

One Hundred Million Frenchmen: The "Assimilation" Theory in French Colonial Policy

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Source: *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Jan., 1962), pp. 129-153

Published by: Cambridge University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/177745>

Accessed: 05/05/2009 16:54

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## ONE HUNDRED MILLION FRENCHMEN: THE "ASSIMILATION" THEORY IN FRENCH COLONIAL POLICY

During World War II, Jacques Stern, a former French Minister of Colonies, wrote almost lyrically of the "patient labor of assimilation" by which France had been "consolidating the moral and material ties which bind together forty million continental Frenchmen and sixty million overseas Frenchmen, white and colored" in the French Empire.<sup>1</sup> When the Brazzaville Conference met in 1944 under the auspices of the Free French government to consider the postwar future of that empire, its final resolution declared that

the aims of the work of colonization which France is pursuing in her colonies exclude any idea of autonomy and any possibility of development outside the French empire *bloc*; the attainment of self-government in the colonies even in the most distant future must be excluded.<sup>2</sup>

As a statement of attitude towards the shape of the postwar world, the Brazzaville declaration must be ranked with Winston Churchill's oft-quoted pronouncement of 1942 that he had "not become the King's First Minister in order to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire". But the Brazzaville statement was more than a pledge of allegiance to the *status quo*. It was also a reaffirmation of the ideal of "assimilation" to the French nation as the logical outcome of the French *mission civilisatrice*.

History has dealt harshly with the Brazzaville prediction. The establishment of the Fourth Republic in 1946 was accompanied by the transmutation of the French Empire into the "French Union", whose peoples, in the flowing phrase of an official orator, were to be "one hundred million citizens and free men" of a France "enriched, ennobled, and expanded".<sup>3</sup> The round figure of sixty millions in overseas France included close to twenty millions each in French North Africa, the sub-Saharan African territories, and Indo-China, along with four millions in Madagascar and lesser numbers in various fragments of empire on three continents and in four seas. Yet a decade and a half later, all that remains of France's imperial domain are the miniscule "overseas *départements*" of Martinique, Guadeloupe, Réunion, and Guiana;

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Stern, *The French Colonies: Past and Future* (New York, 1944), pp. 25-26.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Herbert Luethy, *France Against Herself* (New York, 1955), p. 218.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220.

a few minor island possessions; French Somaliland; and an embattled Algeria whose future relationship with France is doubtful, to say the least, despite the fact that for generations it has been organized into *départements* and thus in theory integrated with metropolitan France. To this list, it is true, there might be added the tenuous relationship which still remains between France and the now-independent states of the Franco-African Community, but the strength of this bond has yet to be proven.

The process of disintegration began almost with the proclamation of the French Union of 1946, as differences between the French and the Vietnamese over the meaning of the new dispensation erupted into bloody warfare that would not end until the recognition in 1954 of the independence of Cambodia, Laos, and the two rival states of North and South Viet Nam. Two years later, in 1956, nationalist pressures forced France to recognize the independence of its North African protectorates, Morocco and Tunisia. In 1958, the pattern appeared for a time to have changed. When the Algerian crisis of that year brought De Gaulle to power, his offer of full independence to any French African colony which voted "no" in the referendum on the new "French Community" under the Fifth Republic was at once a reversal of the prior insistence that colonial independence was inconceivable in the French scheme of things, and a gamble that the gallicized native élites of the colonies would bear witness to the success of assimilative policies.

Seemingly the gamble paid off. Of the thirteen sub-Saharan colonies, only Guinea chose to vote "no". With ill-concealed displeasure, the French government gave Guinea its independence, while the other territories proceeded to organize themselves in their new status as internally-autonomous republics within the Community. Significantly, while the Constitution of the Fifth Republic offered the colonies the alternative of becoming overseas *départements*, not one of the new states chose this assimilationist path. It was even more significant that hardly a year passed before some of the autonomous republics of French Africa began to take a second look at the other constitutional option, complete independence. By 1960, all had decided to take the plunge.

Doubtless the cultural influence of France will remain a factor in the future development of these independent nations, but it seems clear that the policy of assimilation had failed to produce the expected results.

## II

What went wrong? Assuredly, in the collapse of colonialism a variety of factors have been at work, many of which were quite independent of the particular policies which happened to be followed by the imperial powers. But some light may be thrown on the failure of assimilation by an examination of its place in the development of French colonial theory.

To begin with the obvious question, what does the term “assimilation” mean? While virtually all writings on modern French colonial policy use the word, confusion abounds as to its meaning. Some writers present it as the dominant and continuing characteristic of French colonial policy throughout the entire era of imperialism, as the distinctive manifestation of the French genius. Others hold that it was abandoned early in the 20th century, and replaced by a quite different policy of “association”. It is easy to show that this latter term first appeared in the literature of French colonialism as a proposed alternative to “assimilation”, but it is equally true that the two words did not long remain differentiated.

Some counterpose “assimilation” to “autonomy”, these two terms suggesting goals supposedly characteristic of French and British colonial policy respectively – incorporation within the body politic of the mother country, on the one hand, and colonial self-government, on the other. Yet French critics of “assimilation” based their attack on the folly of extending European democratic institutions to the “inferior races” comprising the populations of the colonies and argued that the British did not engage in such irresponsible foolishness.

Some advocates of “assimilation” have given the term a purely legalistic constitutional meaning, with colonial representation in the metropolitan parliament as its most important manifestation. Others have used it in the much broader sense of making over non-European peoples in the “civilized” image of Europeans. Some have suggested that its true significance lies in the French acceptance of racial equality, as contrasted with the “colour bar” drawn by the British. Others have employed it in a narrowly administrative sense to refer to a highly-centralized direct rule in the colonies; yet the supposedly assimilation-minded French employed the protectorate technique in many of their colonies. Also in an administrative context, assimilation has been considered to mean applying a uniform set of rules in *all* colonies without taking into account differences in size, distance from France, social organization, religious patterns, economic development, etc.

Culturally, assimilation might mean the propagation of the French language among non-European peoples; but have not the English done the same with their own tongue? Finally, to complete the confusion, one finds the odd phrase “tariff assimilation” used to describe French customs policy towards the Empire.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> An exceptional example of this confusion is provided in S. H. Roberts, *History of French Colonial Policy (1870-1925)* (London, 1929). M. M. Knight has observed that “Roberts leaves the tangle of meanings attached to ‘subjection’, ‘assimilation’, and ‘association’ more muddled than it is in the better French surveys”. “French Colonial Policy: The Decline of ‘Association’”, *The Journal of Modern History*, V (1933), 208. The indiscriminate use of the same term for varying phenomena also characterizes H. I. Priestley, *France Overseas: A Study of Modern Imperialism* (New York, 1938), and various studies of specific areas in the French Empire.

