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- 1 *Le livre noir du colonialisme* joins a now significant body of literature in addressing Europe's reluctance to come to grips with the importance of colonization to its past. The question concerning this book is not the significance of its subject, but the implications of its approach. Since the 1970s or 1980s in the United States, more recently in France, "colonial studies" has become a field of academic inquiry, crossing disciplinary lines. There are now several alternative conceptions to bring to the study of colonialism, and the *livre noir* needs to be seen as one among them.
- 2 The self-defined context of *Le livre noir du colonialisme* is not colonial studies, or academic history, but rather the terrain of public and political opinion. What intellectuals think and how they define problems and responsibilities is assumed to be of importance to policies—of states, parties, and other groups. This focus on informing the opinions of a public willing to read 800 pages of synthetic scholarship has both admirable and exasperating consequences.
- 3 The immediate predecessor and inspiration of *Le livre noir du colonialisme* was another "black book", *Le livre noir du communisme*, also published by Robert Lafont five years

earlier¹. In a move that displays fundamental reconfigurations of intellectual thought in the 1990s, the second black book was not a polemical response to the first. Marc Ferro's introduction describes the two books as a "couple", and the study of colonialism's evils as a necessary addition to two recognized European "totalitarianisms"—communism and nazism (p. 9). There is no comparison of evils, no setting of colonialism and communism against each other, no ritual of choice between two systems, no way out toward a different future. Instead the focus is relentlessly on the murderous violence of the past.

- 4 Recounting a history of violence is one of the similarities between the two black books. Both are written as indictments, aimed at revealing the criminal nature of the respective systems; both are written for political purpose and directed at Western, European, and particularly French audiences. Both tomes—and they deserve this heavy word—are in large part compilations of synthetic rather than original research. Both target a huge "ism"—communism and colonialism. Here direct comparison of the two black books breaks down, for the "isms" in question are quite different. Putting these books side by side reveals both problematic results of their shared approach—a mix of history and adversarial justice—and strengths and flaws particular to each book.
- 5 Let's begin with the first "ism". The 1997/1998 black book had a well-defined target, communism, for the most part a name worn proudly by its practitioners, if wielded much too widely by its opponents. The book's goal was to force a confrontation with the crimes perpetrated by communist regimes. Thus, the principal actors in this history were clearly identifiable and called by name. The leaders of self-declared communist states, from Lenin to Castro, and the members of communist parties that came to power (whether or not they survived internecine party purges), and elites that supported communist parties in power—these are, literally, the "agents" of this history of state-based crime.
- 6 The writers of the first black book were clear about other fundamentals of their project. They chose to tell the story of communism in the 20th century as a precisely identified normative project. The crimes recounted in this book are those against "the natural rights of humanity" (p. 7). The natural right in question is the right to life, and communist regimes are held accountable for the numbers of deaths attributable to state policies—executions, deportations, provoked or unrelieved famine, forced labor, and torture. Communism is held to account for three kinds of crimes for which state leaders were judged responsible at Nuremberg—crimes against peace (the preparation of war in violation of treaties), crimes of war (violations of international law on war), and crimes against humanity.
- 7 Thus, the goal was not an overall evaluation of communist regimes' successes or failures in any social project, nor a comparison of communism's victims with those of other systems. The main point of the book is that violence and terror were deliberately used by communist regimes to murderous effect in the 20th century. Following the path blazed by Francois Furet's thoroughgoing assault on the hagiography of the French revolution, the authors of the *livre noir* insist that crimes against natural rights and humanity were not contingent aspects of communist governance, but part and parcel of the communist project from its first days. An essential point in this indictment is that communist leaders explicitly called for terror, repression, and killing of whole groups of people—identified by class, ethnicity, function, residence, etc.—and refused to recognize the rights of individuals.

