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JEAN DEFOS DU RAU

(1914–1994)

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Jean Defos du Rau's name has often remained in the margins of both French, as well as the international scholarship in Geography, which has tended to concentrate more on « metropolitan » personalities of the discipline. And yet, Defos du Rau's seminal doctoral study *La Réunion, Étude de géographie humaine* (1958), is an outstanding thesis and a standard reference in any scientific inquiry into La Reunion, an island located between Madagascar and Mauritius. La Réunion, also known as the « old colony », incidentally became a French Overseas department in 1946. Indeed, few and far between are the experts who would dare leave out Jean Defos du Rau's name in their academic studies on La Reunion, since his thesis was a historical landmark in the emergence of the social sciences in the island, and is still holding that position today.

One may recall the modest echo and somewhat narrow range of his subsequent “metropolitan” research, in complete contrast to the pervasive influence of his thesis on the imaginary of those involved in the study of Reunionese society, as they continue to draw on his singular work. But the island admittedly remains a backwater of French scholarly production... Thus the question also remains as to why Jean Dufos du Rau deserves a place in the pantheon of *Geographers*.

The first argument that one can proffer is that Defos du Rau's thesis is nothing less than an outstanding epistemological benchmark in Reunion scholarship. His prose and his scientific postures combine forces to illuminate the modalities of the shift from Colonial Geography to Tropical Geography. It is then, a way to integrate into the memory of the discipline those small island spaces found in the South-West of the Indian Ocean,

marginalized in the studies on the history of thought in geographical colonial context where the "large islands" and major centres of European colonial empires figure prominently. Finally, in the project of "recovery" of the spaces of overseas France, implicitly impelled by Eugene Revert's thesis on Martinique (1949), followed by Defos de Rau's regional monograph on Reunion Island (1958) and by that of Guy Lasserre on Guadeloupe (1961), the work of the geographer holds a rather singular position. Hailed in high esteem by the great masters of the discipline, Rau's research is registered as a milestone in the corpus of French Geography theses of the period.

These elements are reasons valid enough to integrate into the bio-bibliographical gallery of *Geographers* the portrait of Jean Defos du Rau and expose his ideas on the tropical world.

Jean Defos du Rau (1914–1994)

I. From the south to south, JEAN DEFOS DU RAU'S biographical trajectory

Jean Defos du Rau was born on August 5th, 1914 in Dax, a few days before France's official entry into WWI. His family hailed from the lesser nobility in southwest France with a mentality and political commitment, at least for the majority of them, based on the ideological principles of social Catholicism, inherited from the Revolution. His grandparents were active militants in the *Sillon* (furrow), a political and secular movement attached to Catholicism whose objective was to rally Catholic workers against the anticlerical left. As a lawyer at the bar in the city of Dax, his father, Joseph Defos du Rau (1884–1970) was Member of Parliament for the region of Landes in 1919 and, from 1946 to 1956, elected representative of the MRP (Popular Republican Movement) representing the Christian Democrats. This militant environment influenced the political ideas of Jean Defos du Rau, the eldest in a family of five children.

Following his primary and secondary education in Dax, in 1932, J. Defos du Rau continued his studies in literature (*khâgne*) at the Lycée Montaigne in Bordeaux where he met Professor Louis Papy (1903–1990) who guided him to a career in Geography. Papy had been a teacher in Bordeaux since the previous year, also giving classes at the Arts Faculty since 1935, a prophetic prelude for a brilliant career entirely at Bordeaux University, at the Faculty and then, from 1945, at the direction of the Institute of Geography of this same university.

As an orator of exception, and « an admirable story-teller, whose spirit and humour dazzled the most demanding listener » (Bost 1990, 366), Papy was quick to woo the young student who unsurprisingly opted to teach and research in Geography. In the foreword to his thesis, Jean Defos du Rau recognizes this connection (which turned gradually into deep

friendship). He reiterates his debt to his 'master' for giving him 'twenty years of an education in Geography (Defos du Rau 1960, 7). The choice to embrace a career in Geography naturally led Rau to the doorstep of the Faculty of Arts in the capital of southwest France, where he followed lectures with his friend and future colleague, Henri Enjalbert (1910–1983). At the age of 23 years, Rau both obtained the *Agrégation*, France's high-level competitive exam, in history-geography (1937) and got married, subsequently obtaining a teaching post at the Lycée of Bayonne.

At the end of this turbulent period, between the months of August and November 1944, Defos du Rau wrote a series of short articles in the *Republican Resistance* "Journal of the Liberation Committee of Bayonne", in the form of a small booklet entitled *A few reflections on the so-called national Revolution*. One observes the great lucidity (and frankness) of the geographer concerning the policy of collaboration by Marshall Pétain and his propaganda. The skills of the author are emphasized in the preface by Gabriel Delaunay (Chairman of the Committee for the Liberation of the Gironde and First Deputy Mayor of Bordeaux), "The sharpness and the measure, the desire to understand and not to judge, the concern of the specific fact that we cannot discuss", are also those that will spur his analysis of human geography on Reunion.

