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The Road Not Taken: Causality and Discourse in “Republicanism, Liberalism and Empire in Post-Revolutionary France”

Commentary on Jennifer Pitts’ “Republicanism, Liberalism and Empire in Post-Revolutionary France,” presented at Yale’s *Transitions to Modernity* Colloquium Series.

First, let me thank you all for the opportunity to offer some comments and thank Professor Pitts for offering up such a fantastic, thought-provoking paper.

My role today is to perform two interrelated tasks: the first is to recapitulate the argument of Dr. Pitts’ paper for those of you who were unable to download it and provide an analytic summary; and the second is to stimulate discussion by posing some questions and comments from my reading of the paper. I’ll take up these tasks in turn.

Pitts motivates her discussion in “Republicanism, Liberalism, and Empire in Post-Revolutionary France” through an examination of France’s *fracture coloniale*, or the “mutual mistrust and misunderstanding on the part of various participants in debates over France’s colonial past and postcolonial present” (2). Focusing particularly on contemporary debates concerning Algerian immigration and culturo-political assimilation, Pitts asserts that these debates have remained “reactive, and relatively defensive” (1) because they are interpreted through the framework of France’s liberal republican tradition, in which “national unity, or the unity of the republic, continues to represent a paramount goal in French political discourse” (2).

It is this relationship between France's liberal republican tradition and empire that Pitts seeks to explain, particularly between the revolution and July monarchy. The bulk of the paper thus presents a reading of various French (and one Algerian!) thinkers in the republican liberal tradition focusing particularly on Constant and Tocqueville. The central historical puzzle is how French liberal republicans, whose ideology was founded on an "ostensibly universal notion of citizenship" (2-3) and who at first glance should have opposed empire, could have acquiesced to, and indeed have even supported, French colonial ambitions in Algeria in particular. Liberals' "turn to empire" is particularly strange because there were at least two moments of serious liberal critique of colonialism which were foreclosed: Constant's articulation of "a liberal counter-narrative of post-Revolutionary France" posed in the early days of the Bourbon restoration; and the other was Desjobert and Hamdan Khodja's critiques of early French colonialism in Algeria in the 1830s. Both of these moments, in Pitts' view, offered "the critical possibilities of liberal discourse at a moment when liberalism was being marshaled in France and Britain in the service of empire" (18). Why, then, was this path of opposition and critique not embraced by liberal thinkers in France?

Pitts offers two explanations, one internal to the discourse about empire, the other external. The internal explanation for the turn is that liberals as early as the restoration phrased their anti-colonial critiques in terms of political/economic interests (16), abandoning the rhetorical ground that empire was simply wrong, and more important, politically corrupting. Thus by the time of the Algerian debates during the July Monarchy, the liberal republican critique was defanged in the face of bold, sickening pronouncements that "France has, in

Algiers, not a few military posts to occupy nor a few commercial relations to extend, but a whole continent to enlighten” (quoted on 24). Beyond these internal tactics of intellectual and political debate, however, lies a much more important factor: French republican thinkers were victims of what Pitts calls “the longstanding anxiety...about France’s international stature” (5). It was French liberals’ self-perceived inferiority to England in particular that led them, for example, to cling so fiercely to Algerian conquests even when they were only inherited from the previous political regime (5, n. 13, also 25). Thus, tragically, Pitts writes: “the liberal and republican supporters of a French Algeria, could acknowledge and disable criticisms of conquest’s brutality while casting critics as cramped economists oblivious to the claims of public opinion, national honor, and France’s international status, especially vis-à-vis England” (25).

That’s a quick summary of the paper’s central argument. Now, at the risk of vivisectioning a nuanced and subtle analysis of French political thought, I’d like to provide a quick analytic summary. To my mind, the paper’s analytic goal is to explain why the serious republican liberal critique of colonialism was suppressed in favor of the enabling liberal discourse that became dominant. This wholesale liberal critique was suppressed, the paper suggests, because of a conjunction of causal structures. I’ve already mentioned the most important two--perceptions of “national honor” and the changing structure of debates between proponents and opponents of empire within French Republican Liberalism--but there are others in the paper which deserve note. One is public opinion, which, for example, caused the commissioners of enquiry in 1833 to avoid condemning the French occupation of Algeria. A second is the changing attitude of French political regimes to the expression of political opposition (for example, Napoleon’s political censorships distorted debate). A

third is the changing boundaries of the French state as a territorial and imagined space, as it expanded and contracted and included or excluded the populations it encompassed. Each of these structures is semi-independent from one another analytically, but the changing course of French liberalism is explained by their empirical intertwining.