- 8 Although the *livre noir* is essentially about cataloging evil, rather than comparing evil systems, the rhetoric and categories used in the book evoke similarities between communist policies that expressly target groups for deportation, elimination, re-education, or starvation, and other 20th century projects of collective repression and murder. For example, the essay on Cambodia considers whether terms such as genocide can be applied to Pol Pot's communism. Jean-Louis Margolin suggests that social categories were "racialized" by communist regimes, in that class and other social qualities were treated as innate characteristics of individuals, whether inherited or as acquired (p. 749). Words like "cleansing" and "dirty war" are used in the book's essays, without emphasis on the fact that "purge" was indeed a native category for Russian communists, but with an unmistakable resonance for our times.
- 9 This address to present day sensibilities is consistent with the underlying purpose of the *livre noir*. The book's indictment of communist criminality as well as the horrifying "bilan" of numbers of victim of communism is directed at a particular audience—those who might be inclined to justify communist state practice. If the authors' empathy is with the millions of victims of communism, their sad anger is directed not so much at the villains who led state campaigns of terror as at the Western intellectuals who condoned and even glorified the principle of violence exercised in the cause of revolution. *Le livre noir*'s "Never again" is less about communist systems—which they see as having almost everywhere collapsed—than about intellectuals' willingness to promote a politics of terror, exclusion and death for the sake of a "higher" goal. The desired effect of the book's relentless narrative of communist crimes, from Lenin to Castro by way of Mao and Pol Pot and others, is to overcome the "exceptional blindness" of the West and "western communists" (p. 26) and to make sure that violence, death and murder can never again be left out of any account of communism in the 20th century.
- 10 The authors of the volume try to achieve this goal in two ways—by cataloging as extensively as possible the list of communist crimes and by identifying a set of behaviors shared by all communist systems. By tracking communism crime from its beginnings in revolutionary Russia, into the Comintern, Eastern Europe, China, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and North Korea, Latin America (Cuba, Nicaragua, Peru), Africa (Ethiopia, Angola, and Mozambique), and Afghanistan, the *livre noir* compiles a long list of victims and, at the same time, produces a classificatory scheme—a family tree of communist practices whose resemblances are not accidental.
- 11 The catalog, even to readers familiar with its contents, is tragic and horrifying, and, in my view, incapable of being dismissed or mocked. The catalog is an act of respect for the dead; its numbers were people; anyone who takes individual rights seriously must consider its meaning. And the evidence for the catalog, although of necessity based on a variety of sources—official, unofficial, archival, demographic calculations, etc.—is clear enough in most cases. In contrast to the amorphous villains of colonialism, the perpetrators of communist violence provide plenty of direct testimony to their crimes, with their instructions to liquidate, deport, expel, shoot, requisition all stocks, etc. Nicholas Werth's careful study of Soviet practices incorporates a more than sufficient number of direct citations from Lenin's and Stalin's directives to lift the blindfolds of anyone able and willing to read these bone-chilling statements. Even essays based primarily on memoirs, such as those on China and Cambodia, still include convincing

and indisputable evidence of leaders' intent to persecute or eradicate whole categories of people.

- 12 If the catalog itself must be attended to and engaged in any analysis of communist—or other—regimes, the assertion of communist genealogy is less well established. This weak point—a critical one—derives in part from a fundamental disparity between ambition of the book and its accomplishments. In order to make their case for a “genetic code” of communism, the book's editors tried to include a worldwide array of 20th-century communist regimes. The quality of the essays that comprise the volume is very uneven and the intensity of coverage is highly unequal. In part this unevenness is related to inequivalencies of sources. Werth's 265-page section on Russia is based in large part on ongoing archival investigations by both Russian and foreign scholars; this account also incorporates a mass of earlier publications and considers, briefly, new layers of revisionist scholarship on Stalinism. The authors of the essays on China (107 pages), North Korea (21 pages), Cambodia (68 pages) and Cuba (20 pages) clearly were compelled to work with different kinds of materials.
- 13 But the investigations themselves are thin in important respects, even in this thick book. Because the goal is an indictment, we are concerned with perpetrators and victims, and not much in between except for ex-communists who are sometimes both. Another failing is related to the theme of communist genealogy. The essays emphasize both common practices—summary execution, repression, deportation, forced labor camps, collectivization and other violence against peasants—and common rhetorics of revolutionary bloodshed and collective enemies. A lineage of borrowing, imitation, and imposition (in the case of Eastern Europe) is suggested rather than established, with all the particularity it would entail. By not stepping outside the frame of criminal actions, the authors of the collective volume cannot firmly establish what makes communist regimes act in similar ways. A typology of actions suffices to define the Shining Path and Pol Pot under the rubric of this black book's “ism”.
- 14 The loss of coherence—and some power to convince—is most apparent in sections where the authors stray from catalog to trajectory, and into areas that they know little about. Stéphane Courtois' conclusion attempts to spell out a specific historical causality for the birth of communism—as if the authors needed a mutation to produce a new species of government. It is shocking to a Russian historian to see the most generic kind of Eurocentric Russophobia emerge as part of the “why” of communism. “Traditional Russian violence”, Ivan the Terrible, centuries of “slavery” (pp. 857-859) are held to give birth to Leninism. Never mind that Dostoevsky produced a devastating critique of terrorism; that Russian serfs were freed before American slaves; that European courts condemned far more “criminals” to death in the 19th century than did Russian ones. These are truly old chestnuts, and ones that should be thrown into the dust bin of history. Glib conventions, often connected to the awkward task of describing a lineage that has obvious and multiple variations, make their appearance in other essays. China specialists will cringe at Confucianism's role in the “super-ideologization” of “Asian communisms” (p. 756). Africanists will be appalled at the notion that the Leninist structure of post-colonial states produces mass bloodshed on the continent (p. 823).
- 15 These crude explanations for communism's birth and family resemblances might suggest that this *livre noir* would be a stronger book if it had not taken the path of political history and stayed closer to its original goal—demonstrating that communist leaders committed crimes against humanity, that they justified collective