In 1945, he was appointed at the Longchamps in Bordeaux (renamed Lycée Montesquieu in 1948). The establishment is part of the Lycée Montaigne where from 1946 another new teacher, the young Guy Lasserre (1920–2001), began his career after passing the *Agrégation* in Geography with flying colours. Guy Lasserre was a student at Saint-Cloud school, coming second at the competitive exam in 1946. Their paths will henceforth cross.

The Geography of Bordeaux inscribed the outside world in its program through its close relations with the local institutions, supporting the economic expansion of the city, adhering unhesitatingly to the colonial movement. The *Société de géographie commerciale de*

Bordeaux (Society of commercial geography of Bordeaux), created in 1874 by merchant and ship owner Marc Maurel (1826–1911) and Pierre Foncin (1841–1916). The latter was Associate Professor of History and graduated from the *Ecole Normale*. The *Société de géographie commerciale de Bordeaux* (Society of commercial geography of Bordeaux), created in 1874 by merchant and ship owner Marc Maurel (1826–1911) and the *normalien* Pierre Foncin (1841–1916) gave way to the *Colonial Institute* (1901). These organizations represent the founding pillars of the colonial expression of the city, through their investment in the introduction of courses on the subject.

A Chair was specially created in 1899, with the publication of journals devoted to the topic (Péhaut, 1994). Geographers like Pierre Camena d'Almeida (1865–1943), Henri Lorin (1866–1932), Max Sorre (1880–1962) and Henri Cavaillès (1870–1951) taught courses provided within these two circles and were the editors of the *Bulletin* of the Society and of the *Annals* of the Institute.

Despite these involvements, the teaching of colonial Geography between 1905 and the eve of the Second World War was relatively stagnant in spite of the efforts made by the municipality and the Faculty of Arts to legitimize it, by issuing, in parallel to the diploma of the Institute, a certificate of graduate studies integrated into the Bachelor of Arts of the Faculty (Zytnicki, 2008). In 1943, the appointment of Pierre Gourou (1900–1999) and Louis Papy as Associate Professor will boost the teaching of colonial geography. This term, permeable to contemporary movements of independence, is transformed into tropical geography. The Colonial Institute itself will be renamed *Institut de la France d'Outre-mer* (The Institute of Overseas France) in 1947 (ibid., 210). The same year, P. Gourou is appointed Professor at the College of France Chair for the Study of the tropical world. His departure from Bordeaux University leads L. Papy to teach tropical geography and become the Head of

the Secretariat General of the Institute. He will change both the title and the orientation of the publication, *Les Cahiers d'Outre-mer*.

In this environment, the study of the tropical space gradually emerges as one of the prominent signatures of the teaching of Geography in Bordeaux. Louis Papy will unhesitatingly guide his PhD students to research on the French overseas territories. Eugène Revert (1895–1952) was also appointed Associate Professor at Bordeaux in November 1947, having just completed the draft of his theses on Martinique. His enthusiasm for the Caribbean world convinced Guy Lasserre to undertake a doctoral research on Guadeloupe while Jean Defos du Rau chose La Reunion as his ground of predilection. At what point did Rau decide to undertake the long march of a PhD? What reasons led him to turn to La Reunion for his research? In the absence of primary sources such as personal correspondence, we are reduced to a few assumptions. Conducting a doctoral research on a tropical space is part of the genealogical filiation of Bordeaux geography and will satisfy the overseas departments ambitions of its proponents. It seemed therefore difficult for the candidate of the Faculty of Arts to avoid the temptation of researching on tropical horizons at the beginning of the 1947s.

The interest and the urgency of a geographical study were also anchored in the institutional and socio-economic changes that Martinique Guadeloupe, Guyana and Reunion experienced, heralding profound upheavals. Indeed, these "old colonies" chose to join the metropolis and became "*Départements*", a specific political affiliation called "*Départementalisation*". At the end of the Second World War, the claims of independence multiplied and cracked the faltering French imperial construction. General de Gaulle's Brazzaville speech (January 30, 1944) illustrates the possible political changes between the metropolis and its colonies. The question of how the colonial status should evolve was thus posed as early as 1945 for the sugar islands of the Antilles and the Indian Ocean as well as for the Guyanese territory. These former colonies chose integration to France by unanimously

adopting the law of departmentalization, on March 19, 1946, giving them the status of French Overseas department.

The move from a colonial regime to a situation of “coloniality” had the potential to seduce the geographer who was keen to identify the mechanisms of the evolution of the spatial organization and social and economic development of an overseas department. The subject was in coherence with contemporary times and seemed full of potential for the aspiring PhD student.

Jean Defos du Rau left Bordeaux in October 1948 accompanied by his wife and children. He took up a position as a teacher of history and geography at the Lycée Leconte de Lisle, in Saint-Denis, La Reunion. In parallel to his teaching, the geographer engaged almost daily in research and carefully explored his field of investigation to prepare his doctorate. He scoured the island thoroughly right down to the tiniest village, not an easy task despite its modest surface area (2 512 km²). Indeed the island’s road network was still very limited and impracticable during the rainy season. Benefiting from the generous attitude of the “Creole of Bourbon”, known for their hospitality and their commitment towards enhancing the understanding and knowledge of their island, Rau built for himself a network of local personalities between 1949 and 1954, which allowed him to gather a substantial corpus of valuable unpublished data to feed his doctoral synthesis.

