Introduction

BENOÎT DE L’ESTOILE

The past as it lives now: an anthropology of colonial legacies

Notre héritage n’est précédé d’aucun testament. (René Char)

The colonial past is present in our world in many ways, some conspicuous, some unnoticed. In Europe, as in formerly colonised countries around the globe, it is embodied in material culture, in monuments, architecture, libraries, archives and museum collections, in alimentary diet, dress and music, but also in continuing flows of commodities, images and people. In perhaps less tangible but no less crucial ways, it shapes politics, economics, artistic and intellectual life, linguistic practices, forms of belonging or international relations. It informs the rhetoric and the categories mobilised when Europeans deal with migrants from other continents, define standards of good governance or conceive development projects, or when people outside Europe deal with European tourists, businessmen, NGO workers or anthropologists. The presence of the past is also a field of contest. Far from there having today a shared vision of the colonial past, conflicting memories and narratives divide scholars, but also those who somehow define themselves in relationship to the colonial moment. Exploring this double mode of presence of the past offers anthropologists a wide field of inquiry. The articles brought together in this issue may be seen as contributions to an anthropology of colonial legacies, which I will try to outline here.

Metaphors and their uses

At first sight, ‘colonial legacy’ may not sound a happy choice, as, one could argue, it is a metaphor worn out beyond retrieval. In public space, the term ‘colonial legacy’ has often been used with a critical intent to relate some undesirable features of the contemporary world to their alleged colonial roots. Thus, underdevelopment, ‘peace-keeping’ military interventions, and more generally unequal relationships between the West and the Rest; ethnic conflicts and genocides, corruption and authoritarian regimes in non-western countries; racist stereotypes and restrictive immigration policies in

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1 This issue originated in the plenary session, ‘Colonial legacies: the past in the present’ at the EASA Conference in Bristol, Europe and the World, in September 2006. I am grateful to the authors in this issue for their stimulating articles who challenged me to write this introduction.

2 This point has been made with force by Subalternist historians (e.g. Chakrabarty 1992; Prakash 1990). Diouf (1999: 13) notes that colonial history is ‘the place where are fought battles of interpretation over the purity and authenticity of African cultures under the colonial period, and the weight of the latter’s legacy in postcolonial societies’.
Europe; all have been at one time or other defined as ‘colonial legacies’. Used in that sense, a colonial legacy is a holdover from the past that hampers progress, and therefore should be eliminated.3 ‘Colonial legacy’ has also become a claim-making concept in international relations, used to exert pressure for obtaining ‘compensations’ (Bayart and Bertrand 2005). Conversely, some (although few in academia) are at pains to highlight the ‘positive’ elements in the colonial legacy, from railway to healthcare and development programmes. Both positions are antagonistic, but they share the common assumption that the ‘colonial legacy’ may be inventoried and assessed by balancing assets and liabilities. Apart from its normative ring, one problem of this position is that it puts us, the inhabitants of a post-colonial world, in the position of passive receivers of a legacy from the past.

An inquiry into ‘colonial legacies’ might give more content to the now widely accepted claim that the world we live in is post-colonial. This basic tenet of ‘postcolonialism’, once novel, has lost its sharpness to the point of dissolving into a generality. Historian Frederick Cooper, while acknowledging the contributions of postcolonial studies, warns against the perils of reifying both the colonial and post-colonial moments entailed by the use of such generic terms as ‘colonialism’, ‘colonial discourse’, ‘postcoloniality’ or ‘postcolonial condition’:

The post- can usefully underscore the importance of the colonial past to shaping the possibilities and constraints of the present, but such a process cannot be reduced to a colonial effect, nor can either a colonial or a postcolonial period be seen as a coherent whole, as if the varied efforts and struggles in which people engaged in different situations always ended up in the same place. (Cooper 2005: 19).

Indeed, one source of confusion is the assumption that there is an essence of colonialism, overlooking the actual diversity of colonial projects and interactions (Thomas 1994). To try to go beyond such essentialism, I suggest drawing a distinction between colonial relations in a generic sense and colonisation in a restricted sense. I shall speak broadly of ‘colonial relations’ to designate a set of related forms that have structured the interactions of Europe with a large part of the rest of the world between the 15th and 20th centuries.4 These relations have historically taken many forms, including conquest, rebellion and repression, religious mission, scientific exploration, education and medical care, trading and economic exploitation, travel, art, population transfers, etc. Colonial relations, often stamped by domination and violence, are however more aptly characterised by a multifarious process of appropriation than by the sheer negation of the colonised. Appropriation has taken on a range of modalities – religious, economic, demographic, political, linguistic, artistic, intellectual, etc. – that varied markedly across time and place, generating contradictions and conflict in the process. Although generally asymmetrical, this process of appropriation entailed, to some extent, a mutual aspect. By contrast, I

3 In a recent overview by a political scientist (Chevallier, 2007) ‘héritage colonial’ is used as a synonym to ‘séquelles coloniales’ (sequel in the medical sense of long-term after-effects of a pathology).

