

12-1-2010

Review: Biribi: Les bagnes coloniaux de l'armee francaise

Leonard V. Smith

Oberlin College, lvsmith@oberlin.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.oberlin.edu/faculty_schol

Repository Citation

Smith, Leonard V. 2010. Review of Biribi: Biribi: Les bagnes coloniaux de l'armee francaise, by Dominique Kalifa. *Journal Of Modern History* 82(4): 954-956.

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons at Oberlin. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty & Staff Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons at Oberlin. For more information, please contact megan.mitchell@oberlin.edu.

between the monsters and the devils”) but then it moves on more troublingly to pages on Witkowski’s obsessive descriptions of obscene images in ecclesiastical art and graphic images of female genitalia, and after that to pages and pages on Félicien Champsaur’s novel *Lulu* and his view of gargoyles as “phallic” with Champsaur’s take on the “Gothic arch” as a key to the “dark secret of the uncanny female sex.” Hmmm. . . . And all of this to conclude with “Paris (as) the capital of inversion”? Well, that may well have been, in fact, with inter alia, Gide, Jean Lorrain, and Proust. Still, Camille’s text as literary criticism is in these pages deft and daring, but as social and cultural history it does leave me somewhat puzzled.

Much of the problem here relates to a second issue, namely, that literary ways of seeing that seem convincing when we deal with Paris in 1840 aren’t that convincing when we come to the 2000s and 2010s. “What these stone fantasies suggest more than anything,” writes Camille, “is that although we like to imagine ourselves obsolete, we also like to dream that our subjectivity exists in the light of something eternal, something that was before and will exist beyond us, in the gaze of the gargoyle” (364). Well maybe and maybe not: that was surely true when the issue that faced Viollet-le-Duc was about democracy versus authority or the medieval, artisanal past versus industrial, dehumanizing modernity. But somehow, for the later period, namely, the one we live in, isolated as we are “in our fearsome individuality,” Camille’s oracular tone seems misapplied when characterizing our current condition, a misfit that is symbolized perhaps by an advertisement for a plastified Dedo, “the friendly French gargoyle (who) according to folklore caught the imagination of Parisians when he caught a small boy who was falling off the roof of the Notre Dame Cathedral.” Contemporary gargoyle-edom, writes Camille, “certainly has its serious pleasures.” But, alas, I rather doubt it. That may well be why I found the later chapters of this book often strained and less convincing. But it’s important to remember that the problem of these last pages has a lot to do with the nature of our age and much less to do with Camille’s quite wonderful thought and style, which works so well for the 1840s, 1850s, and 1860s.

Again, then, as regards Paris as the capital of the nineteenth century, this is an amazing book written by a brilliant and promising scholar who died of a brain tumor in 2002 at the age of forty-four. Horrible.

PATRICE HIGONNET

Harvard University

Biribi: Les bagnes coloniaux de l’armée française. By *Dominique Kalifa*.

Pour l’Histoire.

Paris: Éditions Perrin, 2009. Pp. 348. €21.00.

The term *Biribi*, all but forgotten in France today, refers neither to a specific institution nor to a specific geographic space. Rather, it refers to an entire disciplinary subculture, a Foucauldian “carceral archipelago.” *Biribi* had a variety of institutional manifestations, from the euphemistically named *corps spéciaux* (special corps, or disciplinary units), to the notorious *ateliers de travaux publics* (literally, “studios of public works,” in fact, brutal labor camps), to the *bataillons d’infanterie légère d’Afrique* (better known as the *Bat d’Af* or ironically as *les joyeux*, or the “joyous ones”). The *Bat d’Af* are particularly interesting because they were, strictly speaking, part of the regular French colonial army and took part in the campaigns of conquest in North Africa.

Conscripts could be sent to the Bat d'Af after the expiration of their sentences, for further largely unregulated correction.

Biribi first emerged during the Restoration, with a concept of absolute power inherited from the ancien régime. This power alone could isolate and contain a population deemed to merit such complete exclusion from the national community. Yet Biribi persisted regime in and regime out, with the last disciplinary units dissolved only in the 1970s. No regime relied on Biribi more than the Third Republic in the 1880s and 1890s, as it turned to republicanizing France from within and to renewed imperialism abroad. Biribi existed in various locations, from New Caledonia to Senegal to metropolitan France. But it always had a particular association with North Africa and the demarcation of French power there, over territory and over persons.

Dominique Kalifa of the Sorbonne, a distinguished historian of crime and punishment in France, has written a highly informative and engaging overview with a sophisticated but unobtrusive theoretical foundation. The book has a conceptual rather than a chronological organization, which emphasizes the continuities of Biribi across time. As I suggested, his conceptual framework relies particularly on Michel Foucault, notably *Discipline and Punish* (first published in French in 1975). Biribi served as a kind of laboratory of surveillance, remarkably resistant to investigative journalism and various movements of reform. Entry and exit remained a bit mysterious, not unintentionally. The authorities could encourage any young man of dubious behavior to believe he might end up there. On the other hand, the most hardened criminals knew that their every deed, not to say most every thought, did not go unobserved by the power that ruled over them. Even periodic scandals served to advertise the power of Biribi—for example the Aernoult-Rousset affair of 1904–7, a sordid story of a young worker who died while serving with the Bat d'Af.