Defos du Rau was appreciated for his skills, his scientific rigour and his frankness, gradually becoming "The Geographer of La Réunion", not only with his colleagues but also amongst the political and economic leaders of the land. His wife obtained a teaching position in the classics at the Juliette Dodu Secondary School. Students and parents also appreciated her. Early June 1954 however, a health issue of some gravity forced the Rau to return to France with his family. At the end of his convalescence he was seconded to the CNRS as Research Officer (1955–1959) under the auspices of Louis Papy. This new position allowed

him to concentrate on his two theses, which he defended on 29 November 1958 at the Institute of Geography of the Arts Faculty in Bordeaux. The jury was composed of distinguished intellectual personalities: Pierre Gourou, Charles Robequain (1897–1963), Hildebert Isnard (1904–1983), Henry Enjalbert, Louis Papy (Supervisor) as well as "the ethnologist of Bordeaux" Pierre Métais (1906–1998).

The very positive reception of his theses, which earned him the Bronze medal of the CNRS in 1961, responded brilliantly to the format of academic excellence. It guaranteed Defos du Rau the recognition of his peers, making him a member of the community of academics in Geography. The location of his research field and supported scientific hypotheses implicitly kept him in the category of specialists of the tropical world (island and rural). It is on the strength of this achievement that on May 6, 1960, Rau was appointed lecturer at the Department of Geography of the Faculty of Arts of Aix-en-Provence University. He carried out the essential part of his academic career in this same faculty where he would rise to the position of Professor in 1967.

His teaching gave a prominent place to the study of the Tropics, in particular to the issues of "under-development" and agriculture, but his lessons also bore on themes offered to BA students, such as the Geography of French regions and the Geography of Europe. The analysis of his notes brings to light the remarkable qualities of the Professor as both an academic of exceptional calibre and an outstanding pedagogue, chiselled by an experience of more than fifteen years at the secondary level. He was therefore particularly suited to prepare candidates for the *Agrégation*. This Defos du Rau carried out with military rigor, clearly marking out the candidates' weak and strong points on the sheets of his individualized lessons. If students dared to miss his tutorials, they were immediately removed from his list without further thought. If one were to go by the themes of the thesis supervisions he

undertook from 1968. The subjects explored development issues (Archet 1973 and 1974, Gérard 1974, Walter 1976, and Pinet des Forest 1976).

The supervision of Wilfrid Bertile's research paper and Jean-François Dupon's thesis symbolically extend Defos du Rau's own research on La Reunion, and more broadly, his work on the small island spaces of the South West Indian Ocean (Mascarenes and Seychelles). Wilfrid Bertile was Defos du Rau's student at Aix-en-Provence. Originally from Saint-Philippe (in southern Reunion), he was interested in the underdevelopment of his island caused by the migration of young Reunionese to the city. His very critical reflection on the migratory solutions set up by the political leaders following the work of Defos du Rau during the decade of 1960–1970, led Bertile to set out very early on the political path. Co-founder of the Socialist Party of Reunion (1972), his political career was riche: *Député* of Reunion from 1981 to 1986, Mayor of Saint-Philippe from 1971 to 1986 at the age of 26 and Secretary General of the Indian Ocean Commission from 2000 to 2004. His political commitment did not distance him from the university where he taught until 2007. W. Bertile has always preserved an endearing memory of his geographical training with Defos du Rau.

Jean-François Dupon was also very close to the geographer of Aix-en-Provence. JF.Dupon's remarkable comparative doctoral synthesis on the Mascarene Islands and the Seychelles (1977), was described as a monument by Hildebert Isnard (1979). After a short period at the University of Aix-Marseille, Dupon pursued a career as research director at Orstom (now IRD) in the Pacific.

Defos du Rau remained deeply attached to the topic which had been at the heart of his thesis, La Réunion. He visited the island several times, both in his capacity as researcher as well as for the work he carried out in March 1968 and March 1971 for the *Centre national de documentation des départements et territoires d'Outre-mer* (National documentation Center of the Overseas Departments and Territories). The supervision of Jean-François Dupont's

thesis (1977), and a teaching mission in September 1972 and March 1975 were other occasions to return to La Réunion. Mention must also be made of the crucial role he played in the organization and the coordination of the scientific direction of the first atlas devoted to the overseas departments, published jointly in 1975 by the CEGET and the CNRS. This study is nothing less than monumental (Bertile, 2017), a significant initiative in terms of the production of the French regional atlas. It also came as an innovation for the Departmental Services of the State, present in La Réunion, which immediately acquired a copy of the atlas. Jean Defos du Rau was by then Professor emeritus, invited on December 13, 1975 to present the Atlas of La Réunion to officials and policy makers. He did this in the company of his main collaborators, J-F. Dupon and Wilfrid Bertile. It would be his final visit to La Reunion. At the end of a very rich and eventful career, culminating in a well-deserved retirement, during which he indulged unreservedly in what was his favourite activity, hiking in the Pyrenees, Defos du Rau died on 3 December 1994 in Bordeaux, the same city that had been at the origin of his extraordinary academic trajectory as Geographer.