4 Imperialism was of course not a uniquely European feature. Empire has been a very common form of rule, from the Roman to the Aztec, from Russia to the Mali, to the Ottoman or Chinese. Comparing these various imperial experiences is fascinating, but I want to concentrate here on the relations of Europe and other continents.
refer to ‘colonisation’ in a restricted sense to describe the political control of a territory by a foreign power with a view to incorporation and exploitation (but not necessarily including settlement); in that sense, colonisation is but one possible mode of colonial relations. 5 ‘Colonial’ and ‘colonisation’ refer to descriptive historical ideal-types, such as ‘feudal’ or ‘industrialisation’, that do not as such involve passing a moral judgement.

Accepting provisionally this distinction suggests two consequences:

1. Colonial relations cover a much larger ground than colonisation proper. Thus a country like Ethiopia, which formally came under Italian occupation only between 1935 and 1941 has however been entangled in colonial relations for a much longer period. Conversely, the fact that South Africa became a sovereign dominion in 1931 does evidently not preclude from seeing apartheid as a specific form of colonial relation in a generic sense. Thus, whereas colonisation as a political form may belong to the past, this does not mean that all forms of ‘colonial relations’ become extinct at the same time. This suggests that colonial legacies loom large in our world.

In particular, this forces upon us that colonial relations created an enduring bound that cannot be severed by decolonisation. Thus Etienne Balibar (2002) claimed that while France and Algeria, in view of their long colonial and post-colonial common history, could of course not be described as ‘one nation’, it was also difficult to describe them as ‘two nations’, unrelated. For all the violence involved, the Algerian War and subsequent Independence did not create two independent units: while colonial legacies are apparent in Algeria, today’s France is in many ways defined by the presence of a numerous population ‘repatriated’ from Algeria after 1962, but also of a large immigration and continuing family links (Sayad 1999). Algeria and France are thus not in a relationship of exteriority to one another, but are involved in a long-term mutual relationship to the point that they cannot ever be fully disentangled.

2. A second consequence is that ‘colonial legacies’ involve the whole of Europe. This point needs to be stressed, as it might easily be overlooked. Some might think that this is a matter of concern only for those of us who live in countries that once had a colonial empire, such as Britain, Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, or France, but that the Swiss, the Slovenes, the Finns or the Greeks are but remotely concerned, or only in so far as they were victims of other, continental, empires. In other words, some are tempted to repudiate the colonial legacy on the ground that their state had no colonial possessions. To qualify this, let us just recall a founding episode in disciplinary history. Landing in the Trobriand Islands, a backwater of the British empire at the antipodes of Europe, which was then in the midst of a deadly war, the Pole Bronislaw Malinowski, who was an Austrian subject, met not only the native Trobrianders who were to make him famous, but a British administrator, a Greek pearl trader and the son he had with a Trobriandese woman, a Jew from Istanbul and his wife from Paris (Young 2004). In fact, many men (and some women) came from all over Europe to participate in the colonial experience. Although colonial projects were to a large extent organised as national enterprises, the colonial personnel was more cosmopolitan, at least before the 20th century. Danish slave ship captains, Swiss military officers, Swedish missionaries, German mining engineers, Hungarian

5 Colonisation is also an ideal-type, which historically took many forms.
explorers or Polish anthropologists, and so on, have been acting in the service of various colonial powers (or on their own). Moreover, there is a strong case to be made that Europe as a whole has been shaped, both objectively and subjectively, by its colonial experience, as it came to define itself from the 15th century on by contrast with other continents. In fact, the colonial setting is one of the contexts where being ‘European’ acquired its meaning. In the colonial world, to be ‘European’ was a category-defining status and prescribing relationships.6

Speaking of ‘colonial legacies’ entails in the first place acknowledging this shared history of colonial relations, and suggests that they are still largely structuring; this does not mean however that such a legacy is necessarily acknowledged, in both a legal and a cognitive sense, by the potential heirs. It also signals that what remains from the past is more than ‘memory’, a point I shall come back to.

