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Other radical geographies: tropicality and decolonisation in twentieth-century French geography

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Abstract: *This paper analyses the anti-colonialist commitment of a circuit of French geographers who variously criticised French colonialism or directly contributed to decolonisation movements in Africa in the central decades of the twentieth century. Based on the analysis of works and unpublished archives of these scholars and activists, I argue that their work can be considered as a specific French contribution to early critical and radical geographies, exposing the complexity and diversity which constitutes the plurality of geographical traditions, to be understood through their stories of political dissidence. I extend current scholarship analysing histories and theories around the movement of ‘radical geography’ as well as geographers’ works on decolonisation, postcolonialism, and anticolonialism, stressing the need for diversifying geographical research’s standpoints beyond Western canons. I especially call for rediscovering other critical and radical geographical traditions from outside the Anglosphere, eventually French anti-colonialist geographies, whose exponents directly collaborated with colleagues from the South, especially the Maghreb and Western Africa. Studying these traditions is indispensable to decolonise geography and make it more international, cosmopolite, and activist. This paper also extends recent contributions demonstrating that, in imperial ages, geography showed more potentiality for inspiring political dissidence than what was commonly believed.*

Keywords: Decolonisation; Anti-colonialism; Radical Geographies; Other geographical traditions; Francophone Africa

This paper analyses French anti-colonialist geographies of the mid-twentieth century and their relations with decolonisation movements, especially in the Maghreb and Western Africa. Having consulted original texts and archival sources, I reconstruct works and networks of French geographers who variously criticised colonialism or contributed to Africa’s

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decolonisation, such as Jacques Weulersse (1905–1946), Yves Châtaigneau (1891–1969) and André Prenant (1926–2010), with a special focus on the figures of Jean Dresch (1905–1994) and Jean Suret-Canale (1921–2007), whose archives allow for new understandings of the neglected roles that anti-colonialist and socialist geographies played in the Francophone world. My argument is twofold. First, I argue that histories of radical geography still largely overlook non-Anglophone critical and radical traditions, while more work should be done to investigate engaged geographies that were produced outside the disciplinary and linguistically dominating canons. It was the case with Francophone geographical traditions, which cannot be viewed uniquely through the lenses of North American ‘radical geography’ and should be contextualised in longer French radical histories. Second, this case exposes how decolonisation further demonstrates the epistemic, disciplinary, and political variety of geographical traditions: there is no such thing as a coherent and stable ‘geography’, but rather diverse assemblages of plural geographies and geographers.

In their recent book *Spatial histories of radical geography*, Trevor Barnes and Eric Sheppard express their wish to overtake common ‘Clark University-centered’ stories of North American radical geography, including ‘selected places outside that core’ (Barnes and Sheppard 2019, 4). Yet, despite the generous efforts of some authors and some exceptional pieces of scholarship published in that book, the only samples that can be considered as being simultaneously outside North America as well as Anglophonia are the chapters on Japan, Mexico, and France. Here, Yann Calbérac notes that North American models did not find a real correspondent in France, also because in French (like in other Latin languages), the word *radical* has completely different meanings than in English, recalling political opportunism rather than dissidence. Therefore, it would be anachronistic to seek ‘Radical Geography’ where one would never find it. For Calbérac, only in recent years (roughly from the early 2000s) have ‘French-style radical geographies’ emerged because of closer connections with Anglophone scholarship (Calbérac 2019; Calbérac and Morange 2012). I would instead contend that ‘French-style’ critical and radical geographies, if we use these two definitions as a continuum rather than distinct labels (Ferretti 2019b), have deeper endogenous roots coming back to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

While this does not mean that Francophone traditions are more ‘critical’ or more ‘anticolonial’ than others, I would stress the importance of rediscovering this bulk of critical thinking, also considering that most Anglo-American geographers have taken authors such as Foucault, Lefebvre and others as their French ‘critical’ references, neglecting voices which were more directly inserted in the discipline of geography. Yet, the disciplinary belonging of these French anticolonial geographers was not always straightforward: Châtaigneau was trained as a geographer and gained scholarly notoriety as a co-author of the celebrated *Géographie universelle* of Vidal de la Blache’s followers, but mainly worked as a diplomat. Suret-Canale held positions as a geographer for most of his career but was often considered as a historian. Despite being ‘canonised’ as the Chair of Geography in the prestigious Sorbonne, also Dresch had a rather unorthodox approach to the discipline, given that he was a physical geographer (Dresch 1966) but his most original contributions can be arguably classified as social and political geography. This confirms how studies on geographical traditions should be inclusive: critical geographical knowledge was not uniquely produced in universities, or by consecrated academics, or under the label of ‘certified’ geography.

This allows extending and complementing scholarship by Dan Clayton arguing that ‘little historical attention has been paid to geographers’ entanglements with postwar decolonization’ (Clayton 2020, 5). While Clayton concludes, after a comparative survey of geographers from different countries, that: ‘The passing of geography’s empire might be characterized as an uneven and tentative journey rather than an abrupt or decisive demise’ (Clayton 2020, 15), I would further contend that there cannot be a unique definition or periodization of ‘geography’s empire’, given the variety of unorthodox voices which rendered geography so diverse. Thus, a focus on specific authors and situations is needed at each time. Furthermore, rediscovering these French anticolonial authors is not only a way to fill lacunas in the archives: their works and trajectories can open new conceptual spaces for radical, postcolonial and anti-colonial geographies, fostering dialogues with current scholarship in these fields.

In addition to decolonisation, the notion of anticolonialism has been recently discussed by Andy Davies, noting how diverse sets of anticolonialisms have been ‘productive of new geographies of the world’ (Davies 2019, 2). According to Davies, the importance of investigating these experiences lies in the fact that they are not limited to the past or to simple reactions against

colonial abuses. Instead, these are critical ways to reflect on spaces and forms of domination, reinforcing ‘a geographical anticolonial thought’ (Davies 2019, 161). French anticolonial geographies give a decisive contribution to Davies’ argument that anticolonialism has been characterised by a plurality of political approaches going often beyond simple nationalism. The presence of prominent anticolonial scholars in central colonial countries in the middle of the twentieth century proves how anti-colonialism is potentially connected to wider struggles rather than to mere nationalistic claims, which can degenerate in provincialism and xenophobia.

Davies also argues that: ‘Anticolonial geographies are therefore closely linked to, but different from post- and decolonial approaches’ (Davies 2019, 12). This helps making a connection between my case and other recent critiques of geography’s imperial spaces, discussing geography’s ‘engagements with colonialism and its afterlives’ (Legg and Jazeel 2019, 3) and committing to global ‘histories from below’ (Featherstone 2019). These include Tariq Jazeel’s recent book *Postcolonialism*, arguing for reinforcing the existing links between radical geographies and postcolonial and subaltern studies. The increasing rediscovery of other geographical traditions opens exceptional possibilities for dialogue with some of Jazeel’s claims, especially when he argues that ‘postcolonialism itself is an inherently geographical intellectual enterprise’ (Jazeel, 2020, i). According to Jazeel, both geography and postcolonialism represent ‘an intention towards pluralization, towards spatial difference’ (Jazeel, 2019, 2). Importantly, these processes of pluralisation start from critiques to geography’s imperial pasts (without denying the importance of dissidence) to discuss how a ‘critical geographical expertise can speak productively to the broader challenge of imagining postcolonial futures’ (Jazeel 2019, 21). Jazeel concludes that scholarship should be politically relevant, and albeit much of postcolonial scholarship deals with representations, this does not deny the materiality of politics, which ‘must take positions’ (Jazeel 2019, 229).