II. Between colonial geography and tropical geography

The significance of Jean Defos du Rau's doctoral work resides in the way it is illustrative of the epistemological shift from colonial geography to tropical geography in France, not to mention Rau's remarkable scientific output on his return to France, as attested by the impressive list of publications, which are also referenced in the bibliography of this article. His doctoral research in particular will be the focus within the ambit of this article. Defos du Rau's thesis took almost ten years to complete, a duration which was not uncommon at the time. His doctoral work became a "masterpiece" and both its theme and field would become an indisputable and enduring asset for the author throughout his career. If Jean Defos du Rau is commonly identified as a "tropicalist", the discipline recognizes him above all as the "specialist" of Reunion. Several levels of inquiry characterize his doctoral research. From

an epistemological point of view for Geographers, his PhD is a pertinent marker in the evolution of the scientific posture of a researcher immersed in a tropical environment. In the post-Second World War context, which also corresponded to the period of decolonization, Rau's work points to the replacement of the colonial discourse by its avatar, asserting the "coloniality of power" as defined by Ramon Grosfoguel (2004).

Using as a springboard Defos du Rau's scientific stance in a post-colonial situation in La Réunion, it is therefore possible, to interrogate the relationship between geographers and colonial heritage. Further, the remarkable exploitation of his thesis by local authorities is symptomatic of the condensation of the researcher's scientific hypotheses into a statement of dogmatic expertise. The ejection of Rau's doctoral synthesis out of his disciplinary field into the political arena will not be without consequence in the strategic choices made by the political leaders of Reunion Island to "plan out" the development of this insular space, beginning in the 1960s. The editorial limits of this paper oblige us to restrict the analysis of these different interrogations. This part will therefore consider the conditions of the concretization as well as the reception of Defos du Rau's PhD, and discuss the notion qualified as "*of colonial*" that contemporary perceptions attribute to him. The conclusion will assess the reality of the exploitation Rau's doctoral contribution as the basis of a large-scale project for Reunion.

The archive, the terrain and the consecration. In 1947, there were no tertiary institutions on the island and few researchers were given to using La Reunion as their field of investigation, an area which continued to conjure up a very remote and very exotic world.

It was only in 1970 that a university centre was created in Reunion to provide the first level of education in Law Economics, The Humanities and The Sciences. This structure remained affiliated with the metropolitan universities on which it depended for the delivery of

higher degrees (Master's, Doctorate). It was not until the opening of the Faculty of "Law and Economics" (followed by the Faculty of "Arts and Human Sciences", then by The Faculty of "Science and Technology") in 1982, that the University Centre of Reunion became a fully-fledged university.

Pending this, scientific knowledge on Reunion was thus at its inception. Since the discovery of the island (~ 1507), travel narratives, memoirs of the East India Company, the various reports of inquiries commissioned by the Higher Council of Bourbon constituted a substantial corpus of evidence on the spatial perceptions of the island and its inhabitants. Among the documents available, some stand out through their outstanding scholarship and constitute here the basic references on which any research is based. Although incomplete and partial, we can cite: *Le Mémoire pour servir à la connoissance particulière de chacun des habitants de l'Isle de Bourbon*, Antoine. Boucher (1710), *Voyage dans les quatre îles des mers d'Afrique*, Bory de Saint-Vincent (1804), *Voyage aux colonies orientales*, Auguste Billiard (1822), *Essai de statistique of the island of Bourbon*, Pierre Philippe Urbain Thomas (1828), *Études sur les plaines des Palmistes et des Cafres de l'île de la Réunion*, Textor of Ravisi (1850) and *Notes sur l'île de la Réunion* by Louis Maillard (1862). It should be noted that this literature was exhumed and published by archivists and historians of the island, who were also contemporaries of Rau.

While the famous "Atlases of France and her colonies" multiplied during the nineteenth century, such works generally provided little relevant information on La Reunion and in reality were a synthesis of previous studies, limited to simple updating of available statistical data. If however rare texts of geography do appear between 1909 and 1938, it is only in the wake of the Second World War that specific geographical knowledge on La Reunion increased, in parallel to, or associated with Defos du Rau's research (Ch. Robequain 1947, J. Blache 1949 and H. Isnard 1950, 1952, 1953 and 1956). This brief inventory brings

to the fore the absence of consistent geographical reports which would have enabled the profiling of the subject of his thesis, and the importance of archives to build statistical data over a long period. On the subject of demographical change, Defos du Rau emphasizes in the opening of his chapter VI on population, "the only certainty given by the figures ... is that they are false" (1960, 267), a remark which was taken up with humor by Paul Veyret (1912–1988) in his account of the thesis (1961).

The geographer then had to patiently delve into the resources of the East India Company and the French Ministry of Overseas to reconstruct the history of population growth in La Reunion ... The cartographic data is likewise meagre. Large-scale mapping is incomplete. The map commonly used is the one devised by the "forester" Paul Lépervanche, at 50 000 which dates from 1878. It was first updated by Ulysse Robert in 1906 (to 100 000) and a second time in 1934 by the geography services of Madagascar ... In order to study land tenure and draw up his typology of farms, Defos du Rau used the land plot plans preserved in the Departmental Archives ... It is thus easy to understand the solid connivance that connects him to fellow archivists and historians, whom the geographer presents as his "true friends": Yves Pérotin (1922–1981) the chief curator of the Archives of Reunion for the period 1952–1957, Albert Lougnon (1905–1969), the scholarly historian who was Defos du Rau's colleague at Lycée Leconte de Lisle, as well as the Reverend Father Jean Barassin (1911–2001), all authors of major studies on the history of La Reunion.

