

The Sedimentation of Empire

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Responding to the wave of decolonizations in the early 1960s, the Directorate General for Development and Cooperation (DG8) was created in 1963. Supporting the imperial continuity argument, Véronique Dimier’s book offers a deeply researched study on the organizational evolutions of this European overseas aid and development organization up to this day.

Reviewed: Véronique Dimier, *The Invention of European Development Aid Bureaucracy: Recycling Empire*, Palgrave 2014.

The subtitle of Véronique Dimier’s deeply researched book on the European Community’s overseas aid and development organization announces its theme: “Recycling Empire.” In these less than 250 pages, her other term for the process she is examining is the “sedimentation of empire.” It is a study of a colonial past that has not passed.

Responding to the wave of decolonizations in the early 1960s, the EU sensed that it would need to create a policy arm to deal with its Member states’ ex-colonies. Thus was born in 1963 the Directorate General for Development and Cooperation (DG8) whose prime focus was on Members’ former colonies in Africa. This body changed its name several times in the following decades, was merged with newer entities, and was obliged to alter its ostensible work methods. But, as Dimier argues, it remained at the organizational center of what she terms the “sedimentation of empires.” The first task of the new body was to staff it with knowledgeable officials. Where would the experts on the ex-colonies come from?

Redundant Colonial Administrators

Named to head the DG8 was Jacques Ferrandi, a Frenchman of Corsican origins (like so many members of his nation's colonial service) who had served France as a colonial officer in Africa, mostly in Senegal. At the end of empire, and continuing into the following decades, the talents developed by France's specialists in the colonies were increasingly valued in the metropole. When in 1959 André Malraux was charged by President de Gaulle to form a Ministry of Cultural Affairs, he staffed its upper echelons with ex-colonial officers. One of the first of these, Emile Biasini, saw his task of spreading Parisian culture to the provinces as much the same work as he had performed in Africa. A few years later, in the 1970s, when powerful regionalist movements—especially in Brittany, Occitanie, and Corsica—were denouncing the “imperialism” of Paris, this same cultural ministry set up an ethnography division. This new problem was thus also an opportunity for the employment of new staff. Suspected as potential spies for their former overlords, and so no longer welcomed in the now independent states of the South, hundreds of French cultural anthropologists found employment in the ministry, scientifically giving the lie to what was termed in one official report as the subversive *ethnologie sauvage* of the regionalists. Their campaign culminated in 1980, declared by President Giscard d'Estaing as *l'Année du Patrimoine*, which featured thousands of celebrations of local and regional cultures approved and financed by Paris. The history of these events is established scholarship.

But not all the approximately 3,000 redundant colonial administrators could be absorbed into Malraux's ministry, other state administrations, or French business firms. Dimier's own contribution shows how Ferrandi's new office welcomed many of these men, this time to serve Europe. Although Dimier could not document their numbers, admittedly a hard task lacking access to their dossiers, throughout the book she systematically, if anecdotally, points out the colonial service background of various DG8 officers, especially the onsite people called *contrôleurs-délégués* who managed the disbursement of funds and provided onsite advice. As the European Community expanded, and as Britain joined France and Belgium in staffing the DG8, their imperial specialists contributed their own knowledge, skills, and administrative direction.

The Development of an *esprit de corps*

To bridge the lack of solid statistical data on the numbers and weight of these former colonial officers, Dimier invokes the development of an *esprit de corps*, which united those veterans endowed with concrete, if perhaps different, colonial experience and new recruits who learned their jobs from the old colonial hands. In the early days of the DG8, this entailed—as it had in the old days—building intense solidarity with fellow officers, gaining detailed knowledge of the terrain through frequent *tournées* (inspection tours around the district), and cultivating close personal ties with members of the African elite.

The DG8 went through several important transformations from 1963 to the opening of the new Millennium—the timespan covered in the book. With Ferrandi at the head, the agency funneled EU financial aid to the new states in Africa with informal engagements, minimum paperwork, absence of hierarchical responsibility, and most importantly, by means of staff members' extensive personal relations with important African deciders, which many of them had cultivated in the years before and after decolonization. Given this re-established patronage system, it should not surprise that there was no formal *post hoc* assessment of how the aid money was spent. In a word, as Dimier points out, this was a restoration of the supposedly defeated system of soft colonial power—indirect rule—that was to have ended once political independence arrived.

Along with rich multi-national and EU archival research to document this elusive thesis of a continuing colonialist *esprit de corps*, Dimier conducted a large number of extensive and telling interviews. She emphasizes how especially important were the local contacts, knowledge, and experience of the former, largely French, colonial officers in the first years of the DG8's functioning. As onetime *contrôleur-délégué* René Teissonnière, who had served as a District Officer in Madagascar, told her:

This position did not change anything in my function. I did exactly what I had always done as a colonial official: persuading the population and their chiefs that such projects could be beneficial to them... negotiating with the Minister of Planning to initiate or work out, for example, a project of rural modernization... Calais [a former District Officer in Guinea and Cameroon] and I used to spend hours talking with the authorities. In some cases, we did a

great job... I considered X, the Minister of Planning as my brother. Having a valuable interlocutor and getting on well with him was absolutely essential. The key elements were proximity, understanding, and adaptation to local culture. (192)