Despite all the limitations that I discuss below, anti-colonialist French geographies demonstrate the importance of scholarly works that take part in these decisions and intervene directly in the operations’ fields, as Dresch and friends did in countries such as Algeria, Morocco and Guinea. This attitude still challenges mainstream models in which, for Jazeel: ‘A few privileged intellectuals dictate a universal agenda for responsible geographical knowledge production without recourse to the vagaries and singularities of research contexts’ (Jazeel 2019, 199-200).

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This confirms the oft-asserted need for producing knowledge from inside the problematics which are investigated rather than looking at ‘research objects’ from nowhere. The trajectories of Dresch, Suret-Canale and others provide examples of transdisciplinary and transnational commitment that can still nourish these perspectives, as well as examples of voluntarist engagement and of the use of geography as a critical tool to read social and political realities.

This paper also extends and puts in relation two broad strands of scholarship. The first addresses ‘other geographical traditions’ and calls for reinclusion of critical and non-canonised authors in the discipline (Ferretti 2019a; Jöns, Monk, and Keighren 2017), to broaden ‘disciplinary histories, which remain Anglo-American and exclusionary’ (Craggs and Neate 2020, 899), arguing for the importance of studying decolonisation from different linguistic traditions (Clayton and Kumar 2019; Sarmiento 2019). This includes the recent flourishing of works on histories of critical and radical geographies (Mitchell 2014; Heynen 2013). The second addresses matters of tropicity and development (Power 2019). In their recent book on French geographer Pierre Gourou (1900–1999), Gavin Bowd and Dan Clayton discuss the connections between tropicity and decolonisation, already noted by other authors (Power and Sidaway 2004), by observing that Gourou’s key book *Les pays tropicaux* ‘was written and reviewed on the cusp of independence in many parts of the world’ (Bowd and Clayton 2019, 18). Gourou was targeted by anti-colonial authors such as Aimé Césaire as an example of a geographer alleging the civilisational superiority of temperate Europe over the tropical world, that is: ‘There was never a great tropical civilisation ... and a geographical curse affected tropical countries’ (Césaire 1950, 20).¹ While Bowd and Clayton nuance these judgements and widely question this *damnatio memoriae* for an author whose work was not devoid of politically ‘progressive’ aspects, they nonetheless admit how Gourou ‘became part of what Gary Wilder terms the “reformist network” and “administrative-scientific complex”’ (Bowd and Clayton 2019, 147) mostly functional in European colonial and neo-colonial endeavours. In what follows, I show how, in the same generation of French geographers, there were clearer and radical voices opposing colonialism.

¹ All quotes from sources originally in French have been translated by the author.

For doing that, I take advantage from exceptional archival sources such as the huge Dresch collection at the Library of the University Paris 8, partially online in the database *Octaviana* but not completely inventoried, the likewise impressive Suret-Canale collection at the Departmental Archives of Seine-Saint-Denis in Bobigny, and the Paris *Archives de la Préfecture de Police*, showing how these geographers were watched by the authorities due to their unorthodox political engagement. This is also an occasion to further investigate the potentiality of radical archives for playing new roles in political debates, extending Paul Griffin's claims for 'making usable pasts' with 'provisions of radical histories' (Griffin 2018, 501), but also for challenging commonplaces in the history of disciplines (eventually geography) by showing unexpected connections and inside stories of the production of knowledge.

In the first part of my paper, I discuss some early cases of anti-colonial critiques in twentieth-century French geography until the ruptures of the years following the Second World War, when wider cultural movements such as *Négritude* anticipated the political independence of most French colonies. In the second part, I analyse French geographers' engagement for the independence of North Africa and against the 1954–1962 war in Algeria, with special reference to Dresch's works. In the third part, I analyse their concurrent engagement for the decolonisation of Sub-Saharan French-speaking Africa, with special reference to Suret-Canale's contributions, and to their specific limits and contradictions.

1. Critical Francophone traditions and post-war ruptures

Recently, Marie-Albane de Suremain argued that 'decolonization does not seem to have been a central figure of French geography' (Suremain 2019, 1). While this might be true for most academic geographers, it should not hide from our view the importance of dissident networks. French scholarship on tropicality has shown that, in the twentieth century, carrying out 'tropical geography' did not straightforwardly imply an alignment with the colonial administration (D'Alessandro-Scarpari 2005), and French historians and geographers have started work on anti-colonial intellectuals (Liauzu 2012; Semmoud 2014). While respected scholarship discussed the historical links between geography's disciplinary establishment and its traditional support of imperialism and colonial expansion (Godlewska and Smith 1994; Driver 2001) including French specificities (Blais, Deprest, and Singaravélou 2011), several works

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rediscovering anti-imperial traditions within the discipline have focused on French-speaking examples, such as the circuits of early anarchist geographers (Deprest 2012; Ferretti 2013; Pelletier 2013). It was around the anti-colonial and anti-racist works of Elisée Reclus (1830–1905) and his brother Elie (1827–1904) that early French anti-colonialist networks moved from scholarly awareness of colonial crimes to explicit political anti-colonial propaganda, especially through the publications of the Recluses' collaborator Jean Grave (Ferretti 2017). As I explain below, this tradition inspired later scholars, including Suret-Canale, whose works on another early denunciator of French imperialism and Grave's correspondent,² Paul Vigné d'Octon (1859–1943), claimed the possibility of anti-colonialism at the peak of imperial ages. While these critical voices became increasingly rare after the First World War, there were some interesting exceptions in the 1930s and 1940s, including works of Weulersse and Châtaigneau.

Weulersse had the opportunity to travel across Africa between 1928 and 1930, thanks to a travel grant of the *Autour du Monde* scheme offered by the Albert Kahn foundation directed by social geographer Jean Brunhes (1869–1930). Weulersse discussed this experience in a neglected book, *Noirs et Blancs* (1931), which anticipated many aspects of later engagements of French-speaking intellectuals for decolonisation. Interestingly, in his biography published in *Geographers Biobibliographical Studies*, Gourou was very short on Weulersse's works on Africa and mainly focused on his later missions in Syria. Yet, he highlighted elements such as Weulersse's friendship with Dresch and Aimé Perpillou (Gourou 1978, 107), and his remarks on the fact that, at that moment, 'the initiative passed from the colonizer to the colonized' (Gourou 1978, 109). In his book, Weulersse launched explicit denunciations of colonial crimes across Sub-Saharan Africa, though they were often attributed to anonymous interviewees. 'Loneliness, and the uncontrolled power that the White enjoys only because of his skin's colour, quickly made him change his mind on what is right and what is not. [Then], it is the shameful robbery. The Whites believe that they can do anything' (Weulersse 1931, 30). A functionary coming back from a tour to appoint soldiers amongst the natives argued: 'There is nothing more stupidly criminal. I felt like a slave driver' (Weulersse 1931, 37), and evoked the consequential effect of some 'revolutionary propaganda' (Weulersse 1931, 16) amongst the Africans. This

² Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, Institut Français d'Histoire Sociale, Fonds Jean Grave, 14 AS 184b.

means that Weulersse's critical perspective was not limited to the denunciation of colonial exploitation, as he was also prefiguring future revolts in the colonised continent.

