

Sex in Colonial Empires and Its Legacy in Europe Today

An interview with Christelle Taraud

July 9, 2019

Published at the end of 2018 and weighing over four kilos, the hefty tome *Sexe, race et colonies* tackles the question of sexual relations in the colonial era. The importance of colonial empires and the way that, during this period, gender representations were constructed through the prism of “race” have had a considerable impact on the legacy of European cultures. The book’s release sparked major controversy in France due to the numerous images it contained: amongst other things, it was accused of aestheticising the indefensible, of violating the rights of those depicted, of voyeuristic sensationalism, and of being pornographic. The work of historian Christelle Taraud, co-editor of the book, shows the centrality of sex in complex colonial and racial relations. In today’s context of third-wave feminism, it clashes with the thinking on minorities of militant groups in the women’s liberation movements at the time of #MeToo.

Green European Journal: You have for a long time studied women in a colonial context, mainly in North Africa, and have published several books on the subject. How did you start working on this?

Christelle Taraud: For both militant feminist and family history reasons, I really wanted to work on North Africa and women. While looking for a way into this subject, I came across reports by colonial doctors from the interwar years that seemed to indicate that the phenomenon of prostitution had been absolutely massive in French-ruled North Africa. So, my initial PhD research focused on the colonial system for regulating prostitution, but then I realised that prostituted women were for the most part indigenous, and that something was playing out that went beyond just the control and management of poor women’s sexuality.

Furthermore, what was said about these women was very condescending, masculine and white. This system – the colonial regulation of prostitution – had been put in place by men for men: it talked endlessly about women, without women themselves ever being heard. That’s what Michelle Perrot says in her book *Les femmes et les silences de l’Histoire*:^[1] because these women were, as well as being prostitutes in a very whorephobic world, not just women, but also poor and colonised individuals; the silence surrounding them is deafening. So, I then tried to do biographical work on the paths taken by these women, in their uniqueness and in their complexity, trying to have as little prejudice as possible: in other words, taking the minutest traces of their words seriously and starting from the principle that they weren’t complete victims with no possibility of defending themselves or resisting.

This system – the colonial regulation of prostitution – had been put in place by men for men: it talked endlessly about women, without women themselves ever being heard.

These are acts of micro-resistance, but, multiplied over and over again, they can undermine a system and bring it

down from within. That's what these women did: they destroyed the system through their many acts of micro-resistance.

The book *Sexe, race et colonies* includes a very rich iconography, with over 1200 images selected from a corpus of 70 000 documents: private photos, postcards, advertisements and so on. How do images play a major role in constructing representations of gender in the context of colonisation?

I studied the image, the perception, the imaginary, the fantasy associated with these women. The pioneering works by Edward Saïd and Michel Foucault had blind spots: Michel Foucault on the question of colonialism and "race", and Edward Saïd on the question of feminism and women, as many feminist scholars have since demonstrated. I said to myself – we're now in the mid-1990s – that there should be a feminist critique of Orientalism. I think that I was one of the first female historians to say that the orientalist paintings from the first half of the 20th century weren't about the Orient. There's a major misunderstanding: the women in them are presented as Orientals because, for example, it allows them to be undressed by giving them an exoticised femininity. However, they are white Parisian models, "painted as Algerian women", at least in the first phase of Orientalist painting. In the same way, black women in Orientalist paintings were systematically side-lined: there are very few paintings that place them in an erotic position; they are often the servants of others, of those whom we really desire.

In short, you could say that from the outset I've presented a political vision of history while staying true to the ethics of my field. Like every profession, to be a historian follows ethical rules that require taking a step back from a number of things. That's why I totally identify with the term used by Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch to define herself as a "politically engaged historian". But that doesn't mean that I don't do scientific work: rather, it means that there is neither absolute truth nor objective knowledge. All knowledge is situated and subjective because it is carried by situated and subjective individuals. My job is to produce critical subjectivity.

Why was the regulatory system for prostitution in North Africa under French rule put in place, and what does this reveal about power relations between colonisers and the colonised?