In her article in this issue, Nélia Dias questions the very notion of ‘colonial legacy’ on two grounds: first, she argues that since the colonial past is not always acknowledged as a heritage, it is preferable not to use the term legacy. Second, and perhaps more crucially, she objects to the notion, because it seems to put the coloniser in the position of the ancestor who bequests his legacy. These are valid objections, but not compelling, as such qualifications may perfectly be integrated in our uses of the metaphor.

I claim inspiration here from poet René Char. The aphorism I use as epigraph may be translated as ‘our legacy comes to us without any testament’,7 suggesting that what is handed down to us from the past comes without a ‘will’ or guidelines as to how to deal with it. It points to the indeterminate, open character of the ‘legacy’. Char’s suggestive use of the metaphor of ‘legacy’ encourages us to use its potential to the full, rather than seeing it as a sealed past, weighing on our present. Legacies are not simply ‘handed down’; they are often claimed and negotiated, but also repudiated, selectively accepted, falsified or challenged. They involve various feelings, nostalgia and jealousy, remembering and forgetting, gratitude or bitterness. They may elicit contestation and negotiation, struggle for recognition and suspicions of illegitimacy. A legacy creates relationships (sometimes quite conflicting) between the various potential heirs: legacy at the same time divides and relates, as suggested by the double meaning of share, to divide and to have in common (‘to perform, enjoy, or suffer in common with others’, according to the Oxford English Dictionary). Dealing with colonial legacies points less to the ‘bequest of the coloniser’ than to the modalities of sharing, including through conflict, whatever remains of a long history of mutual relationship.

Anthropology and the past in the present

Anthropologists have been challenged for their inability or unwillingness to acknowledge the historicity of those they study by denying them ‘coevalness’ (Fabian 1983) or placing them ‘out of time’ (Thomas 1989), in effect keeping stuck within an evolutionist

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6 In Northern Africa, which received an important settler immigration from Mediterranean Europe, ‘Europeans’ were contrasted with ‘Muslims’. A social history of the word ‘European’ in various colonial contexts is needed.

framework. While this critique points to a major weakness of anthropology, it fails to account for alternative voices within the disciplinary tradition. Thus, while Malinowski is often rightly criticised for his neglect of history, his seminal contribution to an analysis of the past in the present (e.g. Bloch 1977), which realised a breakthrough in relation to previous practices, has been largely forgotten.

In the evolutionist framework, ‘survivals’ were seen as relics from the past that were to disappear along with progress; they also constituted the proper object of anthropology. This was dramatically modified when anthropologists developed an interest in the changes produced in Africa by the colonial impact, what was then called ‘culture contact’ and ‘culture change’. In the 1930s, Malinowski devoted seminars to this topic, stimulated his students to address the issue and work out new methods (Mair 1938). Studying colonial change involved a realisation that colonised indigenous societies were not ‘out of time’, but well within history, thus giving critical importance to the issue of the relationship with the past. Measuring the colonial impact seemed to entail providing as a reference point a faithful picture of the pre-colonial culture, which, it was then assumed, was the ‘normal’ state of a culture before its pathological colonial disruption. The avowed goal was to provide a blueprint for reconstructing a ‘healthier’ native society in the context of Indirect Rule (Hunter 1938; Mair 1938b).

Malinowski however was critical of such attempts to reconstruct what he dubbed a ‘zero point of culture change’. First, he objects to the usual attempt at reconstructing a ‘pure indigenous culture’ by mixing heterogeneous sources: what the anthropologist herself interpreted as ‘traditional native institutions’, stripped of visible colonial accretions and supplemented by what her interlocutors told her about the past, and whatever historical records she may have accessed. Malinowski warns against the illusion of continuity: while noting that many ‘African institutions […] survive right into the present time’, as it is the task of the fieldworker to discover, he points out that what is observed today, even if apparently traditional ‘is and must be substantially different from what these institutions were in the past’ (Malinowski 1938: xxix).

Malinowski went beyond this methodological point, suggesting that such attempts at reconstruction ultimately involve a confusion about different meanings of the past:

Reconstruction as the ideal of assessing exactly how one institution worked before the white man came, is one problem. The past as it lives now, and also the past as it lives on in the memories and imaginations of the people, is another reality, and from our point of view it is this second reality which is relevant.