Although in different ways, the trajectory of Châtaigneau was likewise very original. Recently, his figure has been included under the definition of *géographes-hors-les-murs* (geographers outside the walls), nonconformist figures in the discipline who worked in different professional milieus than French universities (Peurey 2015). A diplomat, Châtaigneau was invited to redact the chapter of the post-Vidalian *Géographie Universelle* (Châtaigneau, Sion and Sorre 1934) on the Balkan peninsula, where he served after the First World War. During the Second World War, he was a member of the Resistance with the *France Libre*, and later served as the Governor of Algeria from 1944 to 1948, when the harsh hostility of the more extremist colonial milieus led to his dismissal on the allegation that he was 'the gravedigger of French Algeria' (Crevaux 1948). In a biographic dossier on Châtaigneau surviving at the French National Library, his obituary by anti-colonial activist Charles-André Julien (1891–1991) calls Châtaigneau a 'friend of the Maghreb', a man with 'a great Arab-Islamic culture' and a 'victim of the obscurantism' of the majority of French colons in Algeria, who disdainfully nicknamed him 'Châtaigneau Ben Mohammed'³ due to his attempts to foster dialogue between French colons and Algerian people (Parodi 1972). Châtaigneau claimed that Algeria was the land 'of French people who remained free' (Châtaigneau 1947, 7) during the Resistance, with the contribution of the 'French Muslims' (the term that distinguished the Algerians from the French settlers). He wished to 'extend citizenship' by facilitating Algerians' 'access to public functions' (Alduy 1947, 9), fostering dialogue rather than antagonism among different communities.

This had to be achieved through 'social and economic reforms in favour of Muslim populations' (Châtaigneau 1946, 1), with distribution of land for landless *fellahs*, extension of the right to education, including the teaching of Arabic, and of 'Islamic culture' to be 'develop[ed] freely' (Châtaigneau 1946, 14). This programme, that Châtaigneau defined as 'democratic', was not disruptively radical. Yet, numerous right-wing French settlers, strongly hostile to any concession to Algerian people, started a merciless war against Châtaigneau, whose virulent

³ Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Site François Mitterrand, Rez-de-Jardin, Dossiers biographiques Boutillier du Retail. Documentation sur Yves Châtaigneau (hereafter BNF-YC).

tones are best expressed in the articles of journalist Paul-Dominique Crevaux, compiled into a book replete with all kinds of insults and allegations against the French governor.

Proud of being the nephew of French Amazonia's explorer Jules Crevaux (1847–1882), and of being called 'reactionary' and 'counterrevolutionary', Dominique Crevaux evoked directly or indirectly, regarding Châtaigneau and his friends, delicate words of which representative samples were: 'shit in silk stockings' (Crevaux 1948, 37) and 'murderer' (Crevaux 1948, 39). One of his main allegations against Châtaigneau was of him being responsible for the 1945 Sétif and Guelma massacres. Chillingly, Crevaux listed amongst these 'martyrs' only settlers, while current historiography assesses the victims of these violent clashes between French settlers and natives in no more than 102 for the French and in several thousand amongst the Algerians. Historians are unanimous in recognising the terrorist violence perpetrated by French paramilitary forces in the repression of these riots (Reggui 2008; Peyroulou 2009). According to Jean-Pierre Peyroulou, Châtaigneau did not have control of these peripheral regions, and 'essential information' (Peyroulou 2009, 171) was hidden from him by the colons, who opposed his 'politics of reconciliation' (Peyroulou 2009, 57).

Crevaux accused Châtaigneau of instigating the anti-colonialists, favouring 'the anti-French propaganda and the communist organs' (Crevaux 1948, 41). Seemingly, for Crevaux, Châtaigneau's fault was not ordering the massacre of all Algerian nationalists, and this alone meant that he was facilitating a conspiracy in which the journalist confusingly listed Great Britain, the United States, the Russians, Arab nationalists, and even the Nazis. Through Crevaux's articles, names of Algerian leaders allegedly supported by Châtaigneau were given to implicitly incite readers to hit them, and a military process for Châtaigneau was requested. However, the only trial that took place was against Crevaux, who was fined '20,000 francs and [sentenced to] 15 days in prison (suspended)' (Crevaux 1947, 184) for defamation. Yet, it was finally Châtaigneau who had to abandon Algeria, continuing his career as a French ambassador in Moscow. In his 1948 farewell discourse, Châtaigneau claimed his accomplishments towards 'friendship'⁴ and extension of citizenship.

⁴ BNF-YC, Y. Châtaigneau, Algériens, Algériennes, 24 février 1948, p. 1.

After the 1962 Algerian independence, Châtaigneau published an article in the left-wing journal *Le Monde Diplomatique* calling for the establishment of a new era of cooperation after colonialism.⁵ Authors such as Julien seem to suggest with some regret that, if Châtaigneau's line had been followed, one would have avoided the massacres of the 1954-62 war. In any case, it is worth noting that one of Châtaigneau's successors as Algeria's Governor in the 1950s was another famous scholar, pre-Columbian anthropologist Jacques Soustelle (1912-1990), who was banished for a period by President de Gaulle due to his links with nothing less than the OAS (*Organisation Armée Secrète*), the right-wing paramilitary organisation that carried out terrorist attacks against anti-colonial activists in the last phases of the war (Delarue 1992). This highlights the originality of the critiques, albeit cautious, that some geographers made to colonial rule in turbulent historical periods.

Outside the specific field of geography, a radical anticolonial rupture in the Francophone world took place around the works of Martinican poet and politician Aimé Césaire (1913-2008) and of his wife Suzanne Césaire (1915-1966) (Last 2017). Together with authors such as the future president of Senegal, Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906-2001), they were the protagonists of the political and cultural movement of the *Négritude*, which accompanied decolonisation and is still considered as an inspiration in matters of decoloniality and anti-racism (Rabaka 2015). Paradoxically, there are few documented relations between these authors and anticolonial geographers, despite their common engagement to accelerate the end of French colonialism. This was probably due to a mix of circumstances. On the one hand, in his work as a politician, Césaire mainly focused on Martinique and the Caribbean and had lesser relations with Africa, according to his biographers (Gregson 1997). On the other, Dresch, Suret-Canale and friends were arguably less interested in the French *Territoires d'outremer* than in Africa itself. The respective professional circuits were also different, given that Césaire was not an academic. Yet, there is at least an important contact point between Césaire's trajectory and that of geographers such as Dresch and Prenant: their critiques to the attitude of the French Communist Party (PCF) led by Maurice Thorez (1900-1964) over the War of Algeria (Hale and Véron 2009).