The field. During the 1950s, the island's communication network was still scant and barely accessible. Paved roads ("*blackées*") were few and far between (131 km for 736 km when Defos du Rau arrived on the island). The coast road was not the ideal means of transport for the automobile, and an upland route called La Montagne (the Mountain) was used to commute between the main towns and the western part of the island. To travel right round the island, the Chemin de la Plaine (from Saint-Benoît to Saint-Pierre) came in handy. As far as

any exploration of the interior of La Réunion was concerned, the only option was to go on foot using her network of trails, which were known as "*marronnage*" (or runaway) tracks as they had been used by fugitives during the slavery period. Thus, Rau was confronted with a harsh field of doctoral investigation that required of the geographer, a real physical investment. It involved long walks inside the "cirques", and broad valleys, which were the remnants of Reunion's volcanoes. These culminated in visits to their "*ilettes*" (islets) and to the peaks of volcanic landforms, which were essential objects of research for his secondary thesis. Indeed, any visit to the *Piton de la Fournaise* always involved at this time the organization of a real expedition with guides and porters for a period of several days. The journey began on foot from the Piton Villers located in the Plaine des Cafres.

We must therefore recognize Rau's prowess and exploits in gathering in situ substantial knowledge. He spared neither his time nor his person (nor even his family) to carry out his study of human geography, which, in the final analysis, embraced the entirety of La Reunion. The field of investigation also reveals the identity of Defos du Rau's sources of information, an intricate network of connections: upon his arrival in 1947, by virtue of his status, Jean Defos du Rau was quickly integrated into the circle of the Creole bourgeoisie of Saint-Denis, some of whose members were curious to know more about his doctoral project and, when necessary, keen to open up doors, - both institutional and sometimes more personal, to facilitate his research.

Defos de Rau also benefitted from the local education system whose teachers, scattered in the different municipalities of the island, gave him valuable contacts to discover the rural environment of the *Hauts de l'île* (the uplands). His confessional sensibility moreover facilitated his relations with the religious representatives of the island who evidently elicited respect from the inhabitants and exercised authority over them. On the strength of their interaction with a large number of their parishioners, most of whom came from the lower rungs of society, the clergy had first hand knowledge of the sometimes abject socio-economic realities of the island. Rau assimilated this component of Reunionese society, consisting of nearly 75% of the population, to a " sub-proletariat ". As early as in the introduction to his study (p.16), Defos du Rau does not hesitate to assert "that this sub-proletariat,

which includes two-thirds of the population, has been left in the dark and poverty, as a result of the passivity of leaders who practice a policy of the least effort "(1960, 6).

Lastly, as a researcher and representative of a tertiary institution, most administrative services received Defos de Rau with deference when he needed particular data; he made friends with a few coordinators, with whom he shared the results of his investigations (Water and Forest Services, Department of Agriculture, The Prefecture,...). While it is true that Defos du Rau's sources of information changed over time, for most of them, in the "sphere of power", it would not only be unfair but also inaccurate to overstate their importance.

If the expression "sphere of power" is quite adequate and quite vague, for Reunion in the 1950s, it refers to "Gros-Blancs", representatives of the state (the Prefect for example) and politicians. The term "Gros-Blancs" means in Creole, the grand old "white" families who have managed to obtain most of the agricultural land on the coast. The word is "synonymous with land wealth" (Huguet, 2001). This position has frequently allowed them to gain access to political functions, and to perpetuate a socio-economic system favourable to their interests. At the time of residence of J. Defos du Rau, their power was challenged by supporters of the local Communist Party, led by Dr. Raymond Vergès (1882–1957).

Notwithstanding, the positions presented in the introduction to his thesis show his independence of mind, and his critical lucidity vis-à-vis "his Creole friends" from whom he sought indulgence in his foreword for being frank in his judgments, with "severe and harsh » statements against them. The enthusiastic reception of his study as well as the financial assistance allotted to him for its publication by the General Council of La Réunion and the Chamber of Commerce prove that they did not resent Defos de Rau's attitude.

The Prefect of the period Jean Perreau-Pradier (1911–1981) pressured the Departmental Assembly to obtain this aid together with the decisive action of the "great sugar magnate" Émile Hugot (1904–1993) at the consular level (Defos du Rau, 1960, 9). The ambiguity that surrounds these two personalities today feeds in part the hasty judgments on

the political positioning of Defos du Rau's work. On this ambiguity, we can recall the controversial memory left by the Prefect Perreau-Pradier in La Réunion (1956–1963). For the left wing of La Reunion, he represents a figure *par excellence* of "post-colonial oppression", not hesitating to resort to electoral manipulations in order to oust the Communists and for his zealous application of "the wicked ordinance" of Michel Debré (1912–1996), according to which: "the officials of the State in service in the DOM whose behaviour is likely to disturb public order can be, on the proposal of the prefect and without other formalities, recalled from Office in Metropolitan France "(15 October 1960). 13 officials, members or supporters of the Communist Party Reunion were thus obligatorily transferred "to the metropolis".