Recycling Old Imperial Practices

In Chapter 7, “Roads and Rural Path Dependencies,” Dimier further strengthens her book’s argument that the postwar DG8 recycled old imperial practices by presenting several detailed case studies of African development and road construction projects. She argues convincingly that the premises many DG8 officials operated from continued to be those of the old pre-war Republican left—namely, those of Edgard Pisani, the politician, and of Robert Delavignette, for many years the head of the Ecole Coloniale, which from the late nineteenth century had trained the French colonial administrators. These assumptions started with a great appreciation of African societies as made up of Black Peasants who were tied deeply to the soil. Their leaving the land of their ancestors to be swallowed up in cities—to join a swelling African urban proletariat at best, or to be lost and jobless at worst—was a calamity to be avoided. Accordingly, Delavignette, the intellectual who articulated this idealized vision of nineteenth century French peasant society as a description of contemporary Africa, wanted above all to save the African village of supposedly equal and self-sustaining peasant farmers. Dimier describes the DG8 development projects implemented all over Africa to bring simple new agricultural techniques, small technological upgrades, and improved irrigation as similar to what was accomplished in the colonial era. The officers of the DG8 attempted to re-establish government-sponsored peasant cooperatives, such as had failed in French Africa in the colonial period. These served again as before, mostly as a “means for the colonial and post-colonial states to extend their bureaucratic control over rural societies.” [124]

When it was a question of big projects like building a road (many roads were funded by the DG8), the route was still often, as in the colonial period, intended to bring things the peasants grew to coastal markets. In other cases, the roads were not completed, or they failed to be maintained and became impassable. The DG8’s funding of these doubtful road-building projects, Dimier argues, was largely obligatory as highly visible markers of the munificence

of a local African leader and of his influence with the European powers. Their construction cemented the relationship of the great man with the responsible *contrôleurs-délégué*, as big showy projects had done in colonial times.

The New Democratic Model of the 1970s & the Future of DG8

This golden age of old colonial hands under Ferrandi created a functioning EU organization, which, in important ways and despite inevitable pressures and temptations, kept the implementation of narrow French interests at bay—at least, as Ferrandi told Dimier during her extensive interviews with him. But when Britain joined the EU and sought influence in the DG8, the organization was forced to change. Supported by new Member states that had joined the EU following successive enlargements, the British criticized the old colonial administrative style, strongly driving for a new, rationalized approach to management. This new bureaucratic model, which was strongly pressed by Britain and the new EU Member states from the early 1970s yet took decades to put in place, inevitably involved much more “control at a distance”: clearer criteria for the selection and funding of projects, systematic programming, as well as formal evaluation.

In Chapter 5, Dimier describes the struggle among the ex-colonial nations, particularly France and now Britain, over the future shape of the DG8. French leaders fought for the maintenance of the Ferrandi style, as they saw advantages to France in the continuation of the earlier model. The British fought for greater influence by supporting the young (stay-at-home) economists who demanded more organization, more answerability, and, especially, more concrete numerical data. Changes were made in the direction favored by the British, but, as Dimier argues, “while keeping intact the core elements of [the DG8’s] identity and legitimacy.” [7]

In the 1990s, pressures for rationalization and control were supplemented by a new concern for human rights, democracy, and good government. This new political “Conditionality,” which included sanctions if violations occurred, was seen by many of the organization’s staff members as threatening the precious rapport between the political

powerful in Africa and the field officers. The implementation of Conditionality became a focus of much EU Members' contention in the 1990s.

After some more reorganizations in that decade and through the 2000s (e.g., the creation of EuropeAid), the onetime DG8 functions and staff were folded into the European External Action Service. Dimier thinks it too early to evaluate this new agency, which is charged with managing development aid to the countries of the South. Nevertheless, European interest in tighter control and supervision will likely continue and perhaps intensify the difficult bind that since the 1990s has troubled the *contrôleurs-délégués*. As Dimier writes in her conclusion, "Maintaining the original legitimacy based on personal trust with the African elite... while building a new type of legitimacy based on trust in numbers, became a matter of survival." (211) She leaves this organizational puzzle of the new Millennium for future analysis.

Employing the geological metaphor of rock and soil layers that accumulate over time and can be made visible if one digs deep enough, Dimier argues that throughout all its reorganizations and changing charges, the European agency entrusted with managing aid, especially to Africa, still manifests a "sedimentation of empire." This deeply documented and fascinating book addresses organizational questions; yet by nature of Dimier's argument, it does not delve into the economic ties that connect, or reconnect, the new states in Africa with European powers. It would have nevertheless been useful if Dimier had broken out the sums dispensed in Africa by the DG8, and told us what percentage of the EU budget such aid represented. Her work is also valuable, in particular, for documenting case studies pertinent to the ongoing intellectual debate between researchers who trace the continued contemporary workings of empire and those who thematize, rather, a new globalization. I think that Dimier's book supports the imperial continuity argument more powerfully than it does the globalization perspective.

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