This *mélange* cannot be blamed solely on the failure of scholars to define their terms, however much one might feel that it should be a part of their responsibility. At the height of the debate over assimilation as a colonial policy, a delegate to the *Congrès Colonial National* of 1889-90 complained that "among the partisans of assimilation there are not two who agree on the meaning of that expression". A decade later, virtually the same thought was expressed by a participant in the *Congrès International de Sociologie Coloniale* of 1900 who observed that "there are so many meanings given to 'assimilation' that it has become one of the most dangerous words of our colonial vocabulary".<sup>5</sup>

In 1895 Arthur Girault published his *Principes de Colonisation et de Législation Coloniale* in which, with a true Gallic passion for order, he gave a systematic presentation to the ideas of assimilation as he understood them. His definition, while no more "correct" than any other, provides a useful point of departure for our discussion. Furthermore, his work, written as a text for law students, was reissued in edition after edition, revised and expanded but always retaining the same organization in its discussion of general theoretical principles. Its influence in the training of French officialdom must have been substantial indeed.<sup>6</sup>

His presentation rests on an abstract schematization involving three possible alternative colonial policies: subjection, autonomy, and assimilation. Each, he cautions, is an "abstract type" and none "have ever been realized in their entirety anywhere." Nevertheless, he leaves the reader in no doubt as to his own preference for assimilation, so long as its application is both "moderate" and "eclectic". Its ideal he considers "the constantly more intimate union between the colonial territory and the metropolitan territory". Colonies "are considered as a simple prolongation of the soil of the mother country", merely as "*départements* more distant than the rest". The goal is "the progressive subjection to the same rules of the different parts of the territory" and "the progressive creation of veritable French *départements*".

To Girault, "the principal result and visible sign of assimilation" is the

<sup>5</sup> *Recueil des Délibérations du Congrès Colonial National, Paris, 1889-90* (Paris, 1890), I, 24; *Congrès International de Sociologie Coloniale . . . 1900* (Paris, 1901), I, 183. Frequent reference will be made to these congresses and to another which preceded them, the *Congrès Colonial International de Paris* of 1889, whose report was published at Paris in that same year. It is important to distinguish between the *international* congress of 1889 and the *national* congress of 1889-90, although Roberts, *op. cit.*, and other works frequently fail to do so. For the sake of clarity as well as brevity, the reports of the several congresses will hereafter be cited as *CCI 1889*, *CCN 1889-90*, and *CISC 1900* respectively.

<sup>6</sup> Arthur Girault, *Principes de Colonisation et de Législation Coloniale* (Paris, 1st ed., 1895; 2nd ed., 1903; 3rd ed., 1907; 4th ed., 1921; 5th ed., 1927). A 6th edition, considerably revised and condensed, was published under German occupation in Paris in 1943. The summary of Girault's views which follows is drawn from pp. 54-75 of the first edition.

representation of the colony in the legislature of the mother country. Other practical measures include the following: “A single body of legislation governs all parts of the territory without distinction”, and all new laws in the mother country apply automatically in all the colonies unless specific exception is made. The administrative procedures and sub-divisions that exist in the metropolis are duplicated exactly in the colonies. The very existence of a colonial ministry may be opposed, since all the various aspects of colonial administration would properly fall under one or another of the home ministries: interior, justice, education, etc. No distinct colonial military forces exist, and colonists are subject to military obligations identical with those of citizens at home. Similarly, taxes, tariffs, and financial administration will be identical, as will the extent of civil liberties, reflecting the regime in power in the mother country.

Significantly, he comments that “the assimilation of the natives is a possible consequence, but not at all the only possible one, of the principle of assimilation of colonies”:

If it is hoped to be able to inculcate them with our ideas and our customs, then one works zealously to make them into Frenchmen: they are educated, they are granted the right of suffrage, they are dressed in the European mode, our laws are substituted for their customs, and in a word, native assimilation is pursued. But if one despairs of arriving at this result, if they show themselves refractory toward our civilization, then, to prevent them from injecting a discordant note in the midst of the general uniformity, they are exterminated or pushed back.<sup>7</sup>

As a participant in the discussions at the colonial congress of 1900, he insisted that “assimilation of the natives” and “political and administrative assimilation” must be recognized as “two distinct ideas”.<sup>8</sup> In the third edition of this text, he commented that assimilation “has often been asked for opposite reasons, and with a view to entirely different results”.

There are those who, when speaking of assimilation, are thinking primarily of the natives, and who imagine that it is the policy to be followed towards them which is in question, when in reality it is an entirely different matter. The assimilation of the colonies is so little that of the natives that in Algeria, the pushing back of the latter is precisely what is asked by the colonists who would assimilate that country completely with France.<sup>9</sup>

Obviously, Girault’s interpretation was not shared by all partisans of assimilation, but it is important to be aware of it as we seek to trace the development of the concept.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>8</sup> *CISC 1900*, p. 181.

<sup>9</sup> Girault, *op. cit.* (3rd ed., 1907), p. 51.

## III

Late in the 19th century a great debate developed in France over assimilation as the nation, having won and then lost its first great colonial empire in the 17th and 18th centuries, entered vigorously on a new imperial career under the aegis of the Third Republic. The foundations of the theory, however, lay in the past, and in particular in the treatment accorded the surviving fragments of the first French empire during the Revolution of 1789.<sup>10</sup>

Deputies from the sugar islands of the Caribbean, from the *Ile de France*, and from French India were called to sit in the revolutionary National Assembly. In 1794 the Convention freed the slaves and decreed that "all men resident in the colonies, without distinction of color, are French citizens and enjoy all the rights assured by the Constitution". In 1795, the Constitution of the Year III declared the colonies to be "integral parts of the Republic", and divided them into *départements* just as in the mother country.<sup>11</sup> "The policy of assimilation", wrote Girault a century later, "was in the logic of the revolution."

The Revolution had established the equality of all Frenchmen, and the rights which it proclaimed were in its thought the same for all men without distinction of latitude. What could have been more natural . . . ?<sup>12</sup>

Of course, the "natural" implication of the Revolution might equally have been to extend to the colonies the right to choose their own form of government, as France itself was doing, even if that entailed their independence and separation from France. Unreal though the alternative might seem, in 1793 Jeremy Bentham had called on the Convention to do just that, in a pamphlet entitled "Emancipate Your Colonies!"<sup>13</sup>

The foundations of assimilationist theory can be traced to the arguments of the *philosophes*. In Condorcet's famous phrase, "a good law is good for

<sup>10</sup> Advocates of assimilation, seeking to find the broadest possible basis of support for their views, sought at times to claim the legacy of the Old Regime as well as that of revolutionary France. Thus, Alexandre Isaac recalled that "the edicts of Louis XIII and Louis XIV declared that all Frenchmen who had left the home country to settle in a colony continued to be considered . . . as if they were 'residing in this kingdom';—and that even the 'savages converted to the Christian faith on making profession would be supposed and deemed to be *naturels français*, eligible to all offices, honors, inheritances and donations' ". *CCI 1889*, p. 139. Less graciously, another supporter of assimilation noted that under the Old Regime the colonies shared with the mother country "the privileges of the nobility and the clergy, feudal rights, the communal oven and mill, *lettres de cachet*, and that whole body of iniquitous and superannuated institutions which had become so odious to 18th century Frenchmen". Girault, *op. cit.*, 1st ed. (1895), p. 67.

<sup>11</sup> Bernard Lavergne, *Une Révolution dans la Politique Coloniale de la France* (Paris, 1948), p. 53.