Tone is everything in a book on such a topic, and here Kalifa has struck an excellent balance. He assuredly does not sanitize the particulars of the subject matter—the intrinsic punishment of blazing sun by day and desert cold by night, the day to day violence, the beatings from guards and fellow inmates, the wretched sanitary and living conditions, the systematic sexual violence. Kalifa also reminds us of humiliations that were much greater at the time than they might seem today—such as the use of North Africans or black African troops to guard white prisoners and the ban on mustaches. But Kalifa's rhetorical restraint is such that no one should read this book out of a prurient interest in the subject matter. Likewise, he does not romanticize the men who inhabited Biribi. To be sure, some callow victims found their way there through clear miscarriages of justice. But more commonly the population of Biribi comprised men in their thirties with a clear pattern of violating social and legal norms of all sorts. Simply put, many were hardened and violent criminals, seemingly born to the dystopia of their surroundings. There was good reason to isolate them from the rest of society. But their character is to some extent distinct from Kalifa's subject, the analysis of Biribi as a cultural system that made its population and was in part made by it.

Here Kalifa shows the influence of Foucault's later work, particularly Foucault's interest in resistance to power and resistance as an ambivalent phenomenon. Full-scale mutinies were in fact rare, even more so than in the regular army. This testified both to the success of the authorities in isolating and controlling the population of Biribi and to the ways in which the carceral subculture diffused resistance into manageable behaviors. Living as a free man, writer Pierre Mac Orlan observed, could consist of choosing one's prison and one's servitude. Tattoos were as important in Biribi as in American prisons today and reflected both a will toward creative independence and the ways in which violence infused daily life. The act of tattooing was difficult and

dangerous, given the risk of infection. The men of Biribi used splinters, stray metal shards, or cactus needles to apply pigments drawn from soot (black), roof tile (red), or slate (blue). Images often reflected sexual conquest, heterosexual or homosexual, or spoke in words of the pain the tattoo both inflicted and represented.

Kalifa makes a particularly strong argument about the gendered society of Biribi. So great was the general cultural need to dominate women that an all-male subculture created gender difference where it did not biologically exist. Sex, notably anal intercourse, was as much about performing dominance as satisfying desire. Biribi drew severe distinctions between the “active” and “passive” parties in anal intercourse, which distinguished “male” from “female.” Ritualized gang rape served as one means of brutally determining who was who. Biribi reproduced “normal” gender hierarchies in the most abnormal conditions.

No one generally aware of the photos of Abu Ghraib, not to speak of conditions in some of the more ghastly American prisons, is going to be surprised that a liberal democracy can permit the development of a carceral archipelago that the general public prefers to leave out of sight and out of mind. But this perhaps is Kalifa’s most salient point. It is tempting to think of Biribi as something safely confined to the past. Kalifa wants us to know better and, in the Foucauldian tradition, in this sense has written a history of the present.

LEONARD V. SMITH

Oberlin College

The Moroccan Soul: French Education, Colonial Ethnology, and Muslim

Resistance, 1912–1956. By *Spencer D. Segalla*. France Overseas: Studies in Empire and Decolonization. Edited by *Philip Boucher, A. J. B. Johnston, James D. Le Sueur, and Tyler Stovall*.

Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009. Pp. xx+318. \$55.00.

The Protectorate imposed in Morocco with the 1912 Treaty of Fes inserted the final piece completing a French imperial arc in Africa stretching west from Tunisia down to Senegal. Intentionally eschewing assimilationist “mistakes” made in older neighboring colonies, the first Resident General, Hubert Lyautey, and his cadre of administrative and military lieutenants, sought to implement a more efficient associationist form of indirect imperial rule that pursued economic modernization while preserving “authentic” Moroccan culture and a class of Moroccan elites with whom to collaborate. For “traditionalists and Catholics alienated by the ascendancy of republicans and Dreyfusards,” Morocco presented an opportunity for redemption as a “model for a modern society rooted in a conservative respect for authoritarian hierarchies and traditional institutions” (11) that might ultimately prove the “birthplace of a new France” (13). By harnessing ethnological research to inform a policy aimed at preserving traditional institutions and culture, the Residency sought to control a gradual evolution of the Moroccan society that did not threaten French authority. Rather than making anyone into Frenchmen, the colonial educational system was to keep Moroccans “Moroccan,” preventing “cultural, social, and psychological miscenogation” (15) that might lead to political or social unrest.

Segalla’s engagingly written and thoroughly researched first book examines French attempts to implement an educational policy based on this colonial vision of an