⁵ BNF-YC, Y. Châtaigneau, Dans l'indépendance et la coopération l'Algérie vivra, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, juillet 1962.

2. Jean Dresch and the Maghreb

2.1 The Algerian trauma and the 1956 rupture

The 1954-1962 war of national liberation in Algeria has been a big traumatism in French society, including for left-wing political parties. A member of the PCF until October 1956, Césaire wrote his famous *Lettre à Maurice Thorez* to resign from the Party, denouncing its subordination to Muscovite Stalinism, that he accused of having ‘transformed in nightmare what humankind has entertained for a long time as a dream: socialism’ (Césaire 1956). The Martinican writer expressed special indignation for the Party’s incapacity to deal with the problems of Black and generally colonised people and for its willingness to prioritise French proletariat in imposing a unique model of socialism. These contradictions exploded with the PCF’s decision to vote the attribution of full powers to the government for the Algerian war in 1956. Against that, Césaire claimed for ‘the struggle of colonised peoples against colonialism, the struggle of coloured peoples against racism’, as something that was too complex and too important to be only considered as a subordinated ‘fragment’ of ‘the French worker’s struggle against French capitalism’ (Césaire 1956).

Other intellectuals and activists belonging to the PCF criticised this 1956 move of the communist leadership that they considered as an opportunistic betrayal of their ideals. As for Dresch, Alain Ruscio highlights his critical participation in these debates as a scholar who was ‘not linked to the [Party’s] apparatus’ (Ruscio 2019, 300) and a member, with Prenant, of the *Cellule Sorbonne-Lettres*, which vigorously opposed the official PCF line on matters such as ‘Hungary ... Algeria ... Indochina’ (Ruscio 2019, 360). Dresch joined what Ruscio calls ‘the third Left’ (Ruscio 2019, 481), and a police report also stated that he was temporarily excluded from the Party in 1964,⁶ even though this information has not been confirmed by other sources hitherto. In any case, what Ruscio calls a ‘less dogmatic’ Left gathered around journals such as *La Pensée*, which was contributed by several geographers, including Dresch and Prenant. For Ruscio, the book compilation *Algérie passé et présent* by Prenant, Yves Lacoste and André Nouschi, and prefaced by Dresch, was a milestone towards a ‘decolonised historiography’ (Ruscio 2019, 476) of Algeria. Prenant was likewise a former member of the French Resistance

⁶ Paris, Archives de la Préfecture de Police, Dossier Jean Dresch, 77W4050 (hereafter PP), 10 December 1968.

(Gallissot 2014) and a scholar who analysed Algerian economy, based on his personal experience of teaching in Algiers. He overtly attacked the ‘exploiters of Algeria’ (Prenant 1956, 44), arguing that the colonisation did not serve the French nation, but only a few people.

An example of radical and engaged geographer (Ginsburger 2015) even after becoming an established academic, Chair of Geography at the University of Paris, Director of the Paris Geography institute and even President of the International Geographical Union from 1972 to 1976 (Clout 2012), Dresch was always considered as a prickly figure. A folder from the Paris *Archives de la Préfecture de Police* shows that he was carefully watched by the French police. These sources account for the anxiety with which French authorities of the post-war era followed nonconformist and anti-colonialist intellectuals. Moreover, Dresch was directly involved in African anti-colonial movements, especially concerning Morocco, where he worked in the 1930s, and Algeria, as I discuss below.

The police folder describes Dresch’s activities, reporting several versions of his cv, first acknowledging his service in the French Army during World War II in 1939–40, when he was ‘the lieutenant of the 4th Regiment of Moroccan Infantry’ and in the later campaigns of the *France Libre*, when he was decorated with the *Croix de Guerre*: previously, ‘from 1931 to the declaration of war, he had been professor at the Muslim College, then at the Rabat High School’.⁷ Amazingly, these reports detailed Dresch’s family situation, always noting that neither Dresch nor his wife Andrée Berger raised doubts about their ‘morality’. A 1952 report highlighted Dresch’s and Berger’s adhesion to the PCF and Dresch’s role as the leader ‘of a communist group at the [Paris] *Institut de Géographie*’, likewise noticing that, amongst their six children, their daughter Lydie was arrested in 1951 for taking part in a student protest.⁸ A few months later, another of their daughters, Lise, was added to the list of political activists in the family, getting arrested in 1952 during the student protestations ‘against General Ridgway’s visit to Paris’.⁹ She was later followed by her sister Brigitte, reported in 1956 as a participant in similar activities.¹⁰ A report of December 1955 analyses Dresch’s relations with the Eastern Bloc, mentioning his visits to Russia and Poland, which are detailed in his *Carnets de Voyage*,

⁷ PP, 77W4050, 21 May 1947.

⁸ PP, 77W4050, 23 February 1952.

⁹ PP, 77W4050, 29 June 1952.

¹⁰ PP, 77W4050, December 1956.

available online in the database *Octaviana*.¹¹ Yet, it was in France that Dresch was a member of a number of political associations and networked with other intellectuals.

It was the case with the *Comité de défense des libertés démocratiques en Afrique noire* and the *Association française les amitiés franco-chinoises* of which Dresch was President and where he collaborated with Marie-Elisabeth (Mariel) Jean-Brunhes Delamarre (1905–2001), geographer, daughter of Jean Brunhes, and signalled as a ‘sympathiser of the Extreme Left’s political theories’.¹² During the Algerian war, Dresch was amongst the leaders of the *Comité national d’information et d’action pour la solution pacifique des problèmes d’Afrique du Nord*.¹³ In 1957, Dresch was charged with ‘offence against the integrity of [French] territory’ for being a co-author of the brochure *Vérité sur l’Algérie*, and was amongst the designated speakers for a meeting of anti-war intellectuals, scheduled for 7 June 1957 and prohibited by the authorities.¹⁴ While these documents show that being an anti-militarist and anti-colonialist intellectual under the authoritarian and repressive French state was no joke at that time, the war in Algeria was a turning point towards understanding the trajectories of dissidents like Dresch.

The incriminated brochure was published anonymously but its main contributors were Charles-André Julien and Dresch (Gallissot 1978, 57), consistently with the positions the geographer held in his public conferences.¹⁵ It was an explicit anti-colonial pamphlet, denouncing the ‘collective massacre’ (*La vérité sur l’Algérie* [hereafter VA], 3) that the government was hiding from the French public, recognising the legitimate ‘thirst of freedom’ (VA, 4) of the Algerians and arguing for ‘washing this colonialist impregnation out of our brains’ (VA, 5). Significantly, the classic colonialist argument for civilising ‘barbarous’ people was diverted against the colonisers by arguing that, since 1830, colonial histories of Algeria showed ‘we have surpassed in barbarity the barbarians that we went to civilise’ (VA, 5). Matching Césaire’s arguments comparing totalitarianisms with the behaviour of ‘democratic’ imperialisms (Césaire, 1950), the authors evoked an ‘Algerian Gestapo’ (VA, 47) referring to French repression of anticolonial movements. Their conclusion was a call for ‘helping colonialism to die ...