<sup>12</sup> Girault, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

<sup>13</sup> Jeremy Bentham, *Works* (Edinburgh, 1843), IV, 407.

all men, just as a sound logical proposition is sound everywhere”. Whatever their philosophical background, however, assimilationist practices were discarded with the rise of Bonaparte’s star, and there began a process that would continue throughout the 19th century—assimilative measures became associated with republican governments, their abolition with the overthrow of these governments. Under Napoleon the freedmen were reenslaved. The representation of the colonies in the metropolitan legislature was suppressed. A regime of special colonial laws replaced the universal application of the French code at home and overseas, and these laws took the form of executive decrees.<sup>14</sup> The Restoration brought no change, and while certain steps were taken under the July Monarchy to “assimilate” freed Negroes in the Caribbean islands to a status of legal equality with the white population,<sup>15</sup> half a century passed before assimilation again came into its own, temporarily, at least, with the Revolution of 1848.

The Second Republic again freed the slaves in the French West Indies, reestablished universal suffrage in the colonies as well as at home, and reinstated colonial representation in the metropolitan parliament. From Guadeloupe a Negro, Mathieu, was elected deputy, while Martinique chose as its representative Victor Schoelcher, the abolitionist whose long efforts had at least been rewarded with success.<sup>16</sup> Representation was granted as well to the French foothold in West Africa, where the native residents of the four Senegalese communes of Dakar, Gorée, Rufisque and St. Louis were granted full citizenship and electoral rights. Algeria, still not completely conquered, was divided into *départements* and given a civil regime with parliamentary representation at Paris, though there the suffrage was limited to the French settlers. It was not long, however, before the *coup d'état* of Louis Napoleon brought an end to assimilation in the colonies as it did to democracy in France itself. Only the abolition of slavery and the creation of the Algerian *départements* were not reversed.<sup>17</sup>

The Second Empire saw the steady expansion of French power in Algeria and the beginnings of French empire in the Far East, but its colonial policy followed no consistent pattern. In a report of 1858, Napoleon III spoke of the presence in Algeria “of an armed and mettlesome nationality which we must extinguish by assimilation”, but five years later he declared that “Algeria is not a colony, but an Arab kingdom . . . I am as much Emperor of the Arabs as of the French”.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Girault, *op. cit.*, pp. 186-191.

<sup>15</sup> Lavergne, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

<sup>16</sup> Hubert Deschamps, *Les Méthodes et les Doctrines Coloniales de la France* (Paris, 1953), p. 107.

<sup>17</sup> Émile Tersen, *Histoire de la Colonisation Française* (Paris, 1950), p. 49.

<sup>18</sup> Priestley, *op. cit.*, pp. 82, 85.

On Napoleon's downfall in 1870, the Government of National Defense, acting almost by republican reflex, restored colonial representation. It was some years, however, before the Third Republic was sufficiently stabilized to permit much attention to colonial problems. The Republic itself had not been born in revolutionary enthusiasm, as had that of 1848, but rather in the gloom of defeat and the bitterness of class war, and there was little of the ideological fervor that had marked the brief period at the beginning of the Second Republic. Though a few reforms were instituted, including the grant to Cochinchina of a deputy (to be elected by the European residents), in most respects colonial administration continued to operate under the system of rule by executive decree established by the *sénatus-consultes* of 1854 and 1866 during the Second Empire. Before a new republican theory on the colonial question could be fully worked out, men of action had transformed the very nature of the question by the rapid extension of the empire in the 1880s.

The forward push in Algeria and the new acquisitions in Indo-China, Madagascar, West Africa, and Tunisia provoked controversy. Twice, in 1881 and 1885, Jules Ferry was forced from office by storms of public and parliamentary protest. But alongside those who thought imperialist ventures ill became a republican government were others who saw in the new territories a field for spreading the glories of the French tradition (as well, of course, as those who sought more mundane advantages for French capitalism).

The publication in 1874 by Paul Leroy-Beaulieu of his volume, *De la Colonisation chez les Peuples Modernes*, had attracted little attention, but by the time of its reissue in 1882, colonial policy had become a burning question. While his book was primarily historical, in dealing with Algeria he ventured to discuss the merits of current policy:

The indigenous population is at least 2,500,000. What should be done with these 2,500,000 individuals? Three possibilities exist: to push the natives back beyond the Atlas Mountains, even into the Sahara; to fuse them with the European population by imposing on them, forcibly or by propaganda, our customs, our laws, and perhaps even our religion; or to respect all their customs, make their property inviolable, and remove the Europeans from frequent contact with them. These three systems may be defined in three words: *refoulement*, fusion, abstention.

He found elements of each approach in past policy, but complained that after fifty years of French power no clear choice had yet been made. Such a decision, he felt, was urgently required, but what should it be? The first path he considered "unjust" and therefore unthinkable. The third, "complete respect for the customs, traditions, and manners" of the Arab population, "would, if it were applied with logic, require that our army and our colonists should quit Algeria". Obviously, this too was not to be considered. "Thus, there remains only the second path, the fusion of the indigenous element with the European element." Such fusion need not mean a complete absorption of the natives,

to the point that there would remain no difference in manners or customs. All that would be needed would be to create

a state of affairs in which the two populations of different origin would be placed under the same economic and social regime, obeying the same general laws, and following the same impulse in the productive order. For a long time, perhaps forever, there would of course remain distinctions of habits and beliefs; but there would be an identity of interests from the economic, political, and social point of view; and properly considered, that is the only harmony that is indispensable from the viewpoint of peace, prosperity, and civilization.<sup>19</sup>

#### IV

The debate on assimilation that developed in the late 1880's found its focus in the sessions of the *Congrès Colonial Internationale de Paris* of July and August, 1889, and the *Congrès Colonial National* which met in December, 1889, and again in February and March, 1890.<sup>20</sup> Both meetings were attended by many high officials from various branches of the French government at home and abroad, as well as by scholars, explorers, and other private individuals interested in colonial questions. The first of the sessions, the international congress of 1889, was attended also by delegates from Spain, Portugal, Belgium and the Netherlands. Its most prominent feature was the clash of opinions which took place between Gustave Le Bon, the explorer, and Alexandre Isaac, senator from the Caribbean island *département* of Guadeloupe and one of the two vice-presidents of the Congress.<sup>21</sup>

At the opening general session, Le Bon presented a report "On the Influence of Education and European Institutions on the Indigenous Populations of the Colonies." It was a slashing attack on "the fatal results of the system known as assimilation".

<sup>19</sup> Paul Leroy-Beaulieu, *De la Colonisation chez les Peuples Modernes*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1882), pp. 352-353. He also thought it would be "a farsighted policy" to extend suffrage to the natives in some form. *Ibid.*, p. 378. It is interesting to note Leroy-Beaulieu's use of the word "fusion" for what might otherwise be called "native assimilation". When elsewhere (p. 380) he did use the term "assimilation", what he had in mind was making Algeria an integral part of France from a political and administrative standpoint.

<sup>20</sup> See footnote 5, *supra*.

<sup>21</sup> Isaac's background is interesting in view of his prominence as an advocate of assimilation. He was born in Guadeloupe in 1845, but was educated in France and then entered the educational administration. In 1879 he was named Director of the Interior at Guadeloupe, where he introduced numerous reforms in the system of public instruction in the colony. On his election in 1885 as Guadeloupe's senator, he returned to France, where he played an active role in the discussion of colonial issues. After reelection to the senate in 1894, he was one of the founders of the Democratic Left group in that body. He was vice-president both of the Society for Colonial and Maritime Studies and of the Committee for the Protection of Natives at Paris. C.-E. Curinier (ed.), *Dictionnaire National des Contemporains* (Paris, n.d.), I, 329-330.