Here, Malinowski contrasted two ‘realities’ which can be studied by different means, opposing ‘the past dead and buried’, that he was happy to leave historians to excavate and the past in the present, which it was the anthropologist’s proper task to study. Malinowski opposed here an archaeological approach, aiming to excavate the past and reconstruct from its remains a ‘faithful’ image of it, and another enterprise, geared towards an understanding of the past as re-presented, that is as made present in the minds, practices and institutions of today. This ‘second reality’ then refers on the one hand to a genealogical continuity in institutions, and on the other to ‘the vision of
the past in human memory and tribal legend’, and these two aspects have to be studied separately.

‘To the student of culture change, what really matters is not the objectively true past, scientifically reconstructed and all-important to the antiquarian, but the psychological reality of today’. In other words, ascertaining the facts, ‘what really happened’ (as goes the motto of positivist history), is a completely different task from figuring out what people imagine to be the past. Malinowski concludes with a striking formula: ‘People are swayed by the errors they feel and not by the truth which they ignore’ (1938: xxx). This is not a relativist claim, but simply states that from a sociological point of view the truth-value of a belief about the past is indifferent.

The essential point made by Malinowski is that there is room for an anthropology of the ‘past as it lives now’ which is not opposed to, but different from, the practice of historians. Following his insights, anthropological inquiries into the ‘past as it lives now’ in colonial legacies may tread a genealogical or a sociological path. Genealogical, when they look for the contradictory ‘roots of the present’ in the long history of colonial relations.11 Sociological, when they explore the various ways people deal today with this history. In this issue, Peter Pels and Nélia Dias examine the way anthropologists and museums are confronting colonial legacies, while Didier Fassin and Paula Lopez Caballero study how the past is used as a political resource and defines present identity in quite different post-colonial contexts.

Confronting colonial legacies

As the papers collected here make clear, anthropologists are confronted with colonial legacies at three levels which, although connected, are analytically distinct: in the life and words of those among whom we are studying, in the intellectual tools that are available to us to describe and make sense of that world, and finally in the ways it shapes our interactions in fieldwork and beyond, sometimes in explicit, sometimes in unperceived ways. Reflecting the internal inconsistencies and the variation of colonial interactions across time and place, these colonial legacies are inherently contradictory.

An anthropology of colonial legacies is necessarily reflexive, since anthropology as a form of knowledge is largely part of this legacy. As we have known for some time, anthropology is not in a position to take a detached view of colonial legacies. As Edward Said pointed out, any effort directed at knowing non-European worlds is of necessity not external to colonial relations, but indeed embedded in them:

There is no way that I know of apprehending the world from within our culture (...) without also apprehending the imperial contest itself. And this (...) is a cultural fact of extraordinary political as well as interpretive importance, because it is the true defining horizon (...) of such otherwise abstract and groundless concepts like ‘otherness’ and ‘difference’. (Said 2000: 306).

11 We should however take seriously Frederick Cooper’s cautionary advice that the genealogical drive may well end up in an ‘ahistorical history’. He warns against ‘leap-frogging legacy’, that is postulating a false continuity and attributing long-term effects to the past without analysing the actual steps leading to it (2005: 17). Cooper’s thought-provoking book is reviewed in this issue by Andreas Eckert.
This is precisely where ‘the anthropology of colonialism’ (Pels 1997) brings a helpful contribution. As Peter Pels writes in this issue, its main object has been ‘the study of the representations of the colonised by the colonisers in the context of the practical engagement and entanglement of the two’. More than being just a historical anthropology, or a history of anthropology, it ‘provides us with a historiography of the discipline’s present’. In that sense, ‘the anthropology of colonialism’ is therefore not just another disciplinary subfield, in addition to medical anthropology or the anthropology of the media. It is rather a necessary component of any anthropology of the contemporary world. While the anthropology of colonial legacies shares a great deal with the anthropology of colonialism, it has a different focus. As its very name indicates, the latter focused on the colonial past, while the former is explicitly focused on the various uses of the past in the present.