¹¹ Université Paris 8, Octaviana, Jean Dresch, Carnets de voyage, <https://octaviana.fr/document/FJDNC044#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=2&xywh=-273%2C-1%2C1234%2C1027>

¹² PP, 77W4050, December 1955.

¹³ PP, 77W4050, 12 March 1956.

¹⁴ PP, 77W4050, February 1958.

¹⁵ PP, 77W4050, 9 February 1957.

emptying the prisons and the concentration camps’, to have Algeria ‘freed from domination ... and all other imperialisms’ (VA, 56). In these years, a future famous French geographer, Armand Frémont, redacted a field diary when he was a young conscript for the French Army in Algeria despite his declared convictions: ‘I believed in peoples’ liberation. Yet, like many others, I had to make war, against the Algerians and against myself’ (Frémont 1982, 6). Frémont was a student of Dresch and Pierre George, and his diary shows how anticolonial thinking circulated then in French geography although it was not always visible as such.

Alongside scholarship, Dresch continued his activism as the vice-president of the *Comité Maurice Audin*, an Algiers academic and activist tortured and murdered in 1957. Dresch was the co-founder of the *Comité antifasciste du Quartier Latin*¹⁶ and a defender of the victims of repression in Algeria, along with famous intellectuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Pierre Vidal-Naquet.¹⁷ He also lectured in favour of decolonisation of Sub-Saharan Africa, quoting the case of Congo as an example to be followed by the Algerians ‘to free themselves from the colonialist joke’.¹⁸ Despite this, and despite having been recognised by Moroccan intellectuals as one of the protagonists of their independence (formally granted in 1956) together with ‘other critical geographers (R. Raynaï, F. Joly, G. Maurer, [Jean] Le Coz)’ (El Gharbaoui 1978, 94), Dresch’s work did not receive much attention from geographers, excluding a couple of celebrative special issues—*Hérodote* in 1978 and *Revue de l’Occident musulman et de la Méditerranée* in 1986 (Baduel, 1986). Yet, Dresch’s scholarship was intrinsically linked to his anti-colonialist activity, and it deserves full consideration in current studies on decolonisation and histories of radical geography.

Introducing the 1978 *Hérodote* issue, Lacoste noticed that it was as a geographer that Dresch got in touch with many anti-colonial activists in Africa, including his student, Moroccan Mehdi Ben-Barka, and Ivorian leader Félix Houphouët-Boigny, whom Dresch met when he went on a mission to Ivory Coast ‘to study the consequences of forced labour’ (Lacoste 1978, 7). Activists such as Abderahim Bouabid witnessed the ‘full trust’ (Bouabid 1978, 19) that anti-colonial activists had in Dresch, a popular figure amongst ‘Algerian, Tunisian or Vietnamese’ (Bouabid

¹⁶ PP, 77W4050, December 1960.

¹⁷ PP, 77W4050, June 1961.

¹⁸ PP, 77W4050, 29 September 1960.

1978, 26) exiles in Paris. Habib Attia recollected how he was impressed, as a student in Paris in 1953, by Dresch's classes on Maghreb's geography, challenging the classical Eurocentrism and environmental determinism that characterised French teaching in North Africa (Attia 1978). Lucette Valensi even identified a contrast between geography as a discipline and classical Marxist analyses positing 'the move from feudalism to the domination of bourgeoisie' (Valensi 1978, 41), which unluckily could not fit the complex realities of the colonised world, and indicated as a key reference the book that Dresch published in 1953 with Jean Birot, *La Méditerranée et le Moyen Orient*.

2.2 Another Mediterranean

This book followed the classical magnum opus *La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* by Fernand Braudel, published in 1949. While Braudel was celebrated as the 'prince' of French historians, his attitude towards colonisation is now criticised by scholars discussing his 'imperial imaginary' (Strachan 2011, 73) and substantially uncritical attitude towards French colonialism, which even implied some civilisational essentialism inspired by Orientalist authors (Deprest 2010). Despite the absence of an explicit challenge to Braudel, the chapters redacted by Dresch can be considered as decolonial geographical responses to Braudel's geohistory, and an attempt to deconstruct geographical and historical commonplaces on the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. This intellectual context also explains the frequent interdisciplinary collaborations between historians and geographers in critical scholarly endeavours as I detail below

In his chapter on the Maghreb, Dresch first questioned the 'inventions' of European scholarship, such as that of the 'tribes' (Birot and Dresch 1953, 454), a notion that corresponded more to the colonisers' need to subdivide and classify subjected peoples than to their actual social organisation. This included critiques of commonplace oppositions between nomadism and sedentarism, arguing that there are 'infinite and varying nuances, depending on environmental and historical conditions, between what one calls nomads, semi-nomads and sedentary' (Birot and Dresch 1953, 464). Like Braudel, Dresch stressed the strong historical and cultural connections existing between the opposite shores of the Mediterranean but especially focused on the idea of communitarian freedom which characterised the Berber and Kabyle societies enjoying a relative linguistic and social freedom thanks to their 'refuge regions' (Birot and

Dresch 1953, 456) in the mountains. According to Dresch, the European colonisers tried to erase this diversity by favouring ‘Islamisation and especially Arabisation of Berber populations’ (Birot and Dresch 1953, 457), whose cultures pre-date the introduction of Islam in the Maghreb, to foster centralisation and political control.

Dresch highlighted the contradictions in colonial economic ‘development’, which led to the enrichment of some settlers, while local masses ‘remain poor and illiterate’ (Birot and Dresch 1953, 477), also due to an economy based on unequal colonial exchanges leading to the proletarianisation of artisans and grabbing of lands that were owned by indigenous communities. This created a situation where ‘social and economic segregation ... implies a geographical segregation’ (Birot and Dresch 1953, 507) and a ‘crisis of colonial economy’ (Birot and Dresch 1953, 513). Significantly, this book was published one year before the big Algerian national insurrection of 1954, somehow anticipating the outcomes of the crises the European colonial empires were experiencing in the 1950s.

In the second volume, dedicated to the eastern shore of the Mediterranean, Dresch first released some of the critiques that Edward Said would have discussed two decades later, that is, the idea of the ‘Middle East’ as a conventional definition first adopted by the British administration ‘for military reasons’ (Birot and Dresch 1956, v). Like Said would do, Dresch clearly denied racial stereotypes of the ‘Semitic’ race, arguing that, despite common understanding, ‘there is no racial type, Semitic, Arabic or Jew’ (Birot and Dresch 1956, 299). Likewise, Dresch laughed at legends on an alleged ‘Oriental passivity’ (Birot and Dresch 1956, 322) justifying colonial exploitation, a category in which Dresch included both French and English colonies and protectorates, and the former Ottoman Empire. Dresch highlighted the role of British imperialism in fostering clashes between Arabs and Jews and drafted an early critique of neo-colonialism, noticing how, even in countries that had obtained formal independence, the economy remained ‘colonial or semi-colonial’ (Birot and Dresch 1956, 343).