Daily, people speak of "Frenchifying" the Arabs of Algeria, the yellow peoples of Indo-China, the Negroes of Martinique, of giving to all these colonies the institutions, the laws, and an organization identical to that of our French *départements*.<sup>22</sup>

For such ideas he had nothing but scorn. His discourse was studded with such phrases as "inferior races", "savages", "half-civilized peoples", "barbarians". He satirized the French "taste for uniformity": "Our institutions of the moment seem to us always as the best, and our temperament, which tomorrow will lead us to overturn them entirely, today impels us to impose them on everybody."

These theoretical views have led us and are leading us more and more to organize our colonies as French *départements*. It matters little what their population may be: Negroes, savages, Arabs, yellow peoples, should benefit from the Declaration of the Rights of Man and that which we are pleased to call our great principles. All have universal suffrage, municipal councils, *arrondissement* councils, general councils, tribunals of all degrees, deputies and senators to represent them in our assemblies. Negroes, scarcely emancipated, whose cerebral development corresponds hardly to that of our Stone Age ancestors, have jumped into all the complexities of our formidable modern administrative machines.

In passing, we should note that this was a considerable exaggeration with respect to the existing state of affairs on universal suffrage and parliamentary representation; yet undeniably it was true for parts of the empire. He was particularly exercised by attempts to extend French education to the colonial territories. He denied any enmity for education as such, but argued that "the kind of instruction applicable to civilized men is not at all applicable to half-civilized man". For the latter,

very simple ideas, including the elements of arithmetic and some applications of science to agriculture, industry, or manual trades, will be much more useful than the study of the genealogy of the kings of France or the causes of the Hundred Years' War.<sup>23</sup>

The British experience with European-style education in India provided him with a dramatic example of the pitfalls awaiting France. It had done no more, he claimed, "than unbalance the Hindus and take away from them their aptitude for reasoning, not to speak of a frightful lowering of morality".

There is hardly an English administrator in India who is not firmly convinced that, out of a hundred Hindus educated in English schools, there are a hundred who are irreconcilable enemies of British power, while among a hundred natives educated in Hindu schools, there are very few hostile to that power. . . . The war-cry of the educated Hindus instructed by the English is "India for the Hindus!" . . . What prevents this new class of literates from being dangerous is its small size; but it grows every day, and it is the most serious danger menacing the future of British power in India.

<sup>22</sup> *CCI 1889*, pp. 50-51.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.

The same danger lay ahead of France:

All the educated Arabs whom I have been able to consult have affirmed that the sole result of our education has been to deprave their compatriots, to give them factitious needs without giving them the means to satisfy them, and finally, to render them miserable. Our education shows them the distance which we put between them and ourselves. Every page of our histories shows them that nothing is more humiliating for a people than to tolerate without revolt a foreign domination. If European instruction becomes general in our Mediterranean colony, the unanimous cry of the natives will be *Algeria for the Arabs!*, just as *India for the Hindus!* is the password of all the natives of India who have received an English education.<sup>24</sup>

The discussion of the report was heated. As a native of the Antilles, Senator Isaac expressed his embarrassment at attempting a reply: "Perhaps I myself am included among those natives who should not be given a European education."

I cannot understand how, a hundred years after the Revolution, when if I am not mistaken it is a question of restoring to light the truths affirmed in that great epoch, it can be held that education is a bad thing; that between a colonizing people and the inhabitants of the colonial country there should be only a relationship of domination; that the customs, the language, the knowledge of the European nations are a reserved patrimony which the natives should not be permitted to touch; that, finally, in the external territories of which these nations have taken possession, there should be only subjects, never citizens.

It reminded him, he said, of the days of the monarchy when the kings instructed colonial governors not to develop the spirit of the colonists too much, "because in giving the colonists a certain degree of culture they would be diverted from labors profitable to the metropolis". At that time, he continued, "there were also men in Europe who were crushed under the weight of a society based on restrictions of precisely the same nature. Were the Rights of Man proclaimed for them alone?"<sup>25</sup>

How better could one make friends of a colonial people "than by establishing between them and the colonizers a community of language and interests"? Otherwise, if the native population "possesses a civilization to which you wish to confine them, that civilization will become more and more hostile to your own". And if, on the contrary, they have no civilization, "you may be blamed for having wanted to perpetuate their inferiority".

To say that it is necessary to keep people ignorant in countries under European domination, because instruction brought by the dominant people will make the natives wicked, or enemies, is to make that charge against European civilization itself.

If that doctrine should prevail, it would be necessary to suppress all that has been done up to the present, and to turn boldly toward the past. It would be

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 53-54, 58.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 84-85.

necessary to declare that slavery was a beneficial institution, and that there is but one means of maintaining the metropolitan authority . . . force.<sup>26</sup>

Frank Puaux, a member of the Superior Colonial Council, found himself “overcome by a profound melancholy” while listening to Le Bon.

Suppose that if on the conquest of Gaul, some savant of that time had maintained that the Gauls should be left in barbarism; that singular philanthropist might have been heeded. Would we be here today, if the Romans had followed his counsel?

Do not forget, Messieurs, that we have become what we are because a people of superior civilization communicated their light, their arts, and their laws to our ancestors. Have we the right to keep this rich heritage for ourselves? Can we refuse to do today for others what the Romans did for us nearly two thousand years ago?<sup>27</sup>

Others conceded some points to Le Bon’s argument, but the general tenor of the discussion was critical of his viewpoint. Dr. Poitou-Duplessy, retired chief physician of the navy, recognized that “just as the stomach requires food appropriate to its age and kind, so the brain requires nourishment suitable to the degree of development which it has attained”. The brain of orientals, he agreed, was not yet capable “of partaking of our intellectual nourishment without cerebral indigestion”. Nevertheless, he would not accept the view that assimilation was impossible, if approached slowly and carefully, as a parent teaches a child. Furthermore, even in an inferior race, “some men’s brains are equal to the average among ourselves”, and are thus capable of European education. “To refuse it to them would seem to me difficult and unjust.”<sup>28</sup>

When Le Bon cited a recent anthropological study as proof that the impossibility of civilizing Negroes was “well settled”, that to attempt it was “pure aberration”, Admiral Vallon, former governor of Sénégal, replied that “the blacks lacked neither intelligence nor natural gifts, and in that respect they sometimes put us in the shade”. He considered that educating the natives was not only France’s moral obligation but was in the interest of France as well. “We are in the same situation with respect to these colored peoples as we are with respect to our peasants. We owe education to the former as to the latter.” “It is true”, he added sarcastically, “that some persons think that in sending our peasants to school, we are making them enemies of society.”<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81-83.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91. Not all French officials in Africa agreed with Admiral Vallon, as was apparent from the remarks of M. Ballay, lieutenant governor of Gabon, during the discussion of a report on education in Indo-China. After recounting the efforts in his African colony “to spread education in and the use of the national language”, Ballay expressed his belief that while these efforts should be encouraged, “it would be dangerous to give the natives anything more than an elementary culture. Experience demonstrates

Several speakers criticized Le Bon's assumption that assimilation meant an attempt to transform natives into Frenchmen overnight. The remarks of Senator Barbey, former Minister of Marine and Colonies and the president of the congress, seemed to sum up the predominant view:

