

Medicine and Race During the French Empire

by *Élodie Edwards-Grossi*

Drawing on treatises by naturalists and doctors, as well as reports from colonial missions, historian Delphine Peiretti-Courtis examines how racialized bodies were belittled and dehumanized by medical professionals in the French Empire from the 19th century onwards.

Reviewed: Delphine Peiretti-Courtis, *Corps noirs et médecins blancs : La fabrique du préjugé racial, XIXe-XXe siècles*, La Découverte, 2021. 354 pp., €22.

Delphine Peiretti-Courtis's book is part of a well-established historiography on the relationship between race, the medicalization of the body, and colonial violence in the 19th and 20th centuries. Following in the wake of Claude-Olivier Doron, author of *L'homme altéré. Races et dégénérescence (XVII^e-XIX^e siècles)*, published in 2016, which chronicles the uses and circulation of racist scientific theories in Europe, Peiretti-Courtis documents the history of French colonization and its past and present legacies through the history of medical treatments used on black bodies. *Corps noirs et médecins blancs* ('*Black Bodies and White Doctors*') is divided into three chronological parts; it draws on a variety of sources, primarily treatises by naturalists and doctors, as well as reports from colonial missions, to analyze how racialized bodies, continually belittled and dehumanized, were theorized by colonial medical professionals in the French Empire from the 19th century onwards.

In what ways was the European medical profession in the 19th century influenced by 'bush' medicine, practiced as closely as possible on the colonized people by physicians such as Alphonse Trémeau de Rochebrune, stationed in the colonies in the 1870s, and military doctors Charles-Victor Berger and Gustave Reynaud? How were their racist theories used to legitimize

the scope of the policies being enforced in France's African colonies, particularly Angola, Cape Verde, and Senegal? What developments can be observed in the circulation of these medical and scientific precepts of racial differentialism between the 19th and 20th centuries, and is their legacy still alive today? Delphine Peiretti-Courtis proposes to answer these vital questions.

In the beginning: manufacturing racial prejudice and the othering of bodies in the 18th and 19th centuries

The first part of Peiretti-Courtis's book recalls the already well-known history of the racist typologies that naturalists such as Linné, Buffon and Blumenbach created in the 18th century to divide up the human race (p. 57). Using taxonomies, these naturalists wanted to prove the physical, moral and intellectual superiority of Europeans, basing their theories on observations of their subjects' skin, skull size and shape, and sexual organs. Debates raged between monogenists and polygenists, with the latter rejecting the idea "that there is only one human species, divided into races but all coming from the same branch" (p. 60). On the other hand, monogenists, such as the anatomist Georges Cuvier, remained faithful to Christian belief, which defended the unity of the human species according to Genesis (p. 49). The religious aspect of natural science debates in the 18th and 19th centuries has already been emphasized in historian Terence Keel's 2018 book, *Divine Variations: How Christian Thought Became Racial Science*, which discusses the emergence of monogenist and polygenist theories in the United States in the early 19th century and extends them into the Francophone context.

Concepts of beauty were not exempt from these theories of racial differentialism. Peiretti-Courtis explains how the engravings of the Dutch naturalist Petrus Camper (pp. 98-100) were an attempt to highlight what he theorized as individuals' different "facial angles", supposedly representing the degree of primitivism, beauty and animality of each. Biologists in the 19th century considered the black female body to be particularly close to nature and well suited to motherhood. The author shows how some European doctors believed that African women would have "an undeniable advantage in their maternal role, particularly during childbirth, compared to European women who were considered fragile" (p. 164). As Elsa Dorlin did in her 2006 book entitled *La matrice de la race : généalogie sexuelle et coloniale de la nation française*, Peiretti-Courtis defends the hypothesis that this valorization of the racialized female body during childbirth also came at the expense of its humanity, since it was described by white doctors as being insensitive to pain.

Bush medicine and colonial power

The second part of the book begins by discussing the medical reports drawn up by the 'bush' doctors who practiced in the colonies from 1860 until the 1910s. Medical theories were no longer developed in "consulting rooms" in France, far from any application in the field. Peiretti-Courtis brilliantly highlights the relationship between the theories developed by these doctors and the legitimization of the colonial public order, which was based on work ethics. The black body was thought to have a high level of immune resistance, and military doctors such as Aristide Le Dantec were quick to admit that the colonized people showed far greater endurance than white people when faced with hard physical labor: "Europeans in hot countries find the natives to be of indispensable help for the work that they themselves do not always have the strength to perform because of their poor health." (p. 147) In doing so, racist science justified the colonial political enterprise and the resulting hierarchical order by naturalizing the relationship of black bodies to labor. As Peiretti-Courtis reveals, this complementarity between black and white bodies was thought to be vital for maintaining colonial power: "If Africans were praised for their physical strength, it was thus primarily because they were useful to France: they could serve her, like all indigenous peoples." (p. 147)

