

Introduction

Why Did France Have an Empire?

The French empire left no more durable a trace than Jean de Brunhoff's 1931 children's classic, *Histoire de Babar, le petit éléphant*. The story originated with the author's wife Cécile, as a bedtime story for their ill son. Cécile concluded that her role in the book was minor enough to exclude herself as co-author.¹ Jean, hitherto a painter and book illustrator, wrote six sequels, his son Laurent twenty-three, the last in 2017. Translations and endless merchandizing made the orphaned elephant an immensely valuable, world-wide phenomenon. Like many children's stories, *Babar* has carried grown-up morals, no doubt several of them. We can read the original story here as a fable of historically specific French imperial objectives and aspirations, and Babar as a generic and highly idealized imperial subject.

The story opens with the birth of Babar in a peaceful forest where the animals either do not consider one another prey or at least eat one another off stage. The baby elephant shows his exceptional abilities early, in his use of a tool, a shell, to play in the sand. An evil hunter disrupts the idyll by murdering Babar's beloved mother. The panicked Babar runs away until he reaches a city. The wonders of human civilization displace his shock and mourning for a time. Babar encounters an inexplicably understanding and generous elderly woman, who instantly understands that he needs clothes to ease his transition to his new surroundings. The now green-suited Babar assimilates to life in the city, up to a point. He eats and exercises with the elderly woman and proves himself a fine student of arithmetic. He ventures about in an automobile purchased for him by his patron. Yet Babar remains a partly assimilated outsider. He charms his patron's dinner guests as an exotic visitor from another world. Most importantly, the more Babar adopts the habits of the city, the more he

¹ In Cécile's version, Babar steals money, goes on a shopping spree in the city, and only later is persuaded to return to the forest by his cousins, who understand their proper place in the natural order. See the obituary, *New York Times* (2003). "Cécile de Brunhoff, 99, Creator of Babar," April 8.

2 Introduction: Why Did France Have an Empire?

realizes his own separateness. He misses the camaraderie of his fellow elephants, and now weeps at the memory of his mother.

A visit to the city by two cousins and their mothers leads Babar to realize his true self. He decides to return to his homeland by automobile, a clothed and forever changed elephant. He regrets leaving the generous elderly woman, the agent of his transformation. During Babar's absence, and fortuitously for him, the sitting king of the forest dies from eating a bad mushroom. The elders decide that the resplendent Babar is the natural choice as successor. Babar's engagement to his cousin Celeste guarantees the stability of the new royal line. The couple marries in a forest-wide celebration. A great many adventures await.

As a fable of French imperial aspirations, *Babar* recounts the evolution of an exceptional colonial subject. He has a natural aptitude for learning above his peers, most of whom will never dig with shells or wear smart green suits. He knows instinctively how to make the most of his encounter with the city. His devotion to his patron is sincere, and he will never forget her generosity. Yet he remains an elephant, with or without the green suit. He knows his destiny lies in extending the differentiated blessings of his own advancement to all the animals in the forest. His kingdom there will be shaped by the superior qualities of its new king. At least through its new monarch, some sort of unspoken contract appears to exist between the kingdom and the city, still the wellspring of civilization. Yet the animal kingdom will never become the city. We assume continued loyalty to the elderly lady and the city she exemplifies. But the exact terms of that loyalty await definition over time. In the real world of the French empire, all this would become known as a colonial policy of association. Imperial domains, the theory went, would square the circle of partly adopting Frenchness alongside French rule, while retaining and developing their own identities.

Association was but one of several conceptual frameworks through which the French made sense of having an empire between the Ancien Régime and the present.² This book details the history of those frameworks. As such, it has a "political" focus, defined in a particular sense. It focuses on structures of rule and the operation of those structures. Empires are not nation states, and do not function as such. Nor are they one thing, or even the same thing over time. Empires mean very different things in different times and places. No two empires are alike, and no two empires have the same history. They do not always have clear beginnings, and assuredly do not have clear ends. Important

² Ancien Régime (Old Regime), used here as a proper noun, refers to early modern France before the Revolution that began in 1789.

vestiges of empire remain today in the French Republic and in many of its former domains.