I believe I am able to say that no one here is the enemy of the natives, or the adversary of those who wish to civilize them. The whole problem is to find the best methods for doing that . . . From this point of view, there remains much to be done: we have to free ourselves of a great number of prejudices, to better recognize the proper aptitudes of the various races, to determine the degree of development to which each of them is susceptible. . . . It is necessary above all to recognize that such a work will require much time. We will achieve nothing without patience, and, I may add, without generosity. Only by treating the natives benevolently and by giving them a good example can we win them to our ideas.<sup>30</sup>

Senator Isaac's own role in the congress was the presentation of a report "On Methods of Government in the Colonies". His main theme was the necessity of bringing the colonial regime "into harmony with the present institutions of the metropolis". He was sharply critical of the continued existence of rule by decree as established under the Second Empire, and asked that the colonies already represented in Parliament be brought more completely under the rule of laws. Where colonial representation had not yet been established, and where that fact justified a maintenance of decree rule, he felt "it would nevertheless be bad and sometimes dangerous if the exercise of that regime were not tempered by the organization of some mode of consultation with the interested populations".<sup>31</sup>

He based his argument on an extensive examination of the history of French colonial administration, designed to show that assimilation was the policy truly characteristic of republican France, and even, to some degree, of France before the Revolution. Referring to assimilative practices of Spain and Portugal, he found it "interesting to note that the nations of the Latin race all have this tendency to bring their colonies into the national unity, as if they had inherited the assimilative genius of Rome". He found the "essential condition and characteristic sign" of assimilation "in the existence of colonial representation in the legislative assemblies of the metropolis".<sup>32</sup>

"What is a colony?", he asked. "Is it a simple field of exploitation? an instrument of work composed of the territory and of those who inhabit it? Is it an establishment which has completely answered the purpose of its

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that the black who has received too developed an education acquires a distaste for labor. Those who simply know how to read already disdain manual occupations and refuse to cultivate the land. To multiply the number of so-called educated subjects would be to create in Gabon a hotbed of idlers and *déclassés*." *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 137-139.

creation when it brings to the metropolis a benefit, when there has been procured the means of draining off its products?"

Should a colony not be considered, even after a conquest, once the traces of violence have been effaced, as a fraction of the national individuality, which is linked to the original country by bonds of affection as well as by a community of interests?

He insisted that "we do not intend to formulate an absolute rule equally applicable to all the colonies". "Common sense" would indicate that that was impossible. "Their institutions will be more or less similar or different according to their age, their geographical situation, the composition of their population." It was, he implied, only the tendency and direction of development that was essential.<sup>33</sup>

In the discussion which followed his report, Paul Dislère, councillor of state and another vice-president of the congress, sought to pin down his meaning. Total assimilation, it seemed to Dislère, could be achieved only "at the cost of veritable political or economic revolutions". In the "old colonies", those revolutions had taken place; "the evil is past; now there is only good to be drawn from it". He saw no impediment to their complete assimilation, giving them "all our rights", and also the same burden of taxes as in the metropolis. But he boggled at the implication that "assimilation" implied the right of all colonies, everywhere, to be represented in the national parliament, and asked what this would mean in those colonies "where a very small number of French citizens found themselves in the midst of a considerable native population". Senator Isaac hastened to reply that he had never asked that all colonies should be assimilated:

I have, on the contrary, constantly made a distinction between assimilable colonies and those which are not suited to assimilation. . . . By assimilation I mean a situation in which the French citizens of a colony enjoy all the legal guarantees accorded to the French of the metropolis, on condition that they bear equivalent charges proportionately to their ability.

An unidentified delegate found this a bit evasive. M. Isaac, he said, "seemed to preoccupy himself a little too exclusively with *French citizens*". Side by side with those who enjoyed that character, there were in most of the colonies "numerous natives to whom we accord neither the same rights nor the same guarantees". But his point was hastily passed over.<sup>34</sup>

Isaac had sought the approval of the congress for a series of resolutions calling for the revision of the *sénatus-consultes* of 1854 and 1866 and other colonial reforms. The general feeling, however, was that it would be inappropriate for this body, with its international representation, to take such a step. Doubtless this was in part the motivation for his involvement in plans

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 134-135.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 149-151.

for a purely national congress, devoted solely to problems of the French Empire. Isaac himself became chairman of the organization committee, and was the keynote speaker at the second congress when it met in December, 1889.<sup>35</sup>

The *Congrès Colonial National* was organized in seven sections, the first to consider general questions of colonial organization, the others to discuss problems of specific areas: Algeria and Tunis, the American colonies, the colonies on the west coast of Africa, in the Indian Ocean, in Oceania, and finally of Indo-China. Each section was opened with a report, accompanied by draft resolutions; after discussion, modification, and rejection or approval, the work of each section was submitted in the form of proposed resolutions to a series of general sessions, which again proceeded from general questions to those of specific areas. After discussion, and sometimes further modification, the resolutions from the sections were adopted by the congress as a whole as its recommendations on colonial policy.

The national congress was notable for the absence of critics of assimilation among its leadership, although participants in discussion frequently challenged the proposals made and forced modifications. Senator Isaac, in charge of the discussion on general organization, sought the commitment of the congress to the general principle of assimilation, which he defended (as in the earlier congress) by an appeal to history and the French tradition.<sup>36</sup> When a critic objected that discussion of "pure theory" would lead the congress into sterile debates and obscure the real task of finding "practical means" to improve colonial organization, he insisted that nothing worthwhile could be accomplished without an adequate theory. "Unless we are to abandon everything in the colonial domain to chance and empiricism, it is indispensable to declare ourselves for a system and to set forth its principles." To do so, he reiterated, would not mean either attempting an overnight transformation of the colonies or the imposition of a uniform approach everywhere. "One does not transform a society with the wave of a wand." One must find "a general formula which can be given diverse applications".<sup>37</sup> The resolution which finally emerged with the approval of the congress declared that "in all the overseas lands under French authority, the efforts of colonization should propagate among the natives the language, the methods of work, and, progressively, the spirit and the civilization of France".<sup>38</sup>

There was no dissent on the question of language, but before the provision on "methods of work" was accepted it was necessary to quiet the fears of some delegates. Commander Périssé pointed out that there was "no intention

<sup>35</sup> *CCI 1889*, pp. 147-148; *CCN 1889-90*, I, 1-4.

<sup>36</sup> His report is given in *CCN 1889-90*, II, 3-59.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 15, 18-19, 25; II, 13.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 329.

of introducing into our colonies the complicated industries which can only exist in the home country.”

The only goal that it is possible to attain is to lead the natives progressively to cultivate certain useful trades, or to make use of more perfected implements than the rudimentary tools which they now employ.