Souza Lima (2008) provides an interesting instance of genealogical inquiry into colonial legacies. Attempting to understand current practices of the FUNAI, the National Agency of Assistance to Indians in Brazil, he traces continuities with previous colonial practices. Rather than defining, as has been common practice among Brazilian intellectuals, a single ‘culture of Portuguese colonialism’, whose legacy would explain a number of features in Brazilian society, Souza Lima attempts to ‘grasp how certain specific social categories responsible for managing distinct aspects of imperial enterprise in different periods of time and in interaction with pre-existing local realities, have produced, handled and transmitted their knowledge’. Drawing creatively on previous trends of research framed in terms of ‘internal colonialism’, Souza Lima explores a diversity of ‘traditions of knowledge in colonial management of inequality’, which encompass such diverse aspects as ‘the worldviews, the construction of significant social realities, behaviour and interaction patterns, knowledge and power devices’ (cf. Souza Lima 2005). This brings him to locate the ‘anthropological tradition’ within this array of traditions of knowledge, thus stressing its historically situated character.

As Pels also points out, anthropologists ‘run into a heritage of colonialism that the postcolonial world still keeps alive’. Indeed, the very ‘colonial ontologies’ anthropologists have painfully learnt to criticise in their own disciplinary legacy are still prevalent among development planners and project managers, economists and politicians.\footnote{For a suggestive attempt to inventory the political aspects of colonial legacy, see Bayart and Bertrand (2005). Cf., for comparative attempts at understanding the complex relationships between anthropological knowledge and the ‘government of natives’ in colonial and non-colonial contexts, L’Estoile \textit{et al.} (2005).}

This gap between a reflexive anthropology and the expectations of a wider public looms large in one of the places where the question of how to deal with colonial legacies takes a concrete urgency. Museums of the Other, be they dedicated to ethnography or ‘Primitive Arts’, are colonial legacies both literally, by their collections, and metaphorically, as they embody conceptions of difference inherited from the colonial context. The artefacts they hold have been brought to Europe in the context of colonial relations of various kinds. In that sense, they are testimonies not only of other peoples or other cultures, as has been conventional wisdom in ethnographic museums, but of the complex history of relationships between Europe and the other continents, which include exchange, theft, gift, dispossession, trade, alliance, war, conversion, plundering, deception (Thomas 1991). This again is not only true of those countries which developed
overseas empires. Thus, Swedish national ethnographic museums in Stockholm and Gothenburg house approximately 18,000 objects originating from what became the Belgian Congo (now Democratic Republic of Congo). Most of them were brought back by Swedish missionaries and military officers who took an active role in the colonisation process of the Congo Free State: looking at them not as ‘ethnographic artefacts’ or ‘artworks’ but as traces of interactions from the late 19th century on allows the recovery of a lost history of relationships (Gustaffsson Reinius 2008).

In this issue, Nelia Dias looks at the ways France is dealing with her colonial past by looking at the new museum (2006) dedicated to non-European arts and cultures at the Quai Branly, in Paris. While the museum claims to be a post-colonial tribute to ‘cultural diversity’, and proceeds to ‘erase the past’, some troubling questions remain: to whom do the collections belong? Should the artefacts/artworks be ‘repatriated’ to the places where they came from, as some suggest? Have their uncertain conditions of acquisition been sanctioned by time, so that they may be considered as inalienable national collections kept by the museum for the benefit of mankind? If displayed, how should it be done? As masterworks? As testimonies of other cultures? As Dias writes, Brany’s answer is that ‘non Western objects are a constitutive part of French heritage in particular and of the world heritage’, thus reconciling nationalistic and universalistic demands. In the process, what goes unacknowledged is precisely the colonial legacy.

Indeed, the French situation is remarkable for what amounts to a refusal to address the issue of colonial legacy within national museums (L’Estoile 2005, 2007a & b). This is the case not only at Quai Branly, but also at the new museum for the history of immigration (Cité nationale pour l’histoire de l’immigration), which opened in 2007. The lavish building which houses this museum is in the most conspicuous way a colonial legacy: it was built on the occasion of the 1931 Colonial Exhibition to be the Permanent Palace for the Colonies, and later housed the Museum of Overseas France, and subsequently, from 1960 to 2003 the National Museum for African and Oceanic Arts. However, the issue of the colonial past is not really confronted, especially as the permanent exhibition aims at convincing the visitor that patterns of immigration from the former colonial empire virtually follow the same pattern as earlier intra-European waves of immigration, thus erasing any colonial specificity.