Empire is not difficult to define in the terminology of political science – asymmetrical contracting that preserves politically significant difference. Some sort of agreement, almost always coercive in nature, joins more powerful and less powerful political entities. An empire has a center, a political and administrative core. The center of the French empire became known as the metropole, meaning the somewhat hexagonally shaped European France. Throughout this book, “metropole” and the “Hexagon,” refer to the same thing – European France.³ The center rules both directly and through intermediaries, colonial officials and local elites. Imperial contracting is subject to constant renegotiation, though the parties remain unequal.

Their many permutations and vicissitudes notwithstanding, empires preserve hierarchies resulting from difference, usually though not necessarily grounded in what today we understand as race. To be sure, hybrid reproductive relationships between colonizer and colonized constantly complicated distinctions based on race. Mixed-race persons would support and contest French imperial rule throughout its history. Structural difference distinguishes empires from expanding nation states. For example, “British India” was by definition “British.” But even the most fervent imperialist did not imagine that it would one day become part of the United Kingdom, or even the equal of the United Kingdom within the British Empire. Likewise, “Algérie française” (French Algeria) came to pose an intractable problem for republican France, because the French tried to rule the lands of Algeria as national territory and indigenous Algerians as colonial subjects. This meant treating the minority white and majority Muslim populations in separate and profoundly unequal ways. The tangles of trying to reconcile republicanism and empire constitute a central theme of this book.

In their sweeping survey of the global history of empire, Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper have reminded us that empire is in fact a more ancient and durable political configuration than the nation-state, which was largely a product of the nineteenth century. They have defined empires as “large political units, expansionist or with a memory of power extended over space, polities that maintain distinction and hierarchies as they incorporate new people.”⁴ Such a definition points to the dynamic,

³ It bears noting here that “European France” itself was not a static entity. Corsica became definitively French only in 1768, the city of Nice only in 1860. Alsace and Lorraine changed hands at least six times over the period covered by this book.

⁴ Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 8.

4 Introduction: Why Did France Have an Empire?

even inherently unstable nature of empires. They must always produce and reproduce the forms of hierarchical difference on which their very existence depends. Empires are always rising or falling, expanding or contracting. Historians often write of them as though they were people, with all-too-human life cycles. Empires are born, thence to grow in strength and size. At a certain point, they get older, weaken, and eventually die. Historians have also often found it convenient to tell stories of empire as tragedies – their demise foreseeable through their evils, inherent contradictions, or other fatal flaws. While those who look for tragedy in history will seldom fail to find it, this book will pay more attention to the continued transformation in the form and content of the French empire, and its myriad afterlives after its “fall.”

Yet all the preceding begs the question – what is an empire for? To some extent this is a “European” as well as a national question, assuredly not unique to the French case. Why did Europeans have such boundless imperial ambitions? No other civilization in history seems to have considered it necessary to conquer and rule so many peoples so distant from the imperial center. Why did the French, like other Europeans, acquire so many diverse domains with so little to do with one another? As we will see, the French empire comprised a patchwork – colonies ruled directly, protectorates (foreign supervision of governance), trading posts, local empires subsumed into a French empire, and much else. Why were so many domains, such as the Sahara Desert, so economically unprofitable? Unlike the British, Spanish, or Chinese empires, the French empire never attracted large numbers of settlers. Even in Algeria, barely half the white settlers originated in the Hexagon, most of the rest coming from elsewhere in Mediterranean Europe.

There is no single set of answers to these questions. C. Warren Hollister explained the medieval Crusades, the first imperial adventure of Christian Europe, as taking place through a combination of “piety, pugnacity, and greed.”⁵ While certainly intellectually appealing at a certain level and quite possibly true, we can neither prove nor disprove such a deep, emotion-based explanation. Throughout, I claim that economics provides a necessary but insufficient explanation for the French empire throughout its long history. As we will see, economics does much to explain the mercantile empire of the Ancien Régime in North American and the Caribbean. But the economic rationale for empire became increasingly problematic in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – a point not lost on the many critics of imperial expansion from many places

⁵ C. Warren Hollister, *Medieval Europe: A Short History*, 7th ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1994), 188.

on the domestic political spectrum. More often than not, an economic rationale followed rather than preceded imperial conquest.