Senator Isaac agreed: “No one would think, for example, of transporting to the Sudan this or that one of our metropolitan industries which would not find nourishment in that country. Manifestly, everywhere one should be inspired by the resources, the possibilities, the local needs.” Even greater concern was expressed at the provision for spreading “the spirit and the civilization of France.” In Isaac’s original draft resolution he had used the word “customs” (*mœurs*), and many delegates voiced their doubt that this could ever be achieved. After the substitution of phrasing, however, and Isaac’s assurances that “assimilation does not consist of substituting from one day to the next the customs and institutions of a European people for the customs and institutions of a native people”, the clause was adopted.<sup>39</sup>

The second general resolution adopted by the congress advocated a special regime for each colony, taking account of “different geographical, political, and economic conditions”. This regime, however, should be defined by an organic law. “French laws should as much as possible be applied to Frenchmen residing in the colony”, while “the native laws and customs should be respected insofar as they are compatible with the *mission civilisatrice* of France”. This last provision, though modified somewhat in language from the original proposal to “guarantee in principle” the respect of native laws and customs, of course still glossed over the key dilemma in the idea of assimilation as a benevolent colonial policy.<sup>40</sup>

The third general resolution called for parliamentary representation of all colonies “where the French establishment is sufficiently developed, both in the number of nationals [i.e., Frenchmen from France] . . . and the importance of their interests”, and declared that voting for such representatives should be by “all French citizens” of the colony. “The native populations should be led gradually to the exercise of political rights, taking account of their state of civilization.” The fourth resolution attacked the *sénatus-consultes* of 1854 and 1866 as “not in accord with the principles of the present Constitution” and declared that “rule by decree is not reconcilable with parliamentary representation of the colonies”. The fifth called for the establishment, for the benefit of those colonies as yet unrepresented in parliament, of “a special system of consultation” in the form of a reorganized Superior Colonial Council.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 18-21; III, 5.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 307, 329.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 329-331.

The assimilationists have been misrepresented by their critics, both political and scholarly, as insisting "on a rigid universality" of their theory, making no allowances for variations between one colony and another.<sup>42</sup> The inaccuracy of this is shown by the general resolutions, but it is even more clear from the special resolutions dealing with specific areas. Only with regard to the Caribbean islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe was complete and immediate assimilation "to the status of metropolitan *départements*" demanded. The maintenance of protectorate status was asked for Tunisia and also for Indo-China (except for Cochin-China, which was already under direct French rule). In the West African territories as yet unannexed, the congress felt a protectorate regime would be "more favorable than annexation to the development of our influence and more appropriate to the customs and interests of the natives".<sup>43</sup>

Algeria was recognized as a special case. The congress declared that it was *une terre française*, not a colony, and that France should "strive to inspire French sentiments among the natives, to favor French colonization by all possible means, to assimilate the European foreigners". It opposed naturalization of the natives *en bloc* but felt "it would be useful" to offer "a special naturalization compatible with the maintenance of their personal status" (under Moslem law) "to those who fulfill certain conditions and offer certain guarantees". If this were done, these newly-created Moslem citizens of France should be allowed to vote in the elections for Algerian senators and deputies, and "to become entitled after a delay of ten years to occupy a place in the metropolitan chambers".<sup>44</sup>

In the light of the general program of the assimilationists, what seems significant is not the sweeping character of the measures, but their timidity. In no instance was a further extension of parliamentary representation called for, although the maintenance of existing colonial representation was defended even where the native population was excluded from the franchise. For Algeria the congress recommended that "sufficient financial resources should be created" to make French education "accessible to the entire school-age population", but for Indo-China the congress suggested only that the government "should study ways of encouraging the learning of French and making them accessible at small cost to the native population". During the congress there had been much criticism of official support for the teaching of *quoc ngu* (the romanized version of the native Indo-chinese language which French Catholic missionaries had developed), but a resolution was defeated which

<sup>42</sup> The quoted phrase is from the discussion of the 1889-90 congress in Roberts, *op. cit.*, I, 103, a discussion which is almost a parody, bearing no recognizable relationship to the assimilationists' views as revealed in the proceedings of the congress. Roberts drew heavily on anti-assimilationist French writers who made the same misrepresentation for their own purposes.

<sup>43</sup> *CCN 1889-90*, III, 350, 352-353, 362.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 338-340.

asked that government assistance be given only to teaching in French. The final resolution did, however, urge the government to favor the recruitment of missionaries who would teach the French tongue.

The resolution on the West African establishments also favored the encouragement of missionaries to teach French, and urged "that the sons of influential native chiefs should be brought to France, where they could be familiarized with our civilization and prepared to become valuable auxiliaries for French policy in Africa". Finally, with regard to Madagascar, where French control was not yet complete, the congress seemed most concerned that the government "should maintain energetically the political supremacy of France . . . *vis-à-vis* foreign powers". Assimilation came into the picture only in the request that France should "give as much support as possible to the French missionaries and their *mission civilisatrice*" in the island.<sup>45</sup>

## V

The resolutions of the 1889-90 congress appear to have had little practical effect on the actual conduct of colonial affairs. Specifically, despite Senator Isaac's concern with ending decree rule, the *sénatus-consultes* of 1854 and 1866 continued in force without change.<sup>46</sup> The importance of the congress lay rather in providing a generally-accepted definition of goals for colonial policy, a definition which stood unchallenged for some time. Around the turn of the century, however, a concerted attack on the ideas of assimilation began to develop.

In 1899, Léopold de Saussure attempted, in his *Psychologie de la Colonisation Française, dans ses Rapports avec les Sociétés Indigènes*, to demonstrate that assimilation was an impossibility. The core of his argument was a pseudo-scientific theory of "the heredity of mental characteristics". (He was, of course, far from alone at the time in considering this to be profound scientific truth.)

The Frenchman [complained Saussure] is persuaded that the several human species differ only as a result of education. The profound mental differences which separate the races seem superficial to him; . . . he persists in a futile struggle against the laws of heredity.

Approvingly, he quoted Gustave Le Bon's statement that "a Negro or a Japanese can accumulate all the diplomas possible without ever arriving at the level of an ordinary European". He reviewed the experience of the freed Negro in the West Indies and the United States to demonstrate the "organic incapacity" of that race. Successful examples of assimilation never involved

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 286, 346, 353, 359, 364.

<sup>46</sup> Louis Rolland and Pierre Lampué, *Précis de Législation Coloniale*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1936), pp. 146, 160.

whole races but were limited to individuals, usually of mixed ancestry. The fact that the 1889-90 congress was moderate in its demands for assimilation made it "all the more dangerous", as it would "create illusions and reassure some minds".<sup>47</sup>

Saussure's negative attack on assimilation was matched a few years later by a more positive statement of what colonial policy should be. Joseph Chailley-Bert, in *Dix Années de Politique Coloniale* (1902), argued that the real need of the day was a "native policy" adapted to the existing situation in the newly-acquired territories which, properly speaking, were not colonies but possessions. Such a policy should recognize "the differences of race, of genius, of aspirations and of needs between the native inhabitants of a possession and their European masters" and should see in these differences the need for different institutions. The European could not work in the tropics; he could "accomplish nothing without a cheap and abundant labor supply" provided by the native population. What was needed was a policy which would "limit the introduction of European ideas to those which can serve the progress of commerce and civilization". The proper role for the European colonist was to supply capital, "not to work with his hands . . . but to direct the labor of the natives".<sup>48</sup>

The new ideas were most fully elaborated by Jules Harmand in his *Domination et Colonisation* (1910). Harmand, a man of much colonial experience, had been developing his views over a quarter of a century before their final publication in book form. In 1887 he had first put forward the notion of "association" between conqueror and conquered as the proper basis for colonial policy, and by the first decade of the 20th century this new term had virtually replaced "assimilation" as the catchword to describe French policy.<sup>49</sup> In Harmand's view, "association" meant "scrupulous respect for the manners, customs, and religion of the natives", replacing simple exploitation and expropriation of the native by a policy of "mutual assistance". The purpose of the policy would be to make European domination work more smoothly and productively, reducing the need for force to a minimum. It would seek to ameliorate the condition of the native "by allowing him to evolve along his own lines", leaving his habits and traditions untouched as much as possible, and employing his own forms of social organization.<sup>50</sup>

Such a policy Harmand considered to be a "systematic repudiation of assimilation", substituting "indirect administration" which would conserve

<sup>47</sup> Léopold de Saussure, *Psychologie de la Colonisation Française, dans ses Rapports avec les Sociétés Indigènes* (Paris, 1899), pp. 10, 12, 51, 187, 261, 294.