In 1979, a book collecting a sample of chosen papers by Dresch accounted for his early anti-colonial engagement, starting from his collaboration with the communist journal *L’Espoir* [The Hope] while he was a secondary schoolteacher in Morocco and concurrently worked on his thesis in physical geography in the 1930s and 1940s. A commentary from Dresch’s Introduction

is paramount in understanding his idea that geography should never be neutral or disengaged before pressing social and political matters: 'Abstention would be intellectual and moral dishonesty' (Dresch 1979, 11). Like Said, in *Culture and Imperialism*, argued that culture is a 'battleground' (Said 1993, xiv), Dresch stressed the importance of his Moroccan experience for understanding 'the cultural aspects of colonialism' (Dresch 1979, 17), as a key point rather than a simple superstructure as classical Marxism pretended. For Dresch, the direct contact with nationalist agitators in the Maghreb was also decisive in taking a radical position beyond the hesitations of the French official Left on Morocco, especially the PCF and the Socialists (SFIO).

Dresch's articles for *L'Espoir* denounced the misery of 'dispossessed Moroccans' (Dresch 1979, 24) and the responsibilities of colonial rule, alerting to the potential effects of hunger on social unrest. In a 1938 article significantly titled 'Une tribu victime de la colonisation' [A tribe victim of colonisation], Dresch proved that, in Morocco, he had also developed the skills of a social and economic geographer. Eventually, he analysed how colonial land grabbing and forced sedentarisation had disarticulated traditional ways of life, forcing poor peasants to incur debts and sell the residual lands where they were segregated, a process that Dresch compared to the creation of the 'American [Indian] reserves' (Dresch 1979, 28). Likewise, Dresch analysed the contradictions in colonial economy creating poverty and proletarianisation, as mentioned above, including the 'new kind of [slave] trade' (Dresch 1979, 34), which was the importation of Moroccan workers in France. From a decolonial standpoint, even more incisive were Dresch's critiques of the French prisons for Moroccan nationalists, leading him to ask whether they were comparable with 'the concentration camps of Hitler's Germany' (Dresch 1979, 36). The response was implicit in the following remark on the 'Fascist apprentices of our administration' (Dresch 1979, 38), which was again tragically prophetic, given the support many of these administrators would give to the Vichy regime few years later.

The book also included a 1956 paper published in *La Pensée*, on 'Le fait national algérien', which clearly linked activism and scholarship by insisting on geographers' moral duties before the war 'crimes' (Dresch 1979, 109) and by mobilising history and geography to support the Algerians in building their nation. While Algeria 'was conquered by force' (Dresch 1979, 119), Dresch ironically posited that it was exactly the French example the Algerians were drawing on for asserting their right to constitute a nation; and if they were doing that with armed struggle,

it was ‘for lack of other means’ (Dresch 1979, 121). All economic and social analyses led the geographer to conclude that there was only one solution: ‘Surrendering to evidence ... ceasing the fire and negotiating by first recognising the Algerian national fact’ (Dresch 1979, 123). Alas, several years of war and massacres were needed before everybody understood how right the geographer was.

The 1960 book mentioned above, *Algérie passé et présent*, is a further example of collaboration between geographers and historians, this latter represented by Nouschi. Conceived in the wake of the national insurrection, this work wished to serve Algerian decolonisation by contributing towards building Algeria’s national identity and can be considered as another output where scholarship met activism, being published during the French-Algerian war. In his foreword, Dresch stated that ‘the time of colonisation is over’ (Dresch, 1960, 7), calling for a colonial history that reverted the classical stereotype of the history-less colonised, beyond all ‘paternalistic attitude’ (Dresch 1960, 9). In this work, Prenant authored the chapter on physical geography, challenging deterministic readings that ‘denied to Algeria all physical unit’ (Lacoste, Nouschi, and Prenant 1960, 13) and analysing the natural resources of the nation to demonstrate how false the legend of ‘an Algeria intrinsically unable to secure its economic independence and forced to surrender to the “uninterested aid” of a colonial power’ (Lacoste, Nouschi, and Prenant 1960, 57) was. The entire book, including Lacoste’s chapter staking a claim for the originality of Algerian history, classically participated in the attempt of ‘inventing’, geographically, a decolonised Algerian nation.

As suggested by Claude Bataillon, further studies should be done on anti-colonial works by geographers belonging to the generation of Dresch’s (and George’s) students, especially Bernard Kayser, Lacoste, Michel Rochefort, Raymond Guglielmo, and Prenant (Bataillon 2006). Further studies are also needed on those parts of Dresch’s archives that are not yet inventoried and opened to researchers. Yet, the materials analysed here can demonstrate the existence and radicality of an activist and anti-colonialist French geography engaging in North African decolonisation. As I discuss in the next section, a similar engagement concerned ‘tropical’ or Sub-Saharan Africa.

3.Sub-Saharan Africa: decolonial tropicity

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In addition to his engagement in the Maghreb, Dresch committed to the decolonisation of French Western and Equatorial Africa, supporting the transnational movement ‘Rassemblement démocratique africain’ (Dresch 1979, 145). Together with Suret-Canale (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1978; Suret-Canale 1988), Dresch was one of the critics of the colonial and postcolonial *économie de traite* (an expression difficult to translate into English, similar to what is today called ‘extractivism’) and racism against populations of colour. He importantly criticised Gourou’s work, which he deemed as ‘determinism [resulting in] pessimism’ (Dresch 1979, 145). According to scholars such as Denis Retaillé and Cristina D’Alessandro-Scarpari, the field of French ‘Africanists’ was politically more progressive and willing to denunciate colonial abuses than what is commonly believed. Very few explicitly adopted the label of ‘anti-colonialist’ but: ‘If anti-colonialism is disagreement with local politics originated from colonisation and its direct and contingent effects, then most Africanist geographers have been anti-colonialist’ (D’Alessandro-Scarpari 2007). Indeed, a specialist of tropical Africa who did not mind claiming his anti-colonialism proudly was Suret-Canale.

Another member of the French Resistance and of the PCF (seemingly more orthodox than other geographers), Suret-Canale had his academic career constantly hindered by political ostracisms against him, increasingly revealed by an examination of his spectacular archives in Bobigny. First arrested in September 1940, when he was a nineteen-year-old student, during the German occupation of Paris, for ‘sticking communist leaflets’¹⁹ on the walls of the *Quartier Latin*, he served a prison term of four months. During the remainder of the occupation, Suret-Canale was an organiser of the Communist Youths in South-Western France (Dalançon 2015) and, after the war, took his *Agrégation de Géographie* (the French professional master preparing high-school teachers). In 1946, he accepted a post at the French Lycée of Dakar, in Senegal, from where he was expelled in February 1949, forcibly repatriated via a military airplane, due to his political activities for the ‘Rassemblement démocratique africain’²⁰ and despite the public protestations of students attending the *Université Populaire* that he had founded there.²¹ The concerns of French authorities were well explained in a police report of 1951, noting that Suret-Canale still had ‘regular epistolary relations with several AOF [*Afrique Occidentale Française*] Africans

¹⁹ PP, 1W-39628, 11 May 1955.