What follows is a history of explanations on the part of the French for having an empire, and the asymmetrical contracting that preceded and followed from those explanations. I present a history of the changing dynamics of the French empire as a political construct. All of the lands and peoples explored here had a “French” history – much as Gaul had a “Roman” history, or, for that matter, as Vichy France had a “German” history. From its first ventures, French imperial power based itself on violence and the threat of violence, typically racialized. What follows never contends otherwise. The French empire became the French empire through complicated dynamics of oppression, resistance, and asymmetrical mutual accommodation. These dynamics existed in numerous registers – affairs of state, labor, the environment, gender, and many others. If colonial rule is emphasized here over resistance to that rule, the reason lies in a necessity to understand the precise object of resistance.

Since the imperial power that made and enforced the contracting of empire was based in the Hexagon, the political vicissitudes of European France from the Ancien Régime to the Fifth Republic matter here. Over the centuries, what the French wanted an empire for roughly tracks changes in the way they were governed. Yet the history of the French empire is not the history of the Hexagon with its empire attached for the sake of inclusivity. This book considers from a political perspective what quite a few years ago Frederick Cooper and Ann L. Stoler called for, treating the metropole and the imperial domains as “a single analytical field.”⁶ From this point of view, France and the French empire created each other. A full explanation of empire, just why the French wanted one, and why so many of the peoples over whom the French ruled found it so difficult to let go of France, may be a permanently receding horizon. It is nevertheless the purpose of this book to chase that horizon.

⁶ Frederick Cooper and Ann L. Stoler, “Introduction: Tensions of Empire: Colonial Control and Visions of Rule,” *American Ethnologist*, 16, No. 4 (1989): 609.

1 The Rise and Fall of the Mercantilist Empire

Unfortunately for historians, the Native American and African peoples alongside whom the French built their mercantile empire did not keep extensive written records. At the time, their societies left their marks on history mostly through oral tradition and through traces found much later by archeologists. The French, in contrast, wrote and published profusely throughout the history of their empire. One early French imperialist, a Sieur François Delbée, wrote an account of a slaving expedition to West Africa published in 1671.¹ Much of the account is a travelogue, of places and peoples seen. But Delbée included a detailed record of the African notables with whom he treated. We know only Delbée's version of the story. But even from this perspective, what impresses readers today is not the power of this early imperialist expedition, but its fragility.

In 1669, the semi-private Compagnie des Indes Occidentales (West India Company) sent two ships to the West African kingdom of Ardres (in today's Benin) to establish a base for commerce, meaning primarily the trade in enslaved persons. The French sought to enter a well-established market. Commerce along what the Europeans would call the "Slave Coast" began with the Portuguese in the 1550s. Dutch traders began to supplant the Portuguese early in the next century. The French, in turn, sought to supplant the Dutch. Galloping demand in Europe for cane sugar drove French expansion in the Caribbean. French settlers first arrived in Guadeloupe in 1625, and King Louis XIV claimed Martinique in 1658. Most importantly, by mid-century, the French had begun to wrest part of the island of Hispaniola (today Haiti and the Dominican Republic) from the Spanish, to establish what would become their colony of Saint-Domingue. Earlier European incursions had brought along European germs, which resulted in the death of much of the

¹ Sieur [François] d'Elbée, *Relation de ce qui s'est passé dans les Isles & Terre-Ferme de l'Amerique, pendant la dernière guerre avec l'Angleterre, & depuis en execution du Traité de Breda, avec un journal* [spelling and accent marks of original] (Paris: Clozier, 1671). Unless otherwise noted, cited translations throughout are my own.

indigenous population. Like the competing Portuguese, Spanish, and English empires, the French empire needed labor accustomed to European disease pools. Europeans found that labor by enslaving Africans.

Scholars of Africa do not altogether agree on just what to call the polity of Ardres (also known at the time as Allada, Adra, Adara, and several other similar names), though the most common term is “kingdom.” Like many similar entities, Ardres ruled itself through a dynamic matrix of kinship networks rather than through a bureaucratized state. Toussaint Louverture, later a leader of the French Revolution in Saint-Domingue, descended from one such network, according to his son. Ardres had a tributary relationship to the Oyo Empire, financed primarily through the slave trade. Generally speaking, West African rulers cared less than European rulers about fixed boundaries and more about control over resources, goods and particularly people. West African societies had many gradations of servitude, rather more than Europe. As a rule, persons bound to specific households could not be bought or sold. But those who in one way or another had run afoul of royal or elite power could become chattels, to be sold to foreigners.