<sup>48</sup> Joseph Chailley-Bert, *Dix Années de Politique Coloniale* (Paris, 1902), pp. 45, 56-57, 117.

<sup>49</sup> Paul Masson, "La Colonisation Française au Début du XX<sup>e</sup> Siècle", *Exposition Coloniale de Marseille 1906*, II (Marseille, 1906), 15.

<sup>50</sup> Jules Harmand, *Domination et Colonisation* (Paris, 1910), pp. 160, 163.

native institutions for the “necessarily rigid and oppressive regime of direct administration”. At the same time, he was careful to note, it would “preserve with unshakeable firmness all the rights of domination. . . . It does not aim to prepare for the realization of an equality which cannot be possible, but to establish a certain equivalence or compensation of reciprocal services.” The key to Harmand’s thinking lay in his stark realism:

It is necessary to see things as they are. . . . To praise ceaselessly our generosity, to put forward always our democratic liberalism, is not bad among ourselves, and can be useful. But it would be better to try to make our actions conform to the actual conditions of domination by conquest, which is not democratic, and, without employing either miserable hypocrisy or those “civilized lies” which deceive no one, to seek to justify it by the utility common to the conquerors and to their subjects.

That the colonies should be made for the metropolis, for the many and diverse advantages which it can derive from them, is evident; if the colonies . . . were not made for the purpose of being useful, they would have no other reason for being, and no one could understand by what aberration civilized states should argue over them with such jealousy.<sup>51</sup>

He admitted that it was “bad” to deprive a people of their independence, but he considered it “one of the manifestations of that universal law of the struggle for life”. Civilized nations could not permit “vast and fertile regions of the globe” to remain undeveloped by virtue of “the incapacity of those who hold them”. He recognized that “expansion by conquest . . . seems particularly unjust and disquieting to the conscience of democracies” because it leads to “a regime *ipso facto* aristocratic”.

France has tried to resolve this paradox by assimilation, which is based on a preconceived faith in the equality of all men and their rapid perfectability. . . . The time has come to substitute for this utopian idea conceptions which may be less generous but which are surely more useful and more productive of results, since they will be in conformity with the nature of things.

The first duty of the conqueror “is to maintain his domination and to assure that it will last; everything is good which has the effect of consolidating and guaranteeing it, everything is bad that may weaken or compromise it”.<sup>52</sup>

It was time, he said, to put aside illusions about the “natural rights of man”. He mocked what he called “the revolutionary syllogism”: “All Frenchmen are equal. The inhabitants of the colonies are all Frenchmen. All Frenchmen have the right to send deputies to the Assembly. Therefore the colonies cannot be deprived of this right”. The colonial representation which resulted from this reasoning “has caused the greatest evils”.

The conqueror, by nature and by function, and whether he wishes it or not, is an aristocrat. His government, by duty and by necessity, is a despotic government

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 152-153, 155-156, 170.

... and cannot be otherwise. Democratic institutions, founded on equality and liberty, cannot be transported to the *dominations* [the word he preferred in place of "colonies"—M.D.L.], and universal suffrage, in truth, is there a monster.<sup>53</sup>

Limiting voting rights to the small group of white settlers only aids "the spoliation of the native majority by the European minority" and fosters dissension and hatred. But in the old plantation colonies of the Caribbean, where suffrage had been extended to the liberated slaves, "the inferior majority oppresses the superior minority". "An Annamite, a Negro, an Arab" could not become a Frenchman by "the adoption of certain European habits, the knowledge of the language and literature of the conqueror". This culture would only make him "an enemy better armed against us". "Wisdom tells us not to forget the lessons of Santo Domingo."<sup>54</sup>

In the light of what would follow, it is interesting to note Harmand's warning that his policy of "association" should not be construed with "excessive liberalism" so as to put the native "on the same footing as ourselves" and lead him to believe that he had "the same rights in the association" as the French. Some, he feared, had already tried to use the new term "association" to give "a new virginity" to "that old passion" of assimilation.<sup>55</sup>

## VI

Discussions of colonial policy written prior to World War II, and a surprising number of those written since, have generally accepted (implicitly or explicitly) the view that the expansion of European control over non-European peoples was in the best interests of all concerned.<sup>56</sup> Once this notion is accepted, it becomes easy to judge any given policy by its utility for maintaining that control. In these terms, assimilation proved wanting. It disrupted native society unduly. It taught Asians and Africans the revolutionary heresy of "the Rights of Man". As Gustave Le Bon said in 1889, European-style education only showed the natives "the distance which we put between them and ourselves". Assimilation, wrote Roberts in 1929 in his *History of French Colonial Policy*, was "fundamentally illogical". It was discarded, "association" enthroned.<sup>57</sup>

Yet the distinction between "assimilation" and "association" soon became blurred. By confusing the two doctrines, it was possible to combine those

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 339, 342-343, 350.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 345, 351.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 159, 170.

<sup>56</sup> There is a stimulating discussion of the influence of this assumption in Lowell Ragatz, "Must We Rewrite the History of Imperialism?", a paper read at the American Historical Association meeting in 1950, and published in *Historical Studies: Australia and New Zealand*, VI (November 1953), 90-98.

<sup>57</sup> Roberts, *op. cit.*, I, 103.

features of each which contributed to the perpetuation of French rule. Assimilation was preserved as a constitutional fiction, but no serious attempt was ever made to undertake the massive work of social transformation which could alone make it a reality. The new synthesis was expressed in a resolution of the Chamber of Deputies in 1917, by which France pledged

its determination to pursue ever more effectively towards the colonial peoples the generous policy of association [*sic*] which will continue to assure their progressive incorporation in the national unity and will strengthen the ever closer union of all the territories over which flies the flag of France.<sup>58</sup>

Galicization was permitted to stand as the ultimate goal, but in practice it was not to be pressed too hastily, nor too many natives permitted to attain it.

This interpretation offered the advantage that a gallicized native élite could be separated from the native mass, and used as instruments of French policy.<sup>59</sup> Girault in 1903 had suggested that assimilation was a "safety-valve" by which "the man whom we keep from being first in his own country, because it is a colony", could be offered in exchange "the possibility of being the first among ourselves".<sup>60</sup> The same lure was offered under "association". A select group of natives could still vote for members of the French parliament, and even aspire to sit in that body themselves.<sup>61</sup>

It is true, of course, that the new theory of "association", frankly put forward by Harmand as a device to insure French domination, was in later years dressed in more benevolent guise by men who did not share Harmand's scruples against "civilized lies". It was presented as a kind of partnership of the colonial peoples with the metropolitan power, for mutual benefit.<sup>62</sup> The most appropriate comment would seem to be that of President Sékou Touré of the Republic of Guinea who observed recently that Africans had no objections to partnership as such, but that they did not care for the partnership of the rider and the horse.