exterminations and exclusions from their polities, that they deprived peasants of the means to feed themselves through collectivization. The much more complex task of describing the particular histories of communist movements, with all their many internal and external participants, would demand a less programmatic approach and a shift in explanatory strategy—from “isms” to persons.

- 16 The more reflective essays of this black book acknowledge the ambiguities of the genre. Karol Bartolek, the author of a thoughtful essay on central and southeast Europe, notes that the project of “managing the past” is “complex” (p. 528). Bartolek concludes his article with a consideration of one of the major issues raised but not highlighted by the *livre noir*. What are we to do with the knowledge of communist crimes? Bartolek’s preference would have been for trials immediately after the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, for a public confrontation with the past. But, failing this, he notes the importance of the opening secret police archives for all to confront. The invitation to individuals to “conduct one’s own trial” (p. 529), to interrogate one’s own complicity and past—this call to accountability reminds us that the “managing the past” is necessarily normative, plural, and personal.
- 17 The “ism” of the *Livre noir du colonialisme* is not nearly so well defined as that of its predecessor. The book on communism, however much it falls short of historical analysis, at least had the virtue of a brief for the prosecution: it had someone to indict. *Colonialism* is incoherent. Its span covers the empires growing out of western Europe from the 16th to the 20th century, with a few tidbits outside: Arabs in Zanzibar, Russians in the Caucasus, Japan in East Asia. There is no particular reason why the list stops here: why not the Romans? The Mongols? There is no argument that anything like the project which communism represented unites the cases in question. Marc Ferro’s introduction does little to overcome the underlying diffuseness of the project: he wants to insure that colonialism takes its place alongside Nazism and Communism in the dock of historical criminality (p. 11), but he can’t make clear what the criteria are for being on or off the list of the indicted. He writes of “*les crimes commis par l’Occident*” (p. 36). The indictment includes “*colonialisme sans colons*” and “*pratiques dites colonialistes*” but not in colonies, and it slides further to include globalization and multinational corporations (pp. 10, 35, 37). If the individual chapters produce numerous crimes—from the massacres of conquest in the Americas to the brutality of collective punishment in response to anticolonial movements in Africa—it is not clear who the successors to the criminals are who are being asked to acknowledge the crimes and perhaps to pay reparations. The ethical and political implications of invoking descent rules for the inheritance of blame are far from clear. Reading *colonialisme* against *communisme*, the central flaw of the former’s prosecutorial strategy is all the clearer: it is a book that seems to be about historical accountability, but it keeps diffusing the responsibility to a vaguely defined “West” located somewhere between 1492 and 1962, or 1492 and 2004.
- 18 But if the book falls short of a serious discussion of accountability for acts of colonization, it is still an intervention in discussions of historical memory. It has the value of insisting that we should not forget the importance of colonialism in history and that the historical record is filled with numerous examples of inhumanity. The additive effect of the numerous instances brought out in its chapters—inadequate as it is to any analytic purpose—does serve such a goal. But as a contribution to acts of remembrance, it has important shortcomings, undercutting its own claims to be addressing Europe’s unwillingness to see its past with open eyes.