Delbée arrived on the African continent in 1670 not as a conqueror, but as a salesman, almost a supplicant. Certainly, he treated the sovereign with the respect he would have paid any European monarch. The king of Ardres maintained an elaborate court etiquette, in which the visitors were first received by retainers and only some days later admitted to the royal presence. Once admitted, Delbée met a skilled and experienced negotiator. They spoke Portuguese, understood by them both. The king clearly wanted to conclude a transaction. But first he complained that while he had been informed that “France was such a great kingdom and filled with rare items,” the visitors had brought with them “only things similar to what the Dutch had been bringing for quite a while.” Delbée promised better in the future, now that the French understood the royal tastes. The king responded with a detailed shopping list for future offerings, including a French-style sword, fabric, lace, and two pairs of shoes, one of velvet, the other presumably of leather, but scarlet. The sovereign had also established a tax regime for the slave trade, involving the payment of the price of fifty enslaved persons for each ship permitted to dock. In addition, he required that the French “pay” two enslaved persons to his son for the right to take on fresh water for their departure. The king also required that the building to be established for trade with the French not become a French fort.

Delbée, for his part, maintained what today we might code as an anthropologist’s interest in the inhabitants of Ardres, including those forced to become his cargo. He was particularly interested in their religious objects

8 The Rise and Fall of the Mercantilist Empire

(*fétiches*), though posited that only the influence of *marabouts* (Muslim holy men) prevented them from becoming Christians. Delbée provided a detailed account of how the enslaved became such – whether prisoners of war, persons paid as tribute, persons born of the enslaved, debtors, or persons convicted of crimes. He spared himself a moment of compassion for the Africans forced aboard his ship, “taken with melancholy to see their homeland disappear before their eyes, some of whom had already fallen ill with sadness.” One wife of the king, referred to as the *princesse*, annoyed that her husband had deprived her of some of the goods brought by the foreigners, took it upon herself to sell eight competing wives into enslavement. Delbée felt “such compassion” for all the female captives on his ship that he separated them from the enslaved men. He recounted with pride that not one woman died during the passage across the Atlantic. He did not report what the crew demanded in exchange.

Nothing distracted Delbée from the task at hand, in this land where commerce consisted of only “men and food” (*hommes et vivres*). Along the way to the Caribbean, his ship stopped at the small French enclave in Cayenne, on the South American coast. There they took on supplies and left off the sick, who they supposed would die before they reached their destination of Martinique. In all, of the 433 enslaved persons who boarded at the port at Offra, some 100 died en route. Delbée’s ship took on sugar and tobacco in Martinique and returned to France after a voyage of ten months and twenty days.

Delbée’s story, and the untold stories of the captives he carried across the Atlantic, was repeated thousands of times through the early modern period. These stories illustrate, among other things, some of the contours of the French mercantile empire. This version of empire intertwined politics and economics perhaps to a greater degree than any subsequent version. The mercantile empire had a specific economic purpose – the enrichment of the kingdom of France. This empire gave rise to many different kinds of power relationships. The king of Andres and certainly not the French held power on this piece of the African coast in 1670. As we will see, the French crown and its agents wielded little more power in its vast claimed domains in North America.

Later, the mercantile empire in the Caribbean gave rise to a veritable laboratory of imperial domination. There, the plantation system extracted what Marxists call the surplus value of labor to a degree seldom seen before or since. It made fortunes for a handful of French. Yet the mercantile empire was never as imposing as it looked on a map. French domains in North America remained lightly held in most places, to say the least. Even in the Caribbean, where the French empire was strongest, the French Revolution precipitated the largest and most successful revolt

of enslaved persons in world history. The defeat of Napoleon and the shifting world economy would reduce the French mercantile empire to a relative triviality. France would enter the nineteenth century a minor imperial power.

