned and how they provided ground and space for women as producers of knowledge, scrupulous observers of social facts, and in the role of scientists intent upon method.

In addition, this book is not “just” about France or the colonies, although that project in and of itself represents a large undertaking. Rather it is a sustained comparative analysis of the cluster of disciplinary tendencies, personalities, mentoring and teaching styles, and institutions that collected around the idea of “ethnologie” as the study of total social facts in France. At the same time, we grasp the how French, Anglo-American, and German (to name only the most studied) understandings of anthropology, previously treated as running along parallel, but distinct, lines of development, in reality interlaced —despite discernible differences.

The research —in diverse archival and other primary sources as well as in the gargantuan secondary literature — is staggering. Conklin chased after collections of papers in the making, followed moving archives around, and tracked down individuals whose mandate as ethnologists was to scatter to the far corners of the world. There is something for every reader in this work. Among its numerous contributions is the fact that Conklin’s volume is addressed both to historians and anthropologists. Since the copious notes run as a parallel text to the main arguments and narrative, graduate students from a range of disciplines will surely mine those references for bibliography and uncharted research directions. Additionally it offers to Anglophone readers a synthesis of French-language work, both contemporary as well as from the past, on three major domains: empire, race, and anthropology. But what this study so lucidly illuminates is how and why “disciplines” in general change from within and without. For French readers, it narrates a story that may be unfamiliar and as such proves the old adage that “the best ethnographers come from elsewhere.” Cornell University Press is to be congratulated on putting out a paperback edition that is both attractive and priced for classroom use. Required reading for all.

Published in Books&Ideas, 1st September, 2014.

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