- 19 Most important, the *livre noir* tends toward becoming “une conversation franco-française”, or at best euro-européenne. Africans, Asians, and Native Americans appear in most of its pages as victims². If an older generation of imperial historian treated Europeans in the colonies as the only people with history-bringing progress to the tradition-bound—the *livre noir* still places most agency in European hands, a force for evil instead of good but still the determining force. The alternative is not to whitewash colonialism or deny its important place in history, but to take the care to examine it historically. This implies a view of power sensitive to the limits of domination as well as its extent, to the ways colonial regimes co-opted to their own account economic networks that they did not create, to ways colonized populations not only resisted external onslaught but found niches in colonial economic and social structures, pushed them in unintended directions and turned colonizing ideologies into claims and assertions. We need to ask how the act of ruling actual people often made colonial regimes reconfigure the principles and strategies by which they claimed to rule³.
- 20 In addition, in Ferro’s introduction and some of the chapters, the act of colonization is not only an important one with long-term effects, but a determinant intervention: it is on the ledger of colonialism that all economic and social processes that take place in a colony and ex-colony can be added up. Economic expansion and contradiction, population loss and growth are treated as if solely determined by colonization itself. There are complex issues about how one writes history where the actors involved had vastly unequal power and where the law of unintended consequences was in operation. The farmer in the late Gold Coast who, from the late 19th century and in the absence of any colonial directive, took cocoa shoots from missionaries and shaped an export economy which operated under social processes distinct from the models of the colonizer and which brought a degree of social mobility for a time to a significant population is reduced to the a stick figure whose wealth was being drained by Europe (p. 27), and the explanation for the hardships which such people suffered in other times receives no explanation other than the naming of colonialism. But in *Colonialisme*, any such reflection is subordinated here to creating a colonial edifice that is timeless and all-powerful.
- 21 The genre of the *livre noir* implicitly defines another genre, a *livre rose*, as Ferro sometimes calls it. There are enough publications being marketed that reflect a colonial nostalgia or constitute a colonial apologia so that some sort of refutation is appropriate⁴. But is a debate in which one side provides lists of schools and hospitals and the other lists massacres and acts of racial denigration going to be very edifying? (This kind of divide prevented productive discussion of communism for most of a century.) Will either of these selective briefs tell us much about the kinds of societies which colonization produced, as people in colonies tested the coercive, economic, and imaginative limitations of colonizing forces as they actually existed, as they resisted, deflected, appropriated, and reconfigured the physical and cultural armory of colonialism?
- 22 The *livre noir* reminds us that violence was as much part of late colonialism as early, that projects of assimilating colonized populations could be as devastating to people’s collective well-being as exterminationist policies were to their individual existence. There is much less reflection on the extent to which in certain situations colonial brutality reflected the weakness of colonial regimes in establishing routine administration—the need for exemplary, collective brutality to make up for the

difficulty it faced in turning colonized people into docile subjects. There is still less on the trajectories of authority as the needs and resources of colonizers shifted or on the ways in which struggles with and against colonial authority both changed and affected the course of colonial power. From the opening passages of his introduction, Marc Ferro presumes the “totalitarian” nature of colonial rule. But if the concept of totalitarianism is to be taken seriously, more than an evocation of Hannah Arendt (p. 9) is required; neither Ferro nor his authors bother to make an explicit case for its relevance. They do not ask about the limits of power as actually exercised, about the constraints on colonial regimes’ ability to transform or to exploit, about their frequent dependence on indigenous economic and political actors whom they could not fully control. African historians, among others, have made considerable contributions along these lines, but despite useful chapters on conquest, demography, and racial ideologies, such work has little place in this book.

- 23 Of course, the *livre noir* is hardly a homogeneous book. Some of its chapters are rather like encyclopedia entries summarizing a complex history for a non-expert audience; a few—notably Carmen Bernand’s chapter on Iberian colonialism—pull themselves out of the prosecutorial genre to give a sense of the ways in which a colonial society evolved, in an unequal but interactive process. Some (Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch’s chapters for instance) are rich in references, others are limited, some others (Yves Benot on decolonization) give little indication of being up to date or well thought out. Short extracts from published articles on specific topics are included, mostly so truncated that they add little. Many excerpts from primary sources appear, some vivid and compelling, few long enough or contextualized enough to contribute to analysis. Readers will find this book most valuable for the places and times about which they know the least, and the chapters on India, Indonesia, and Australia may well be informative to francophone readers. But the whole is less than the sum of its parts.
- 24 What is missing—for all its claims to opening eyes—is interest in what we actually know about colonialism and about different ways of approaching the topic. There are mentions made of some recent scholarship: Edward Said is evoked; Subaltern Studies gets a sentence and a footnote⁵; some of the chapters provide references to recent works by scholars of Latin America, Asia, Australia, and Africa. But there is no sustained discussion of what is now a substantial body of scholarship and a significant variety of approaches: imperial history, colonial studies, analysis of postcolonial texts, the anthropology of colonialism, the work of African or Asian historians on the colonial period or the more recent efforts of historians to rethink what “France”, “Britain”, “Spain”, or “Europe” might mean in the context of colonization⁶. The editor and the authors prefer the stance of lonely combat.
- 25 Here we come back to the central misconception of the enterprise: the prosecutorial stance, diffused broadly over time and space, is a step away from a consideration of responsibility and accountability rather than a contribution to it. As the book goes from one instance of colonial brutality and misrule to another, responsibility becomes more and more abstract; the “ism” starts to carry the burden of guilt; the idea that—in any historical context—some people might criticize what others would defend is lost in a repetitive narrative that keeps placing causation and accountability at a level beyond any historical actors. The concluding chapter of the book links its prosecutorial case to the issue of reparations, but Nadja Vuckovic does more to describe recent initiatives than to provide an analysis—which can be found elsewhere in this issue—of how the