1.1 Absolute Monarchy, Mercantilism, and Empire

The French built an empire during the Ancien Régime under the direction of the crown. Underpinning this empire lay an elaborate ideological foundation for monarchy as absolute, personal rule. The king of France (Salic law forbidding sovereign queens since the early Middle Ages) ruled as the anointed of God. The king, indeed, had accountability only to God. Divine law prohibited him from doing anything that would imperil the souls of his subjects. But natural law gave him otherwise absolute power on Earth. “Nature” commonly meant what the monarch wanted it to mean. The king alone gave law to the kingdom, at least in theory. “It is he who makes law for the subject,” wrote sixteenth-century theorist Jean Bodin, “abrogates laws already made, and amends absolute law.” This aspirational absolutism assumed more concrete forms in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The crown largely co-opted the institutional Catholic Church, religious home to the vast majority of the king’s subjects. Bishop Jacques Bénigne Bossuet became something of a house theoretician to the most illustrious of the absolute monarchs, Louis XIV (reigned 1642–1715). The king, Bossuet wrote, “was absolute with respect to constraint, there being no power capable of forcing the sovereign, who in this sense is independent of human authority.”

Day in and day out, absolute monarchy sought to create its own reality through performance. Indeed, an enormous part of the sovereign’s working day involved court ritual, from the *levée*, an elaborate ceremony around the king getting out of bed attended by up to 100 courtiers, to the time he went to bed, when the *levée* was run in reverse. The crown had managed to turn the ceremonial enactment of the most mundane daily tasks into marks of immense social prestige, such as holding the sleeve of the king as he dressed. The king always had to look the part, with wigs, vests, culottes, and shoes made by some of the most skilled artisans in Europe. Louis XIV built the magnificent palace of Versailles as a theater for performing absolutism. Musicians, artists, actors, writers, all paid constant tribute to the glory of the crown. Royal patronage in the form of decorations and offices fell only upon aristocrats who maintained secondary residences at Versailles, sometimes at ruinous expense to themselves.

The theater of absolutism worked hard to conceal a very different reality, a kingdom profoundly shaped by the ancient Society of Orders

10 The Rise and Fall of the Mercantilist Empire

and the medieval history of the monarchy itself. The realities of absolutism, in turn, shaped the development of the mercantile empire. Centuries of tradition and law had it that “those who fight,” the nobility, did not need to contribute financially to the kingdom because of their military service. “Those who pray,” the clergy, likewise contributed spiritually rather than monetarily. This left most of the burden of royal finance on the Third Estate, “those who work,” who, politically speaking, comprised adult male Christians. Consequently, the nobility and the clergy controlled immense wealth, and enjoyed a social and political legitimacy that they did not owe to the crown.

Moreover, the writ of the king did not even mean the same thing throughout the kingdom. Over the course of the Middle Ages, the French monarchy expanded its domains slowly, almost like an amoeba, from its original domains in the Paris region, the Île de France. France became an empire well before it became a unitary state. Unlike an amoeba, the monarchy did not completely digest what it absorbed. Separate bodies of law and numerous internal trade barriers persisted throughout the kingdom. No fewer than thirteen domains had preserved their regional assemblies, or *Parlements*. These were both judicial and legislative bodies. The most powerful of them, the Paris *Parlement*, had jurisdiction over only about one-third of the kingdom. *Parlements* registered or approved royal edicts, including those concerning loans and taxation. The king could always overrule a *Parlement* through a *lit de justice*, a simple, binding declaration of the king’s capacity as lawgiver. But the *lit de justice* remained a blunt instrument, and kings had to spend carefully the political capital required to use it.

Long-standing customary law had prohibited slavery in the French kingdom proper, as a barbaric practice more suited to Muslims than the realm of the most Christian of kings. Masters in the empire would often bring enslaved persons with them to the Hexagon as domestic servants. While this never amounted to a large number of people, the enslaved proved quite visible because of their physical proximity to power. What was the status of the enslaved once in Europe? A 1719 royal edict required registration of all enslaved persons with the Admiralty. Masters who did not do so were subject to the manumission of their servants by the crown. A 1738 decree sought to tighten the regulation of the enslaved brought to the Hexagon and made appropriated persons the property of the crown rather than free. But neither edict was registered by the *Parlements*, nor did the crown see to their enforcement by the *lit de justice*. The matter remained in a kind of legal limbo until the French Revolution.

The French absolute monarchy, like its counterparts in Spain or Austria, ruled with structural financial weaknesses. It could not tax the