Reception and consecration. When his *Study of Human Geography* was published in 1960, it became an instant object of laudatory reports in the leading Geography journals such as those of Max Derruau and Charles Robequain in the *Annales de géographie* (No. 374, 1960 and No. 377, 1961), André Meynier in *Norvois* (No. 1, 1961) and Paul Veyret in the *Revue de géographie alpine* (No. 2, 1961). The jury who evaluated him in 1958 had already expressed its satisfaction by unanimously by conferring upon him the highest grade ("*Très Honorable*"). Charles Robequain who was present at the defence of Rau's thesis, did not hesitate to prophesy in the *Annals of Geography* that "the work of J. Defos du Rau will, for a long time, remain fundamental for the knowledge of this island [...] but also for its economic and social promotion", (1961, 92). André Meynier (1901–1983) likewise saluted Defos de Rau in the review *Norvois*: "this thesis – one of the best, if not the best, among the batch of five or six excellent theses that have come out of the presses for a year". Recognizing in this study a model of Regional Geography written in a "strict Vidalian obedience", he noted the author's "particular gift of literary expression (...) behind which hovers, impalpable, but present, the shadow of Leconte of the Isle "(sic). Finally, with regard to the amplitude of this work,

Meynier raised the question of whether Defos de Rau will be listened to, "will he even be read by those who should, to get a rule of action?"(1961, 244).

Anticipating the echo of this question, the local press and Defos du Rau's "friends" had already trumpeted the success and importance of his study around the island. In a rather short, but laudatory text, Léonce Sallez of the newspaper *La Démocratie*, agreed that this study represented "a great intellectual and social work" (June 10, 1960). In the same spirit, and at the invitation of the editors of the *Recueil de documents et travaux inédits pour servir à l'histoire de la Réunion* (Collection of documents and unpublished works to serve the history of La Réunion), Jacques Savin, Rau's colleague at Leconte de Lisle high school, undertook a very detailed exegesis of his friend's PhD (1960), whose analysis he unreservedly applauded. Although Jacques Savin pointed out that "the local opinion" could be offended and "hostile to certain interpretations", he assured that it had quasi-unanimously hailed the success of a "perfectly conscientious and loyal piece of work". Indeed, if both the academic world as well as the various government services in Reunion acclaimed Defos du Rau's thesis, the inner circle of the "Creoles de Bourbon" remained aloof. The limited number of copies of the thesis sent to Reunion Island implies a fairly restricted and highly targeted distribution. The Academy Inspector and Vice-Rector, Hippolyte Foucque (1887–1970) wrote a rather long chronicle in the local newspaper, the *Journal de l'île*, (where Foucque was also a longstanding associate, paying tribute to the "masterly work" of Defos du Rau. After explaining rather eloquently the different parts that structured the main thesis, Foucque pointed at Rau's stigmatizing remarks on Creole society and its "incredibly backward past". Foucque remarked that some of Defos du Rau's comments resorted to essentializing a few individual reflections on Reunion Islanders.

Having posited such reservations, the Inspector of the Academy nevertheless recognized in Defos du Rau's work a "monumental work" and concluded that "whomsoever

henceforth writes on Reunion, shall neither be nor should be indifferent to it" (6 July 1960). Another discordant tone should be highlighted here, which appears in a reader's letter published in the *Balai* (June 29, 1960). The letter is signed by a "Creole of Honor" who rebels against Rau's anecdotal judgments, which were very disdainful, according to him, of La Reunion and her image. One may surmise that this "Creole of Honor" is part of the inner circle of "Creole friends" that the geographer met during his stay in Reunion.

While praising Defos du Rau's integrity as he "told very harsh truths that it was necessary to say harshly", the editor-in-chief, Roger Guichard, agreed with his reader and regretted the charges made by the geographer, "Who, despite the veracity of his declarations, was not directly linked to the work he has achieved" (June 29 and July 2, 1960). Insignificant and barely perceptible though this incident was at that time, it formed tiny cracks in the "fervent monument to the glory of Bourbon" erected by the geographer [according to his own formula (Defos 1960, 10)]. They prefigured the more radical contemporary critics who will later strive to demonstrate that the Defos du Rau's work deserved to be inscribed on the memorial of colonization.

A colonial thesis? In the early 1980s, the growth of research on Reunion, energized by the establishment of a local university centre, helped to widen scientific knowledge on the island. The studies that emerged during this period, whatever the sensitivity of the researcher, the approach and the discipline, made reference to Defos du Rau's PhD. Since the 1960s, it has indeed been considered as one of the seminal works in social sciences produced in Reunion. The very broad thematic scanning carried out by Rau allows each of the disciplinary fields to recognize in his study the elements that are close to him, and to reinvest them in a critical way to build the development of his own research object.

The systematic re-interpreting of the work of Defos du Rau with a time gap of more than forty years and in a very different socio-economic context from that which the

geographer had lived through during the 1950s, led unsurprisingly to the discreet emergence of much more critical appreciations of the geographer's work (Marimoutou, 1990, Benjelloun, 2008, Germanaz, 2009, Huyghues-Belrose, 2012). In the context of Post-Colonial Studies, the thesis appears to some readers to be a piece of anthology of colonial production. It is indeed difficult not to consider it as a colonial expression of the geographical research of the 1950s, and it would be wrong to defend the contrary. But to attribute to him abruptly the label of colonialism also seems all too reductive.