The French situation contrasts with the one in neighbouring former colonial powers. Thus, the Bristol Empire and Commonwealth museum, whose permanent exhibition bears the title ‘The Empire and Us’, explicitly aims at establishing a link between the empire of yesterday and both Britain and the Commonwealth of today. It aims to create a sense of shared history, without nevertheless refraining from disclosing conflicts of interpretation. In a different context, the Museo de America, in Madrid, initially conceived during Franco’s dictatorship as a Museum of Hispanicity, focuses to a large extent on the history of relationships between Spain, the Spanish in the Americas, and indigenous societies, giving a prominent place to colonial societies.13

Unilateral declarations of goodwill such as displayed by the Musée du quai Branly will not prove a sufficient answer to the nagging issue of how to deal with colonial legacies. In my view, a first step would be to acknowledge explicitly in the permanent exhibit that ‘colonial relations’ provided the framework for the various interactions

13 The Museo de America’s exhibition choices raise problems of their own (beginning with a surprising evolutionist framework), which I cannot elaborate here.
between Europe and other continents, to begin with modes of making sense of and representing non-European peoples.

**Claiming the past: contested legacies**

The silence on the colonial past in French museums stands in sharp contrast with vociferous public debates in recent years. While these have involved various issues, what is significant for our purpose is that for a large part they have been framed in terms of a tension between the research and teaching of history on the one hand, and the ‘memories’ of specific groups on the other. Prominent historians petitioned in defence of ‘freedom for history’ against the so-called ‘memory-laws’ passed by the National Assembly, a legislation which they perceived as entailing a ‘competition of memories’, opposing various communal entities claiming to be victims of history (‘memory of repatriated settlers’ against memory of the ‘children of the colonised’, ‘memory of slavery’ against ‘memory of the Shoah’), and ultimately endangering the autonomy of historical research. Historians used the notion of ‘memory’ to contain the proliferation of unauthorised versions of the past, while representatives of groups claiming an identity rooted in a specific history challenged the monopoly of professional historians over legitimate accounts of the past in the name of a ‘duty of memory’, and state officials called for a ‘reconciliation of memories’. For all protagonists, ‘memory’ seems to be the default category to designate virtually any relationship to the past.

While Didier Fassin focuses here on post-apartheid South Africa, his exploration of the ‘politics of memory’ (cf. Hacking 1995) resonates with this debate. The established historians’ orthodoxy discounts memory as sacred, communal and particularistic in contrast with history, presented as critical, universalistic, and secular. In other words, history must be conquered against memory. Fassin attempts here to rescue ‘memory’ from its disqualification by historians by outlining an anthropological approach relating the psychological and political dimensions of remembering. Starting from Thabo Mbeki’s (South Africa’s president) repeated use of ‘historical arguments’, Fassin suggests that the past is not only mobilised as a rhetorical resource, but, as ‘embodied’, directly affects the perception and interpretation of the present. He sets out to study the ways (subjective) ‘experience of history’ (‘the psychic trace left by memory in terms of the interpretation of the social world’) is affected by the violence of the (objective) ‘historical condition’. He argues that conspiracy theory as a model of interpreting the AIDS epidemics in South Africa is essentially rooted in a particular ‘experience of

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14 See the website of Liberté pour l’histoire: http://www.lph-asso.fr/.
15 For professional historians, memory designates at the same time (1) a highly suspect source on the past, which needs to be critically examined to assess its reliability; (2) a potential rival in the quest for a monopoly on legitimate accounts of the past.
16 See for instance the call to ‘reconciliate the memories’ by the French Minister of War Veterans, Hamlaoui Mekachera, himself a former officer in the French army in Algeria (2005). For a general background, see Bertrand (2006).
17 As Fassin reminds us, the contrast between memory and history has been forcefully articulated by the influential historian Pierre Nora in a famous series he edited in the 1980s, Lieux de mémoire (see Nora 1996). It is then no accident that the association Liberté pour l’histoire is today chaired by Pierre Nora.
history’ for Blacks under apartheid, which came to define a specific group identity. Such an effort to apprehend memory, in a Malinowskian fashion, ‘as a living link between past and present’, sheds light on the complex interplay between the construction of personal and collective memories and narratives of suffering which mobilise the past to make claims in the present.