information advanced in the previous pages can be translated into an argument. The approach of the editor is left dangling—the vast list of atrocities has been left on the account of a vaguely defined “west”, over 500 years, without linkage to a specific list of perpetrators, as has been the case with the Nuremberg Trials or the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, or for that matter the *Livre noir du communisme*. The net effect of this collection is to let slavers and abolitionists stand alongside each other, the perpetrators of massacres and those who exposed them, the most extreme racists and those who sought a non-racial order. Activists among colonized populations get few mentions in this book, and no consideration at all of whether they might have actually had an effect—except in the unexplained moment of heroic liberation. Anticolonialists are allotted one chapter by Marcel Merle, which cites no reference less than 20 years old, and prefers retrospective moral judgement to historical analysis of how anticolonial movements in colonies, metropolises, and international fora affected the course of history over many years. We are left with an overall view of a “west” whose uniting sin, over time and space, has been the inscription of racial distinction and the turning of such distinction into a license to murder and to exploit. The *Livre noir du colonialisme* insures that no reader can plead ignorance to the extent and longevity of the exploitation and the murder, but its lack of systematic argumentation leaves the reader with little except a presumption that the basic criteria of accountability assume a generically defined West—transmissible across generations—which has sinned against an equally generic South, also transmissible across generations. Might not such a way of framing issues contribute to sustaining an essentialist view of race which is one of the worst consequences of the history of racializing ideologies?

- 26 If one black book has given us a set of perpetrators isolated from the historical currents in which they swam, the other one errs—more seriously—in the opposite direction, to attach responsibility to everyone and to no one. Nuremberg and the trc were both clear on one point: that accountability for the past was an attempt to change the future—to create a public discourse that would hopefully mark and constrain the evil actions of people in power. The *Livre noir du communisme*, for all its flaws, reflects and encourages an openness in regard to a particular historical record: the possibility that people might look to the archives and other records of former communist regimes and pursue a reckoning with specific individuals, specific groups and movements, specific intellectual traditions, with themselves. Some of the better chapters in the *Livre noir du colonialisme* might have a similar effect. The book as a whole does not. Seeking to condemn colonialism and its part in European history, the *Livre noir* lets the colonialists off the hook.
- 27 Both books leave in place a question of what scholars—and especially historians—can contribute to a discourse about responsibility and accountability. Will a case for prosecution—whether its object is specific or vague—contribute to the understanding that people who have experienced colonial or communist rule, or their long-lasting effects, have of what it was they experienced, and of what lessons they can draw from it? Or would we do better to engage more thorough-going histories that listen to multiple voices, scrutinize the exercise of both power and political imagination with sensitivity to their limits as well as their extent, and attend to how people—survivors, of course, but including the nominally powerful as well as the presumed victims and all

those in between—deflected and reinterpreted as well as resisted the structures imposed on them?

NOTES

1. English translation: *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*, Cambridge, Mass.-London, Harvard University Press, 1999.
2. On the dangers of victimology, see Achille Mbembe, “African Modes of Self Writing”, *Public Culture* 14 (2002): 241-243.
3. Questions such as these are emphasized in Frederick Cooper & Ann Laura Stoler (eds.), *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), and a large and growing literature which barely finds its way into the *livre noir*.
4. For example, see Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power*, London, Allan Lane, 2002.
5. One might note the absence from the references of the important effort of an historian of Africa, Mamadou Diouf, to bring before a francophone audience a valuable sample of the writings of the Subaltern Studies collective, a group of historians of India that has done much to shake up the field of colonial studies. See his edited collection *L'historiographie indienne en débat: Colonialisme, nationalisme et sociétés postcoloniales*, Paris, Karthala, 1999.
6. A useful summary of a considerable range of scholarship going under the name of postcolonial studies is Robert J. C. Young, in *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2001. A recent collection of conference paper both supportive and critical of this field is Suvir Kaul & Ania Loomba (eds.), *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, Durham NC, Duke University Press, forthcoming. My own view is consistent with the goals of the endeavor and critical of several of the most influential approaches. See *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History*, Berkeley, University of California Press, forthcoming.