Further, to position oneself thus is almost tantamount to a sententious and definitive judgment, further prohibiting us to take into account the complexity that surrounds this geographer's discourse, albeit unmistakably imprinted with coloniality. As concerns the idea of coloniality, according to R. Grosfoguel, it refers to "the reproduction and maintenance of the old colonial ethno-racial hierarchies in the post-colonial world" (2007, 109). It is a form of "cultural racism" in Reunion Island leading the metropolitan representatives of power to pursue the imposition of political, economic and cultural models in contradiction with local resilience.

If it is not possible here to unravel at length the many intricacies that come into play in the expression of the "geographical explanation" advanced by Defos du Rau on Reunionese spatialities, (sometimes formulated in a colonial tone), we will limit ourselves to the analysis of its most obvious articulations. The structure and content of his thesis needs to be recalled beforehand. *Réunion, study of human geography* is a regional monograph whose outline derives, for its main features, from the implicit model of Albert Demangeon (1872–1940)'s thesis entitled *Plaine picarde* (1905). The study pivots around four parts: the environment, the setting and the past, the land and the men, their lives and the regional activities, Reunionese problems.

The theses written by E. Revert (1949) and G. Lasserre (1961) espouse the same formal structure, except that the former, a specialist of Martinique, introduces an unpublished final chapter on "the life in Martinique". In the latter, he analyses the folklore, the magic practices, the "pre-logical mentality" of the inhabitants, politics, the question of colour, in short he innovates by a proposition "with the indecisive borders between human geography and sociology" (Revert, 1949, 424). In his foreword, Eugene Revert indicates that he conceived his thesis "in the classical form of a regional study [...] to study in a word this reciprocal action of nature on man and man on nature which is the very heart of geography. If his approach "sticks" to the Vidalian paradigm, the geographer indulges in a departure from the orthodoxy of the regional monograph by proposing an incursion into the territory of ethnology that he presents as « *Le chapitre sur la démographie marque le terme quasi traditionnel d'une étude de ce genre et seules les conclusions devraient suivre. Il paraît cependant utile, dans le cas présent d'y ajouter un court essai sur la vie martiniquaise* »; ("The chapter on demography marks the quasi-traditional term of a study of this kind and only the conclusions should follow. It seems useful, however, in this case to add a short essay on the life of Martinique ") (1949, 424).

This originality, unanimously appreciated by his colleagues who underline the humour (Papy, 1951, 275), undoubtedly influenced Defos du Rau in the drafting of his final chapter where he paints a severe portrait of "Creole civilization". In a similar final chapter, *les problèmes guadeloupéens (Guadeloupe's problems)*, G. Lasserre did not venture into the anthropological field, thus avoiding burdening himself with an analysis of the mentalities and cultural traits of the Guadeloupean population.

It is undoubtedly in this development that the colonial expression of the geographer is at its most sensitive, even if it is present throughout the 700 pages of his work. The reading of the thesis inevitably challenges the reader today through its rhetoric of colonial discourse in a text with scientific pretensions. In rare places (Chapter XI, Ethnic Abilities, pp. 495–496), one

sees outrageous formulations whose presence in a doctoral work would be totally unacceptable today, even if we must avoid interpreting such information in the light of the present time. We can schematically distinguish three or four topoi grouping the statements of coloniality in the geographer's text.

The implacable superiority of the European model. The argumentation, the analysis as well as the demonstration developed by Defos du Rau on the geographical realities of the island are built in constant and implicit reference to the model of "European civilization". This Europeanocentric position is based on the author's indisputable axiom (and still widely shared at the time) of the intellectual relevance and effectiveness of the "modern" techniques of civilization present in Europe". The qualifiers used to describe "Creole civilization", or that of "*Les Hauts*" (the Uplands), embodied by the "modes/type of living" of the *Petits Blancs* (Poor Whites), are introduced by a recurrent device placing the social, cultural and economic situations of Reunion in a systematically negative opposition to the "European model".

The three "isms" of the tropical world: determinism, naturalism, culturalism. It is surprising to note from the pen of the geographer, whose culture inevitably incorporates the knowledge of "possibilism" of Vidal de la Blache (1845–1918), the convocation of a natural and cultural determinism to explain by implacable causality many traits of Reunionese society. Thus (page 21), "Creole indolence is not an empty word. Do not take it in the pejorative sense, [warns the author]. The Island way of life is the consequence of the "climate of the Isles"; who claims to ignore it [...] ignores the psychological element essential to the understanding of the human geography of Bourbon "; or again: "Fatalism and indolence reign, [...] recognize [...] it is only to admit that the climate conditions the temperament" (315).

In the cultural register, concerning the population (p. 15): "the population, so colourful, that inhabits it [...] is in fact a piece of French population, bearing strongly the stamp of the paternalistic and polite 19th century [...], the entirety in the tropical fashion, that

is to say, with this accent of carefreeness, [...] of no effort and languor ". On the economic situation in 1946–1947: "Indolence and fatalism, African or Asiatic, had quickly won over the whites" (p. 523). These appreciations, which can be interpreted as marks of coloniality, are above all the astonishing signs of the resilience, during the 1950s, of explanatory topos formulated in the nineteenth century to mask the misunderstanding and ignorance of the tropical world, experienced by colonizers, facing a nature and cultures that were totally alien to them.