²⁰ Bobigny, Archives Départementales de Seine-Saint-Denis, Fonds Suret-Canale - 229 J (hereafter ADSS, 229J), Folder 120, Notice biographique.

²¹ ADSS, 229J), Folder 110, Motion de Protestation, 23 February 1949.

for propaganda aims'.²² It seems that, in those years, the French government was petrified of the endeavours of dissident intellectuals with African contacts.

In the 1950s, Suret-Canale taught in several French high schools and started a *Thèse d'État* under the supervision of Rennes historical geographer André Meynier (1901–1983). Although the subject of this thesis was quite traditional and not explicitly politicised, eventually the *Bocage angevin au nord de la Loire*,²³ Suret-Canale's archives show that Meynier was likewise a leftist, and maintained a lifelong acquaintance with Suret-Canale based on both political affinities and scholarly support. In a 1956 letter, Meynier tried to convince Suret-Canale that it was worth publishing in *Annales de Géographie*, 'even if they have conformist political positions'.²⁴ Yet, Suret-Canale's passion remained Africa: in 1958, he published the first volume of his *Afrique noire occidentale et centrale*, which was saluted as a big event, being the first French work proposing a history of Africa, a continent which, until that moment, 'was [commonly] supposed to be without history' (Dalançon 2015). The foreword was again by Dresch, Suret-Canale's other academic mentor, who noticed how colonial views of the world ignored African civilisations, building histories of 'easy exoticism, of shames and miseries carefully hidden' (Dresch 1958, 7). These could be corrected by Suret-Canale because: 'He is a geographer ... he was never coloniser or administrator' (Dresch 1958, 8). The subversive potentialities of geography could not be better explained.

In 1959, Suret-Canale responded to the call of controversial Guinean president Sékou Touré, who needed to replace the French teachers who were repatriated after Guinea refused to join the French Union: Suret-Canale accepted this appointment at his own risk, as his departure provoked his expulsion from the French administration, which was only revoked after long negotiations in the following years.²⁵ During his time in Guinea, Suret-Canale could extend his African studies and publish another disruptive work: a school textbook on African history, matching requests for 'decolonised' school materials that he was personally receiving from Touré,²⁶ and also congratulations from Thorez for 'this manual, which re-establishes the truth,

²² PP 1W-39628, 20 December 1951.

²³ ADSS, 229J, Folder 410, Thèse principale, Plan schématique.

²⁴ ADSS, 229J, Folder 410, Meynier to Suret-Canale, 6 February 1956.

²⁵ ADSS, 229J, Folder 57, Suret-Canale to M. le Ministre de l'Éducation nationale, May 1959.

²⁶ ADSS, 229J, Folder 62, Touré to Suret-Canale, 14 May 1962.

abused by the colonisers'.²⁷ First printed in Conakry and co-authored with Djibril Tamsir Niane, *Histoire de l'Afrique occidentale* challenged the other manuals of African history filled with colonial ideology and 'less about the history of Africa than the history of colonisation' (Niane and Suret-Canale 1961, 3). Importantly, it was not limited to the denunciation of colonial crimes, as it included chapters on African resistance and subaltern agency against colonisation, and highlighted the presence of anti-colonial movements in Europe to foster internationalist solidarity amongst workers, beyond any essentialisation or 'clash of civilisation'.

While I did not find any documented contact between Suret-Canale and the Césaires hitherto, the French geographer was in touch with another scholar whom Reiland Rabaka (2015) considers as a forerunner of both Pan-Africanism and *Négritude*, that is W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963). Du Bois spent his late years in newly decolonised Ghana of President Kwame Nkrumah continuing his ambitious (although unaccomplished) project of cultural decolonisation, that is the *Encyclopaedia Africana*, for which Suret-Canale's collaboration was requested in 1962.²⁸ While this project had to be authored 'mainly by African scholars' (Fenderson 2010, 84) to express a new vision of Pan-Africanism which was especially centred in the decolonisation of the African continent, Suret-Canale was arguably chosen as he was resident in Africa and actively involved in the decolonisation process. Suret-Canale also received the praise of other critical historians of Africa like Basil Davidson²⁹ and corresponded with African historian Joseph Ki-Zerbo, who visited him in Guinea seeking advice for his own *General History of Africa*.³⁰ Numerous letters were sent to Suret-Canale by Nazi Boni, a Burkina Faso anti-colonial activist who was then in Dakar, working on a history of resistant Africa with the political support of leaders such as Senghor and Touré.³¹ Boni's *Histoire synthétique de l'Afrique résistante* was finally published in Paris in 1971 with a foreword by Suret-Canale. The French geographer endorsed this work as 'the first great book of African history written in French by an African' (Suret-Canale 1971, 9), where the colonised had started to speak autonomously. Suret-Canale noticed how, in his tormented biography, Boni had experienced European colonial brutality since his childhood, mentioning the discriminations that he faced as a schoolteacher

²⁷ ADSS, 229J, Folder 55, Thorez to Suret-Canale, 5 March 1961.

²⁸ ADSS, 229J, Folder 62, Hunton to Suret-Canale, 30 April 1962.

²⁹ ADSS, 229J, Folder 62, Davidson to Suret-Canale, 21 January 1962.

³⁰ ADSS, 229J, Folder 62, Ki-Zerbo to Suret-Canale, 1 April 1962.

³¹ ADSS, 229J, Folder 62, Boni to Suret-Canale, 16 December 1962.

in the French colonial educational system, which appointed only white people to senior positions. Matching Dresch's ideas, Suret-Canale expressed his views on the role of scholarship, where: 'False objectivity, which pretends to unite the victim and the hangman, is the worst of falsifications' (Suret-Canale 1971, 18). The aim that Suret-Canale and Boni explicitly shared was 'the decolonisation of history' (Suret-Canale 1971, 19): these documents show the important role that the former played in fostering networks of African anti-colonial history.

Geopolitical tensions between Guinea and France forced Suret-Canale to return to France in 1963 to avoid revocation of his French nationality. According to Alain Dalançon, he was also deceived by Touré's regime, which became increasingly authoritarian (Dalançon 2015). While Suret-Canale continued to correspond with Touré in the following years, signing as his 'compagnon de l'indépendance',³² this raises the problem of Suret-Canale's political orthodoxy, which led him to organically sit with the PCF despite this party, affected by dreadful Stalinist legacies, became increasingly unpopular in social movements since 1968. It is unclear whether Suret-Canale responded to the 1956 appeals of dissident intellectuals,³³ and some political cynicism seems to emerge in his 1964 letter to the Party secretariat, where he suggested not to intervene in a request for solidarity from imprisoned Guinean students to avoid puzzling Touré.³⁴ While this question will require further study, Suret-Canale's recollections to Pascal Bianchini suggest that his critical attitudes could also go beyond ideology and orthodoxy, in statements such as: 'Marxism cannot give sight to the blinds ... nor substitute scientific work' (Suret-Canale 2011, 23). As for the Soviet Union, he also argued that, during decolonisation, they 'did not understand anything of what was going on in Africa' (Suret-Canale 2011, 99).