The French did not want to marry colonised women – because of scientific racism, notably – but nonetheless "reserved" some of them for their sexual consumption. To do so, a system had to be put in place to allow the legal monopolisation of these women. The French were the unquestionable victors, so they believed they had a "sexual right" to the colonised, but they knew that they could not have access to *all* women, otherwise it would have literally blown up colonial society. So, with the male elites of colonised societies, they negotiated which women would be "sacrificed" to sexual intermingling and put in place a system of coercive regulation to control the process. That's how the regulatory system for prostitution was born. Mixed sexual relations were channelled into a space that was not deemed problematic as it concerned women who had already been "degraded" (former slaves, courtesans, prostitutes etc.) by men from both societies. Despite this, as I said earlier, many of these women were involved in subversion and/or rebellion. These rebellions weren't revolutions, but they were rebellions all the same.

By studying prostitution, we can understand all power relations.

Prostitution and prostitutes are often presented as marginal. That's a mistake, because prostitution is at the heart of society. By studying prostitution, we can understand all power relations. When we take the time to listen seriously to prostituted people, it stares us in the face: the centrality of commercialised sex, and at the same time this incredible space that allows us to see the violence of power relations between multiple and intersecting individuals. In colonial prostitution, all of this is maximised as prostitutes are subjected to extreme domination. We cannot

pretend that it's just about sex: it's a matter of state. The Algerians, for example, had almost always been occupied since the Phoenicians, but from 1830, the feature of colonisation was the massive and unprecedented monopolisation of women, all the more important given the powerfully patriarchal society where the question of male honour – measured against the control of women – is central. On both sides, women were used to settle scores between men.

The book shows just how our contemporary societies, especially in the former European colonial powers, are heavily imbued with the legacy of colonisation in representations of race and gender, be it the representation of women or men. How did representations of masculinity evolve in this context?

This period saw a very marked redefinition of masculinity across Europe. From the 1860s onwards, there was a determination to domesticate men and channel their aggression, including sexual aggression, which caused lots of public order problems (brawls, honour killings, harassment and violence, rapes, etc). Political leaders at the end of the 19th century were men of order in the full sense of the term: they regulated everything, categorised everything, controlled everything, they wanted an ordered, rational, Cartesian society. Men would therefore be “trained” in a certain form of masculinity in homosocial institutions like school, sports organisations, the army and so on. This process aimed to construct what I call a sort of “masculine righteousness”, an acceptable average. In the same period, doctors, particularly sex therapists, started explaining what “good” sexuality was: the frequency of sexual relations, the nature of practices considered to be acceptable, the categorisation of “perversions”. “Good sexual relations” were clearly first and foremost heterosexual, the woman always had to be in a position of submission, their aim was essentially procreational and, to ensure procreation, their practice had to be quite – but not too – regular. All of these heteronormative prescriptions contributed towards the codification of the intimate.

Colonisation understood this: the masculinity of Other men would be constructed in opposition, as they were never part of this “civilising of mores” that was getting underway at the time in Europe. This exercise in delegitimisation did enormous damage because it called into question the masculine identity of colonised men in highly patriarchal societies.

How did this process feed the narrative that colonised men were inferior?

There was a desire to delegitimise them, through “too much” or “too little”, through the creation of two stigmatising categories. The first was that of the sexual predator, the hyper-masculine compulsive rapist. In France, this was embodied in the enduring form of the Arab who not only had a knife between his teeth but “his penis constantly hanging out of his trousers”. From the 19th century, we find texts saying: “Rape is the Arab’s everyday pleasure.” This representation was useful on several levels then as it is today: on the one hand, it allowed sexual violence to be blamed on those men over there; on the other, it allowed “their” women to continue to be controlled.

This categorisation is recorded in the wild, obsessive ideas about genital organs with a pseudo-scientific literature quibbling over the apparently oversized penises of black men primarily, and then of Arabs, with Arabs moreover supposed to be “vicious” and “perverted”, while black people were instead represented as “big children”. The whole framework of categories of perversion that was being theorised at the time in Europe in French, German and British sexual therapy was applied to Algerian society, for example. In the Belle Epoque period, Arabs were of course presented as zoophiles, paedophiles, necrophiliacs, sodomites, etc.

The second category of delegitimisation of the masculinity of these men led them to always be considered as “sub” or “too little”: in other words, as feeble and effeminate but not necessarily homosexual, who don't fit the masculine ideal. These ideas of “too much” or “too little” can be used separately and at the same time too: we can condemn them for being hyper feminine and, at the same time, hyper masculine. In any case, in the colonial context, they were perceived as not being like European men, as being dangerous. So, they were to be avoided, which was the

goal: to prevent the women of the colonisers from having relations with them (while the colonisers did not deny themselves the use of colonised women). Which proves that sex was central, because if it wasn't, there wouldn't have been these sexual lines that are so strongly associated with colour lines or racial lines.