There is a good deal of truth to Doucet's observation (in 1926) that "this 'policy of association' was new only in the writings and speeches of

<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Louis Vignon, *Un Programme de Politique Coloniale—Les Questions Indigènes* (Paris, 1919), p. 202.

<sup>59</sup> Some perceptive comments on this tactic appear in R. L. Buell, *The Native Problem in Africa* (New York, 1928), II, 77-85.

<sup>60</sup> Girault, *op. cit.*, footnote to discussion of assimilation from 2nd ed., 1903, quoted in 3rd ed., 1907, p. 91.

<sup>61</sup> The degree to which natives could participate in elections varied considerably from colony to colony. Only in the "old colonies" and the "four communes" of Sénégal was there a blanket naturalization of non-Europeans, but varying provisions existed elsewhere by which a limited number of natives could attain French citizenship through special procedures. The prevailing situation in the mid-1920s was summed up—and sharply criticized as dangerously liberal—in Jean Runner, *Les Droits Politiques des Indigènes des Colonies* (Paris, 1927). Runner considered "association" to be "only a disguised policy of assimilation", and he had no use for either. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>62</sup> Serious scholars have accepted such statements at their face value. It would be unkind to cite specific instances, but they are easily found.

theorists”.<sup>63</sup> Assimilation in practice was never as extreme as the critics of the theory suggested. As we have seen, even the *assimilateurs* of 1889 were quite cautious when it came to proposing specific measures to accomplish their aim. One may wonder if the true spirit of assimilation was not perhaps as well expressed by General Gallieni’s address to the Betsileo people of Madagascar:

You will always be Betsileos, but you will at the same time be Frenchmen. You should learn the French language; you should dress yourselves in French fabrics, renowned the whole world over for their good quality; you should above all become the devoted helpers of our French colonists, who have come among you to bring you wealth and civilization.

On another occasion he commented again on the adoption of European clothing and added that at Tananarive “the sale of bicycles has, in a very short time, taken on great importance among the Malagasy population”. “These facts”, he concluded, “demonstrate once again the spirit of assimilation of the race.”<sup>64</sup>

After the switch to “association” had served to reassure Frenchmen that they were not about to be inundated by the votes of millions of natives in the French colonies, the distinction between it and “assimilation” began to seem less necessary. By the 1930s, “assimilation” had again become a respectable term in the lexicon of French imperialism.<sup>65</sup> Its motivation, however, now seemed to be less a generous urge to extend to benighted peoples the blessings of (French) civilization, than the need to provide doctrinal justification for the maintenance of French rule in the face of developing demands for colonial self-determination.

Still, this is not the entire story. Assimilationists like Alexandre Isaac have been unjustly attacked for the absurdity of their idea that “the Rights of Man” should apply to all men. There is an undeniable moral grandeur in the ideal of assimilation as it was linked by them to the democratic traditions of republican France. The critics of assimilation, on the other hand, can derive little credit from their obsession with notions of “superior” and “inferior” races. A more justifiable charge against the assimilationists might be that they failed to realize the inherent contradiction between the assimilation they favored and the kind of imperial expansion to which they freely lent their support. Democrats at home, they were unable to see (as did Harmand, for example) that in the nature of things imperialism could not be democratic.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Robert Doucet, *Commentaires sur la Colonisation* (Paris, 1926), p. 48.

<sup>64</sup> Hubert Deschamps and Paul Chauvet (eds.), *Gallieni Pacificateur: Écrits Coloniaux de Gallieni* (Paris, 1949), pp. 218, 314.

<sup>65</sup> M. M. Knight, “French Colonial Policy: The Decline of ‘Association’”, *The Journal of Modern History*, V (1933), 209.

<sup>66</sup> It is interesting to compare the French debate over assimilation to the turn-of-the-century controversy in the United States as to whether “the Constitution followed the flag” in Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. As in the French case, the problem

One source of their difficulty lay in the fact that in the sugar islands of the West Indies, assimilation had been intimately linked with the abolition of slavery. So long as colonial policy was conceived primarily in terms of these remnants of the first French empire, there was no need to distinguish between "native assimilation" and "legal and political assimilation". There, the non-white population was made up of former slaves who long since had been torn from their original roots, who spoke French, who had in fact no other cultural tradition available to them. Thus, when Isaac thought of his own land, he asked only for the complete fulfillment of assimilation in constitutional terms.

But when he and his supporters came to the problem of *new* conquests in lands with far larger populations, and with their own established civilizations, they failed to recognize the basic difference in the situation. They might call for harmonizing the French colonial system with the democratic principles of the French constitution, but they had no answer when a critic demanded—as one did at the 1889-90 congress—"What would become of France if the majority of voters were of a race different from that of the French nation proper?"

The representatives of the colonies would one day form the majority in our assemblies. Arabs, Annamites, the tribes of the African coast would dictate to us our laws; our colonial enterprises would only lead to our voluntary servitude.<sup>67</sup>

They could only say that assimilation should proceed cautiously, gradually.

The new nations emerging from colonial status in the middle of the 20th century have not been motivated by a desire to return to "the good old days" before their conquest by an imperial power. They are not striving today to root out "Western" technology, but complaining instead that under colonial rule they were prevented from developing their fair share of the techniques of modern industrial society. They do not complain that "Western" education has been forced on them, but that they have not had enough of it.<sup>68</sup> They do not complain that French rule was too democratic, but that it never was

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arose from the apparent contradiction of a democratic republic becoming an imperial power. As in the French case, too, the opposition was based in large part on the belief that the principles of Western democratic government were not suitable for "backward" non-white peoples.

<sup>67</sup> *CCN 1889-90*, I, 50; III, 16.

<sup>68</sup> In the African territories of "overseas France" prior to World War II, "only a few schools on the French model were provided in some of the colonial cities for the children of French expatriates and officials or for the few indigenous peoples who were able to pass entrance exams. The French never excluded colonials, for racial reasons, from French culture and education, but they made little effort to make it available until about a decade ago. . . . By 1950 when the problem of colonial education had become acute, French colonial areas had illiteracy rates ranging from 95 to 99 per cent." Carroll Quigley, "Education in Overseas France", *Current History*, XXXV (1958), 102.

democratic at all. While the colonies which were represented in the metropolitan parliament at the outset of the Third Republic continued to enjoy that distinction, no further extension of colonial representation took place despite the steady development of the non-represented colonies. The result in the 20th century was a “completely incoherent” mixed system whereby one part of the empire had electoral rights (with no rhyme or reason in the apportionment) while the remainder, in the aggregate no less qualified, had none.<sup>69</sup> In 1936, there were only 432,122 qualified voters in all the overseas territories, and a large part of these were Europeans.<sup>70</sup>

As independent states, the former colonies are all seeking more effective ways to achieve, on their own, the benefits of civilization which their colonial masters talked about but did little to provide.

What was wrong with “assimilation” was not that it was illogical, unrealistic, or impossible, but rather that no serious effort was ever made to carry it out.

MARTIN DEMING LEWIS  
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<sup>69</sup> Doucet, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

<sup>70</sup> Ellen Hammer, “The French Empire Today”, ed. E. M. Earle, *Modern France: Problems of the Third and Fourth Republics* (Princeton, 1951), p. 453n.