However, in many cases, memory seems too restrictive a category to understand the multiplicity of the ‘uses of the past’. It lumps together quite distinct processes: biographical memories (of those who experienced directly an event or a period), the transmission of tradition within the family and collective practices of commemoration aiming at producing a sense of group identity. Despite all disclaimers, memory carries with it a whole set of notions usually associated with remembering and forgetting: amnesia and obsessive memory, denial and recovering, unconscious or fragmented memory, etc. While borrowing notions from psychology\(^\text{18}\) or psychoanalysis may produce suggestive insights (e.g. Cole 1997), it often leads to obscuring the actual social processes involved. Framing the issue of the past in the present in terms of ‘memory’ also triggers a series of questions: Can memory be trusted? How to differentiate ‘true remembering’ from ‘pseudo-memories’ (Kenny 1999) or ‘deceptive-memory’ (Hacking 1995)? While such questions are essential for the judge and the historian attempting to discriminate ‘facts’ from ‘fiction’, they are unhelpful for understanding ‘the past as it lives now’.

Paula Lopez Caballero’s article makes apparent that much more than ‘memory’ is involved in the relationship with the past, and, pace Malinowski, that an ‘archaeological’ approach to the past can make a crucial contribution to the anthropological study of change. By comparing two historically distant genealogical narratives of an Indian community, she shows how the past is being reappropriated in terms of local concerns and rewritten in tight relation with its redefinition at the national level. Indians in Mexico (as in a number of other Latino-American countries\(^\text{19}\)) are officially defined by their alleged genealogical link with the precolonial past. In contemporary Mexico, the pre-colonial past is then at the same time the common national heritage of all Mexicans, and what gives their specific identity to a particular section of the population. In post-revolutionary Mexico, the pre-colonial past was made into a ‘national heritage’, whereas the colonial inheritance, and especially its part associated with Indian reappropriations of catholicism, was relegated to an ‘inauthentic past’ which was defined as ‘obsolete’. Anthropologists played a crucial role in this redefinition (Lomnitz 2005) which often came to discounting the Indians’ present in favour of their alleged glorious past. Conversely, some cultural elements in contemporary Indian communities that were previously considered as authentic remains of pre-Columbian cultures, preserved in the ‘memory of the vanquished’ as a form of passive resistance to colonial domination, have recently begun to be re-evaluated as having emerged within colonial relationships in processes of mutual appropriation.\(^\text{20}\) Thus, what is recognised as (legitimate) legacy in Mexico’s colonial and pre-colonial past has been constantly shifting.

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18 Psychological approaches of memory, aiming at discovering the (universal) cognitive mechanisms involved in the process of remembering, generally show scant interest for the past. For a stimulating programme of an ‘anthropology of memory’, see Severi (2007).
19 On the definition of ‘Indian’ identity in Brazil, see Pacheco de Oliveira (2005).
20 For a similar argument regarding Peruvian historiography, see Estensorro (2003).


Starting from quite diverse empirical and theoretical backgrounds, the articles in this issue suggest that an anthropology of colonial legacies offers promising fields of inquiry for anthropologists. Claiming it as a ‘new field’ of anthropology would be naive, as such topics have been present in the vast body of literature in colonial and post-colonial studies (for an early instance in anthropology, see Turner (1971)). However, such a labelling might help us to go beyond grand statements on the postcolonial condition, and avoid confusing this research agenda either with a repetition of the ‘anthropology and colonialism’ controversy or with colonial history. While anthropologists should not shy away from visiting the archives in order to engage in a historical anthropology of colonial interactions, aiming at ‘understanding the past in its own terms’, an anthropology of colonial legacies is a distinct endeavour, exploring the various ways the colonial (and pre-colonial) past is negotiated, contested, reinvented, reinterpreted, forgotten or denied by the various heirs, sometimes in relative consensus, more often in conflict. Colonial legacies are not univocal but contradictory, reflecting the complex and contradictory character of colonial relations themselves. They are not passively received, and their meaning is actively reinterpreted and renegotiated. Far from establishing an inventory of ‘colonial holdovers’ to get rid of, it would try to understand how colonial legacies shape in contradictory ways today’s modes of relationships and self-understandings, both in Europe and in former colonial dependencies, and how people confront them.

The acid test for an ‘anthropology of colonial legacies’ will be its ability to open up fruitful avenues for inquiry on ‘the past as it lives now’, including fieldwork projects and comparative research on the various ways of dealing with colonial legacies, in former imperial capitals or in former colonial peripheries, among intellectuals or peasants. This task may illuminate the modes of presence of the past which make sense of a shared history of relationships. Increasing the awareness of the relational character of the world we live in might also open the possibility of imagining other modes of relationship, which would not erase the colonial past nor arrive at an impossible consensus about it, but allow us to learn to live together with our shared colonial legacies.

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