An "essentialisation" of the other ... by the transmission of hackneyed ethnotypes. We will not repeat the terms describing the "aptitudes" of the various communities that make up the diversity of the population (pp. 495–496), these are the passages that have been most frequently exhumed from the book. The characterization proposed by Defos du Rau does not belong to him; he is only summarizing in his literary verve the fictional representations of "the other" which had, since the end of the eighteenth century already been elaborated by travellers as well as by the upper echelons of Creole society. As C. Marimoutou (1990) writes, thus "takes shape and sense the scientific misunderstanding" where "the gaze can be guided by previous writings" and the scientific text assumes the "status of fiction". The author adds: "it leads to the paradox that "scientific" writing becomes hyper-literature and enters the inter-textual chain of Reunionese literature" (1990, 43–45).

The other point one can raise here is the hypothesis of the effacement of colour in the thesis of Defos du Rau, where "the Creole civilization" becomes the only solid reference of Bourbonnais society, its other components remaining too impenetrable to the period of its investigations: [p. 471], chapter, Urban life (on the lifestyles of Chinese and Indian Muslims): "It must be made clear that basically the secret life of these Asian environments is still poorly known." If Defos de Rau's colour erasure posture is demonstrated by the primary place he accords to "Creole Society" for whom the questions of "race" and "Little Whites" are

essential, the existence of an astonishing map, “testing the colour distribution in Reunion Island (Fig 38, p 298) goes against the grain of the erasure hypothesis, which must then be rethought and nuanced.

Without wishing to downplay the perceptible postures of coloniality in Defos du Rau's study, whose enunciation should not be interpreted as an *ad hominem* charge, we must consider the political, intellectual and economic contexts, both local and international, as well as the period during which the researcher wrote his thesis. It is also necessary to integrate the positioning of his colleagues and of the academic world of geography with regard to the colonial question in order to understand the leniency and the fervent welcome that his work benefitted from. Through the intercession of his thesis jury, academia felt little embarrassment in reading his text and conferring him the highest distinction possible.

Of the members of the thesis panel, Pierre Gourou, Hildebert Isnard and Pierre Métais (representing ethnology) were undoubtedly the better armed, or the most sensitive to the colonial question; and yet no criticism of Defos de Rau essentialist remarks was found in their evaluation. In 1987, without any reference to the colonial tone of Defos du Rau's thesis, Etienne Dalmasso once again praises this "admirable" work, which for him remains "a point of reference and an excellent introduction to the understanding of Reunion Island and the sugar islands "(page 108).

To understand such benevolence, two factors seem to have played favourably in the case of Defos du Rau: the first was that his work judiciously illustrates the transition from a colonial geography to a tropical geography, under the benevolent sponsorship of P. Gourou. Without wishing to overestimate the influence of P. Gourou, it was still deep in Defos du Rau. If the latter was no longer a student when the specialist of Tonkin was appointed to Bordeaux, the geographer acknowledges in his thanks the seminal contribution of Gourou's work in his reflection. The place of the indispensable, but not decisive, physical environment, the

expression of the human densities on the ground, and the facts of civilization are some of the principal contributions made by Rau who had grasped the conceptual shift made since the mid-1950s by Gourou in favour of a tropical geography, even if one is still some distance from the *Terres de Bonne Esperance* (1982).

This was a reality that his evaluators were most understanding of, and attenuated their perception of the marks of coloniality. The second refers to residual colonial practices that were still widely accepted among geographers (Suret-Canal, 1948 and 1994), both in their technical aspects and as a support for development towards the areas designated under the term "underdeveloped". In fact, geographers of the period adhered to the colonial movement more in view of the advantages that underdeveloped countries could obtain from it than out of pure imperialist ideology. As practicing Catholics defending social Catholicism, Jean Defos du Rau and his wife have never been members of any political party. Pascal Clerc in *All colonialists? French geographers and colonial ideology* (2011), traced to perfection this posture.

To conclude on the importance of the "monument" built by Defos du Rau and its influence on the institutional bodies of Reunion Island, it must be observed that although his reception was rather nuanced among his "Creole friends", on the side of administration, senior officials as well as politicians, his work was a real scientific guarantee for the socio-economic policies which have been implemented since the process of Departmentalization. Defos du Rau thoroughly analyses the themes of the Reunion educational system and its deficiencies, the overpopulation of the island, the modernization of her economy and the alteration of her environmental resources (the issue of deforestation and subsequent intense erosion). By profiling in the last part his "search for solutions" for the future, he participated implicitly but certainly in the reformulation of the large scale projects that were planned by the metropolitan

political powers in the early 1960s, following the trip by General de Gaulle and his prime minister, Michel Debré to the island in July 1959.

Drawing from these elements, the alarmist conclusions posited by Jean Dufos du Rau bore on the explosive risk of overpopulation that awaited the island. His urgent plea to devise a migration policy to metropolitan France did not fall on deaf ears, as the authorities set about to devising a massive migration plan; even if, in the final analysis, such a programme has also proved to be quite ambiguous, in both form and justification.

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