So, from summary, on to questions and comments. My main question and concern with the piece, which I'll spend the rest of my time discussing, deals with its central thesis that French liberal republicanism accommodated empire because of its anxiety about France's international status. My concern is that while I accept the fact that this is the case, I think the paper leaves us wondering *why* it turned out this way. Why were concerns over the international stature of France were so powerful that they could refigure French republican liberalism, making brilliant minds paper over the obvious contradictions in their thought? After all, while the republican tradition was younger than France's ongoing national embarrassment at the hands of England, both seem like central elements of the French national consciousness at the time, and perceptions of national stature remain, like French liberalism, a discourse. So why was one discourse powerful enough to refigure the other. Why couldn't it have been the other way? I think a trouble with the paper is that it doesn't really have an answer to this question. But I'd like to suggest some elements of an answer suggested by the paper below.

Trying to answer this question in the paper's terms requires, I think, slightly modifying its stated goal but leads to some interesting empirical, theoretical, and analytic questions. Again, Pitts seeks to explain French liberalism's *reaction* to the imperial undertaking in Algeria--as she puts it, "how the articulation of liberal and republican agendas in France *was affected by*

the Algeria conquest” (4). And on this ground, I think she’s successful and her answer is plain: French republican liberals reacted to Algeria by theoretically accommodating and even encouraging colonialism. But what if we shift the question out of the register of intellectual reflection and ask in its place “how was the political discourse of French republican liberalism intertwined with the political action of French colonialism in Algeria?” (And, by the way, I would suggest that this second formulation is definitely present in Pitts’ paper.)

Asking the question in this way--how discursive frameworks and political events mutually constitute and condition one another--leads us to first pose the question of how seriously we should take the paper’s counterfactuals. Could the course not only of French liberalism, but French empire, really have been different had liberalism continued to voice a sustained, total critique of colonialism? What if France had actually followed Khodja’s call for “a more expansive international order” (19)? The paper’s point is that this *didn’t* happen, but if we take seriously the power of a sustained liberal critique to halt or modify the spread of colonialism, we also have a stronger account of the critique’s suppression.

To perhaps build the elements of such an account, I’d like to hear a little more about the social basis of the *anticolonialistes* in French politics, because there may have been some link between the constituencies they represented and their political/intellectual positions vis-à-vis Algeria. Were the *anticolonialistes* representatives of a particular social category or area, and could they have expanded their base of political support popularly, or through coalition with other political groups? Did they try and fail, and if so, why? The question here is how French liberalism intersected with French politics with a view to the significance of Algeria.

Another thing I think we need to explain given this framework is not only why the full-throated French liberal critique of empire “sputtered and died,” but also why those who did voice it didn’t have a greater effect. Pitts’ discussion of the commissions of enquiry made me think of the sociological work—particularly Bruce Carruthers’, Margaret Weir, and Theda Skocpol’s work on the differential impact of Keynesian economics on different states’ economic policies following the great depression. This work argues that state administrations can be “open” or “closed” to external ideas (and can be more or less autonomous from government decision-making). Of course I’m not suggesting that a single commissions’ reports could have reversed the course of French colonialism; but I am asking if there were parts of the French administration (or, the organized French political public) that were systematically more or less sympathetic to such wholesale anticolonial claims. (This question also inverts nicely, and asks whether there were state structures that were particularly receptive to and grounds for colonial cheerleading. Interestingly, of course, this relationship isn’t always self-evident.)

And, if you’re willing to endure a brief Bourdieusian inquiry, another dimension of what we might call the suppression of intellectual alternatives that I’d like to hear more about is the structure of the field of French republican liberal intellectualism in this period. As I’ve mentioned, in one of her most valuable contributions, Pitts shows us how even at moments of relatively homogeneity of orthodox opinion about colonialism, the voice of opposition and heterodoxy was still present, if muted. To me, this means asking more directly why Khodja’s critique of colonialism seems to have been largely ignored. Pitts suggests that this was partly because he was Muslim and partly because by the time he wrote the debate within liberalism had turned to political/economic grounds. But again, if we shift our frame to the

more expansive one I have suggested, I think we also have to say something more specific about Khodja's intellectual/political strategy. With whom did he correspond? With what factions of the debate? Was there an internal status differentiation among the factions of French republican liberalism, with different statuses and rewards attached to rejecting French colonialism and allying oneself with an Algerian?

This line of questions--asking about the internal structure of the field of French liberalism and how it intersects with French politics and the French state apparatus--leads to another question concerning careers. That is to say, over the course of their intellectual lives, Constant and Tocqueville were both trying not only to articulate coherent theoretical positions but also to be active participants in French politics (to say nothing of the Abbe de Pradt, who, as Pitts says, "remade himself as a liberal under the restoration"). In vocabulary of proponents of what has been called the "new sociology of ideas," these intellectuals' career strategies, and indeed the career of French republican liberalism as a whole, comprises an "intellectual movement." Given this perspective, we might imagine a stand for or against colonialism by a politically active French Republican Liberal as a career-move trying to balance two costs--political rewards and intellectual credibility--while being structured by the intensity of political and intellectual organization.

In conclusion, let me emphasize again the value of Pitts' paper in exposing the path not taken in French Republican Liberalism. Maybe a good place to start our discussion is whether the road not taken could have been walked, what would have happened had it been, and since it wasn't, how structures, strategies, and frameworks pointed so forcefully and tragically in another direction.