Colonial power was also thought to be beneficial for Africans' health and especially for controlling their vices and their sexuality, which was considered unbridled. As a figure of paradox, the racialized body was sometimes portrayed by doctors as effeminate and unmanly (p. 467), yet was often represented as hypersexualized (p. 218). The African body was also frequently represented pictorially, on advertising posters that portrayed racist stereotypes or in anthropometric photographs used in medical and anthropological sciences. Following on from historian Daniel Foliard's recent book *Combattre, Punir, Photographier. Empires coloniaux 1890-1914*, which emphasizes the dominant role played by photography in the orchestration of the colonial project in the 19th century, Peiretti-Courtis shows how photography was used to subject colonized bodies to the gaze of the colonizers and their doctors by representing "the supposedly primitive nature of Africans" (p. 376) and providing "a concrete illustration – 'proof' by means of an image" (p. 377). The photographs from the collection of Prince Roland Bonaparte reproduced in her book (p. 384, p. 385) depict, among other things, naked Hottentot and Khoisan women, posing in front of a tropical garden: as the author points out, scientific objectivity was mixed with eroticism, because "behind the pretext of science, a desire to represent the sensual exoticism of the black woman often emerged" (p. 386). This observation echoes Anne Lafont's recent book, *L'art et la race*, which analyzes the processes by which sexual and racial differences were naturalized, and the fetishization of the racial subject in Enlightenment pictorial productions¹.

¹ See <https://laviedesidees.fr/Joseph-Madeleine-Laure-et-Zita-les-visages-noirs-de-la-peinture-francaise.html>

Race, between nature and culture

The third part of the book discusses the decades between 1910 and 1960 and sheds light on the discourses that advocated cultural relativism and led people “to conceive otherness in a different way”: indigenous behaviors came under scrutiny from ethnologists, following the example of Paul Rivet, Marcel Mauss and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl from the 1920s onwards, who embarked on “the comparative study of the social and cultural characteristics of peoples” (p. 498). As these new sciences became institutionalized, observers in the field, be they military doctors or administrators, began to consider “indigenous people through new interpretive frameworks,” freeing themselves “gradually from the belief that everything is innate and seeking explanations for the origin of the differences between peoples” (p. 499). Despite successive declarations made in the 1950s and 1960s by scientists working under the aegis of UNESCO, who endorsed the non-existence of races as natural constants², the concept of ‘biological’ race was still popular in the 21st century “in the public’s imagination as well as among some scientists” (p. 545) and took on new forms, particularly genetic identifications used to determine whether an individual belonged to a discrete group, defined as ‘racial’.

Present-day legacies of racial bias in science

Overall, Delphine Peiretti-Courtis’ book skillfully and clearly presents a nuanced history that is all too often omitted by historians of science and medicine. The author also invites us to question the past and present uses of the racial subject in our contemporary societies.

A few pages at the beginning and end of the book highlight the contemporary stereotypes that persist with regard to black bodies, legitimized by the medical and scientific community throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. The book would have benefited from an epilogue inviting the reader to question the continued use of race in medicine today, and its reconfigurations, especially in genetics: the “debris of the Empire”, as historian and anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler refers to it in *La chair de l’empire : Savoirs intimes et pouvoirs raciaux en régime colonial*, continues to litter our present³. In recent years, the popularization of genetic ancestry tests and the increasing media coverage of scientific publications identifying diverse geographical ancestries within groups of human populations have continued to legitimize the return to this racial mindset in biology, perpetually defined by distinct phenotypic criteria.

Focusing on the French Empire, the book could also have made greater reference to works on other colonial empires or post-slavery societies, such as Brazil or the United States, in

² See in particular Jean Benoist, “Retour sur les propositions concernant les aspects biologiques de la race. Unesco, Moscou, 1964. Entretien avec Jean-Luc Bonniol”, *Cahiers de l’Urmis*, n°20, June 2021.

<http://journals.openedition.org/urmis/2288>

³ Ann Laura Stoler, *La chair de l’empire : Savoirs intimes et pouvoirs raciaux en régime colonial*, Paris, La Découverte, 2013.

order to analyze the repeated transnational circulation of medical and scientific theories on black bodies. These points indicate new avenues to explore in further publications and in no way detract from this book, which has proven to be both thorough and necessary in the historiography of the French Empire, race and science.

Further reading:

- Jean Benoist, “[Retour sur les propositions concernant les aspects biologiques de la race. Unesco, Moscou, 1964. Entretien avec Jean-Luc Bonniol](#)”, *Cahiers de l'Urmis*, n°20, June 2021.
- Elsa Dorlin, *La matrice de la race : généalogie sexuelle et coloniale de la nation française*, Paris, La Découverte, 2006
- Claude-Olivier Doron, *L'homme altéré. Races et dégénérescence (XVIIe-XIXe siècles)*, Ceyzérieu, Champ Vallon, 2016.
- Daniel Foliard, *Combattre, Punir, Photographier. Empires coloniaux 1890-1914*, Paris, La Découverte, 2020.
- Terence Keel, *Divine Variations: How Christian Thought Became Racial Science* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018).
- Anne Lafont, *L'art et la race. L'Africain (tout) contre l'œil des Lumières*, Paris, Les presses du réel, 2019.
- Ann Laura Stoler, *La chair de l'empire : Savoirs intimes et pouvoirs raciaux en régime colonial*, Paris, La Découverte, 2013.

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