

changed step by step after the formation of the departments of Alger, Constantine, and Oran, resulting in the purely military rule over the colony being replaced by a civilian administration, which, however, continued to rely heavily on the army.

Kalman devotes his first chapter to a concise overview of the organization and financing of the various forces involved in policing after 1870. The following chapter traces a high point of resistance to colonial control by the French, namely the banditry in the Constantinois during World War I. During this period, efforts to avoid conscription into the French army merged with the first nationalist efforts at anti-colonialism, leading to a series of attacks against the administration and the property of the settlers. Kalman is able to show impressively how, in this moment of crisis framed as “crime wave,” all the patterns of justification and use of violence were already evident, which were to remain effective right into the war of independence, during which they were merely intensified. The author shows this in detail in chapter 3, which is dedicated to the challenges of public order and the police system during World War II. In the following chapter, he examines the (dominant) continuities and (less striking) discontinuities between the Vichy regime and France’s postwar government in order to finally present the confrontation of the police apparatus with the Parti du peuple algérien in the decade before the war of independence. This leads to a brief description of the period from 1954 onwards and the instrumentalization of the police for the increasingly desperate and therefore particularly brutal suppression of the independence movement. Ultimately, this escalation seems inevitable, as

France refused any kind of negotiated decolonization or the Algerian elites’ access to representation, participation, and power, often by means of unlimited violence.

The traces of this strategic mistake can still be seen in the recent past in both Algeria and France. For Samuel Kalman, even the latest attempts by the high-level historical commission headed by Benjamin Stora as well as President Macron’s apologies for individual crimes are not enough to overcome the burden of memories of colonial oppression. Kalman’s book is a stirring example of the potential historiography has to help acknowledge, and thereby perhaps alleviate, the pain that stems from this past through the unsparing and clearly formulated presentation of the past.

Leigh Gardner, *Sovereignty without Power: Liberia in the Age of Empires, 1822–1980* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 340 pp.

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Liberian historiography has not benefited from a large number of studies applying the kind of in-depth historical analysis that provides a complex understanding of the actions and reactions of different (not static) social groups in this part of the world as an integral part of African and global history.[1] Rather strictly nationalist and otherwise parochial considerations have dominated the scholarly agenda. In the 1980s

in particular, emerged the “Black Colonialism” narrative, which has remained popular ever since.[2] It has studied social and political inequalities since the early nineteenth century under the assumption that “black settler rule [...] was virtually identical to European colonial rule over African peoples”.[3] Furthermore, it has typically adopted a rigid perspective, pitting Liberians of diaspora heritage—the descendants of nineteenth-century settlers comprising free African Americans and emancipated enslaved people—against the indigenous majority. Indeed, as Mary H. Moran explained in 2004, “The ‘Black colonialism’ thesis has too often assumed an unbridgeable gulf between these sectors of Liberian society”.[4] Despite their international dimensions, the armed conflicts that ravaged Liberia between 1989 and 2003 only served to further solidify this easy explanation. In consequence, the “Black Colonialism” narrative has continued to overshadow a complex of overlapping and interconnected global, ethnic, and personal conflicts and tensions. To this point, Richard Reid has put forward that “in our modern rush to ‘stop’ conflict, perceiving it as uniformly a ‘bad thing’ which must be eradicated, we have too often been guilty of presentism, of historical foreshortening”.[5] So, while some scholars will likely read Leigh Gardner solely for her contribution to African economic history, I approach her book with the gaze of an Africanist with broader questions about political (e.g. networks), social (e.g. religious), and economic (e.g. technological) change and continuity in Liberia’s past.

Leigh Gardner’s important new book makes a timely contribution to the historical study of poverty in Africa against the

backdrop of imperial expansion and globalisation, innovating Liberian historiography in exciting ways. In particular, she compellingly argues that scholars studying political independence elsewhere in Africa, Asia, and Latin America during the Age of European Empires (and later) would benefit from learning about the challenges faced by the West African state. Although it gained independence in 1847, Liberia continuously struggled to maintain its sovereignty in the face of imperial bullying, as well as regional and internal strife. Her monograph brings together studies on colonial credit, foreign debt, and monetary regimes. It also asks critical questions about the ability of foreign investors to recreate colonial conditions: “How similar or different was the experience of independent states? Did interventions by more powerful states linked to money and debt simply replicate the conditions of formal colonial rule as theories of neocolonialism would suggest? Or did formal recognition of sovereignty – even in the context of relative poverty – change the story in some way [...] What did sovereignty mean in the age of empire?”

Leigh Gardner challenges the notion of Liberian exceptionalism by presenting an alternative comparative approach to analysing local economic and political trends. As she explains it, the Liberian experience bore “more in common with other independent states than it did with countries under formal colonial rule” (p. XVI) – a line that could be read as a direct rebuttal to the adherents of the “Black Colonialism” thesis. Her study draws on comparative examples from Latin America, Asia, and elsewhere on the African continent, especially Ethiopia.

In ten chapters—no small feat given Liberia’s challenging archival landscape—she examines the country’s resource endowments, political strategies for survival, and the operationalisation of the country’s political sovereignty by a Liberian elite seeking to accumulate further wealth. Her analysis of Liberia’s economic history gifts future generations of scholars annual indicators of the country’s economic performance, which were painstakingly collected and carefully pieced together. But those exasperated by the overconfidence too often displayed in the field of African economic history will enjoy her transparent and critical, even anthropological, treatment of these same figures and the records from which they were drawn.

Gardner also touches on various aspects of social and political history: from pre-existing indigenous institutions used to build trust and facilitate trade, such as the Poro and Sande societies; to the social conflicts that defined relations between richer and poorer migrants (and recaptives) from the Americas; to the ideologies that shaped local political parties; and the links between the loss of central government control over cash revenues and forced labour.

Ultimately, Leigh Gardner is concerned with the price of sovereignty from the perspective of what she calls “low capacity” states (p. 137). She presents a powerful study that focuses on long-run changes in economic growth in Liberia between 1847 and 1980, with an eye to the situation before the nineteenth century. I can only recommend that those interested in Liberia’s past and present use it to test pre-suppositions about the peculiarities of the country’s development. It will be of inter-

est to Africanists in general as well as to historians of Africa and the globe.

Notes

- 1 For a recent notable exception, see Carl Patrick Burrowes, *Between the Kola Forest and the Salty Sea: A History of the Liberian People before 1800* (n.p., 2016). Also noteworthy are recent studies exploring Black internationalism in relation to Liberia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. See, for example, Robert Murrery, *Atlantic Passages Race, Mobility, and Liberian Colonization* (University Press of Florida, 2023); Gerald Horne et al., *In Search of Liberty: African American Internationalism in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World*, vol. 38 (University of Georgia Press, 2021); Kristin L. Hoganson and Jay Sexton (eds.), *Crossing Empires: Taking U.S. History into Transimperial Terrain, American Encounters/Global Interactions* (Duke University Press, 2020).
- 2 Mary H. Moran, “A Review of „Power and Press Freedom in Liberia, 1830–1970: The Impact of Globalization and Civil Society on Media-Government Relations, by Carl Patrick Burrowes,” *Political Communication* (2006), 471.
- 3 D. Elwood Dunn, “Book Review,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 25, no. 4 (1987): 712–715.
- 4 For some original contributions to this line of inquiry, see Yekutiel Gershoni, *Black Colonialism: The Americo-Liberian Scramble For The Hinterland* (Westview Press, 1985).
- 5 Richard J. Reid, *Warfare in African History* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), xii.