How do you connect your work with feminism?

I've always been militant, and most of my political engagement has been feminist. I studied history because I know that the national narrative is something powerfully ideologised, that there are facts and values that aren't in it, and that some groups and individuals are poorly represented. Yet, in colonial processes, people and societies have been done lasting damage and for that we are today collectively responsible... we must therefore strive to repair as much as possible. This begins by accepting the fact that we have only been, individually and collectively, very imperfectly decolonised: we think that we live in a world where relations between people are equal, but we experience inequality every day. This inequality, structural and systematic, is not, of course, only linked to colonisation, but it nonetheless bears a great deal of responsibility due to the fact that it was – and in the colonial world continues to be – one of the great sources of discrimination.

I studied history because I know that the national narrative is something powerfully ideologised, that there are facts and values that aren't in it, and that some groups and individuals are poorly represented.

It's here that feminism can help. Because feminism is a comprehensive political theory that is not just dedicated to women's rights. It's a repair tool that is founded on a number of very simple things: first, self-conscientisation, and then self-liberation. This requires a difficult exercise: never projecting yourself onto people that you meet, whether dead or alive. Each must take their own path to conscientisation and liberation. This is very much an integral part of feminism. That's why I categorically reject the notion of absolute and definitive victim.

Returning to the controversy generated by the book's release, you say that you are not lumping together questions of domination and questions of violence.

Starting from the principle that an image – which is necessarily a construction – is *necessarily* reality is very problematic. Similarly, believing that what we see – and we always see what we want to see – is real can lead to the falsification, through anachronism or dogmatism, of an image's content. Of course, I'm not saying that there aren't victims or systems of domination – I'm saying quite the opposite – but that doesn't change the fact that individuals also have strategies for accommodation so that they can live in societies as they are, including when they are terribly coercive. These strategies are also important for understanding their paths and their individuality; there can, for example, be acts of resistance in the face of intersecting patriarchal and/or colonial domination.

Before the release of *Sexe, Race et Colonies*, a major newspaper published some fairly hardcore images featured in the book, which provoked outrage in some militant decolonial and Afro-feminist circles. What did you think about this controversy?

I can understand the opinion piece by Cases Rebelles entitled “Our bodies”, but I think there's been a misunderstanding, because these aren't “their” bodies. What's more, these women are not bodies at all and belong to nobody but themselves. We therefore have to search for them to understand them and not start from the principle that “we are them” and “they are us”.

*My role is to train critical minds, starting with my own:
stepping back from one's own prejudices, working from
one's ambivalences.*

When we search for them – and it's often very hard to find them because the archives are most often silent – we above all bring to light their paradoxes, their ambivalences, their contradictions, their tensions... Resituating them in this human complexity is not to deny the violence of domination but, on the contrary, to give ourselves a chance to eradicate it from our world today. In the national survey on violence against women in France that Maryse Jaspard coordinated in 2000, she reminded us, quite rightly, that racialised women suffer more sexual violence and rapes than other women, both in French overseas territories and in continental France. This is precisely because everything that the book talks about is still there. This violence is alive, persistent – it's not a relic.

I don't believe that I hold the truth. My role is to train critical minds, starting with my own: stepping back from one's own prejudices, working from one's ambivalences. But I'm fully engaged in this approach because I have the strong conviction that at stake with these issues are very important things for our society in France, but also much more broadly in Europe and the world. This book, though not perfect, can be very useful because first and foremost it's a weapon of war.

[1] Michelle Perrot, *Les Femmes ou les Silences de l'Histoire*, 2012.



Christelle Taraud is a historian who specialises in the history of women, gender, and sexualities in the colonial context. She teaches at the Parisian programmes of Columbia University and at New-York University and CUPA. She is co-author of the book **Sexe, race et colonies** (La Découverte, 2018).

Published July 9, 2019

Interview in English

Translation available in French

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/sex-in-colonial-empires-and-its-legacy-in-europe-today/>

The Green European Journal offers analysis on current affairs, political ecology and the struggle for an alternative Europe. In print and online, the journal works to create an inclusive, multilingual and independent media space.

Sign up to the newsletter to receive our monthly Editor's Picks.