In France, Suret-Canale suffered continued academic ostracism due to the prevailing conservative positions of people controlling academic recruitment in geography, despite the support of Dresch, who continued to correspond lengthily with Suret-Canale, calling him '*Cher camarade*' and endeavouring to appoint him as an Assistant at the University of Paris. Yet, in 1965, Dresch had to disappointedly inform Suret-Canale that the Institute had voted against his

³² ADSS, 229J, Folder 113, Suret-Canale to Touré, 24 September 1963.

³³ ADSS, 229J, Folder 110, Comité [d'action] des intellectuels français contre la poursuite de la guerre en Afrique du Nord, 14 April 1956.

³⁴ ADSS, 229J, Folder 112, Note aux Secrétariat, 11 June 1974.

nomination: ‘The political aspect of this vote is clear. Some are disgusted. But the dirty tricks [*saloperies*] are done through secret ballot’.³⁵ From 1966 to 1974, Suret-Canale obtained a scholarship for a new thesis, supervised by Dresch, on *Géographie des investissements et problèmes du développement en Afrique tropicale d’expression française*³⁶ accompanied by a complementary dissertation on *La république de Guinée: contribution à la géographie du sous-développement*³⁷ supervised by Pierre Monbeig. The main thesis could only be discussed in 1984 due to the numerous obstacles the French administration put in Suret-Canale’s path, including denying him permission for travelling to Africa, deemed ‘inopportune’.³⁸ Also, disciplinary boundaries were mobilised against Suret-Canale, when Dresch informed him that somebody considered his work as ‘history rather than geography’.³⁹ In 1974, he was denied an extension of his fellowship, and, in the impossibility of being tenured at the CNRS, he established himself as a *maître-assistant* (a permanent teaching fellow) at the University of Paris VII (where he was again mentored by Dresch), where he remained until retirement.

Among his late works, it is worth mentioning his research on the history of early anti-colonialism in France, especially on the figure of Octon, on which he engaged in a polemic with historian Henri Brunschwig, who had argued that, before 1914, it would have been anachronistic to use the definition of anti-colonialism (Brunschwig 1974). Octon, a medical doctor in colonial Africa, a radical politician, and, after 1906, a writer and journalist in France, published heated denunciations of French colonial crimes in Africa that, for Brunschwig, only questioned the ‘excesses’ of the colonial system and not the system itself. Suret-Canale responded that the relevant rupture happened before 1914, with the 1911 Octon’s book *La sueur d’un burnous* [The Sweat of a Burnous] on Tunisia, where doubtlessly ‘the colonisation is questioned, and in what terms!’ (Suret-Canale 1978, 235).⁴⁰ Suret-Canale highlighted a ‘dream’ that Octon reported, where he saw all the oppressed peoples of Asia and Africa violently getting rid of their invaders and starting to live happily—that is, decolonisation—to conclude that ‘it is well possible to talk of anti-colonialism before 1914’ (Suret-Canale 1978, 239).

³⁵ ADSS, 229J, Folder 410, Dresch to Suret-Canale, 3 June 1965.

³⁶ ADSS, 229J, Folder 410, Rapport d’activité au CNRS 1969–70.

³⁷ ADSS, 229J, Folder 410, Rapport d’activité au CNRS, octobre 1966–février 1967.

³⁸ ADSS, 229J, Folder 410, Rapport d’activité au CNRS (1971–72).

³⁹ ADSS, 229J, Folder 410, Dresch to Canale, 23 January 1973.

⁴⁰ A later version of this Suret-Canale’s paper is available in English in an anthology of his works (Suret-Canale 1988).

Amazingly, both Brunschwig and Suret-Canale overlooked the anarchist tradition and the important contribution political anarchism made to French anti-colonialism with works such as Grave's *Patriotisme et colonisation*, published in 1903 and prefaced by Elisée Reclus (Ferretti 2017). Later, Suret-Canale edited some of Octon's books, such as *La Gloire du Sabre*, with commentaries more cognisant of anarchism, admitting that Octon's 'evolution towards the Left will lead him to get close to anarcho-syndicalism' (Suret-Canale 1984, 22) and to 'collaborate with the 'anarcho-syndicalist journal *Bataille Syndicaliste*' (Suret-Canale 1984, 23) after engaging with Gustave Hervé's radical paper *La Guerre Sociale*. After the First World War, Octon's 'anarchistic orientation and his anti-clericalism led him towards ... publications such as *Le Libertaire* and *Revue Anarchiste*' (Suret-Canale 1984, 23). While this shows the importance, for militant scholars, of building historical roots, traditions, and identities for their ideas, these works of Suret-Canale reveal how geographical anti-colonialism had deep roots in French radical histories, including anarchism, as ultimately even a rigid Marxist like Suret-Canale had to admit. Finally, Sub-Saharan Africa was an important matter for these mobilisations, no less than the Maghreb and the Mediterranean.

Conclusion

While more work is needed on all these authors, this article has shown the importance of non-Anglophone radical geographical traditions and the need for continuing the investigation on the works of authors who were overlooked for political or epistemological reasons, and whose works and archives can still fuel current debates on the history of critical and radical geographies, as well as on decolonisation cultures (Craggs and Wintle 2016). While some comparative work on geographers' decolonisation has been recently started (Clayton 2020), the plurality and complexity of geographical traditions need to be further addressed by scholars studying decolonisation and postcolonialism. It is focusing on unorthodoxy and political dissidence that we can appreciate this diversity of geography, by rediscovering archives and specific figures, whose works had anyway collective dimensions as it is shown by the fact that these French dissident geographers were mutually connected and inserted in wider transnational anticolonial networks.

French anti-colonialist geographers of the mid-twentieth century did not create an academic 'school' because of their relatively peripheral positions (with the notable exception of Dresch) and relatively loose insertion in the discipline, and this can first explain them being overlooked. Yet, the archives show that they were not isolated and that they counted on wider networks of sympathy and collaboration amongst French and African geographers of their generation. Another reason behind them getting neglected is their failure to appeal to the post-1968 movements given that they mostly relied on some traditional Marxism, which was then increasingly indigestible in continental Europe (while, paradoxically, it was embraced by North American geographers like David Harvey), and also considering that the PCF became increasingly unpopular among dissidents.

Therefore, French specificities provided both advantages and limitations to these scholars. If the original anarchist inspiration was not maintained by most of the socially engaged geographers in the age of decolonisation, it is worth continuing this investigation to value the more libertarian aspects of the contributions they made during their critical support to social and anti-colonial struggles in Africa. This is still relevant as an activist model stressing the responsibility of the researcher (Jazeel 2019) in being part of the matters studied, one which can nourish current postcolonial, decolonial and radical perspectives in the academy and outside, at the condition that we consider the pluralistic aspects of these traditions.

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