



Universiteit  
Leiden

The Netherlands

## **‘There is still a certain rejection of African history in the West.’ An Interview with Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch**

Richard, A.I.; Schulte Nordholt, L.R.C.

### **Citation**

Richard, A. I., & Schulte Nordholt, L. R. C. (2022). ‘There is still a certain rejection of African history in the West.’ An Interview with Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch. *Itinerario: Journal Of Imperial And Global Interactions*, 46(1), 1-13. doi:10.1017/S016511532200002X

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licensed under Article 25fa Copyright Act/Law \(Amendment Taverne\)](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3284930>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

## **‘There is still a certain rejection of African history in the West.’ An Interview with Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch**

---

ANNE-ISABELLE RICHARD\*  
and LARISSA SCHULTE NORDHOLT\*

E-mail: a.i.richard@hum.leidenuniv.nl; l.r.c.schulte.nordholt@hum.leidenuniv.nl

Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch is emeritus professor of African History at Université Paris-Diderot (Paris VII). Her pioneering work in African history over the past fifty years, focusing on comparative social and economic history of Africa, is part of the first generation of post-war African historiography. In particular she focused on the economic consequences of colonialism in Africa, taking into account the role of women in a colonial context and their function in society more broadly. In the 1970s she founded the centre *Connaissance du Tiers-Monde/Afrique* at Paris VII. She also supervised numerous doctoral students. Coquery-Vidrovitch has, in other words, been instrumental in establishing African history as a reputable scholarly activity in France. We spoke to her in 2020 in her home in Paris, where she told us the story of her career and its entanglement with the history of both African history as a discipline in France and the history of French (particularly Parisian) universities as well as Francophone African universities. She has recently published a richly detailed autobiography, *Le choix de l'Afrique* in which she writes about many of the same themes we discussed in 2020, albeit from different angles.<sup>1</sup> The following is an edited version of our conversation which focuses on three aspects: Coquery-Vidrovitch's life story as a historian of Africa, the history of French university life and the development of African history as a discipline. Coquery-Vidrovitch reflected on recent historiographical developments and debates and specifically the place of Africa within those debates. In our conversation she highlighted how the power structures of academia, in France specifically but also elsewhere, have shaped the writing of African history. She spoke about the importance of precise language, specifically regarding the topic of 'race' and highlighted the importance of keeping an open mind towards one's own theses and preconceptions.

### Becoming a historian of Africa

*Anne-Isabelle Richard (AIR): You have already written a little bit about your life, as a child that was interested in history. Could you tell us about how you came to be a historian?*

Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch (CCV): For me history is, in fact, a calling. I always wanted to do history. I cannot tell you why! My family was more interested in the hard sciences. But I just knew I wanted to become a historian. I always had a curious nature, growing up during the Second World War as a clandestine non-declared Jewish girl I did not speak much, but I observed. During the War there were not enough school-books in primary school, so we had to share. My friend had the history and geography book and one night my mother found that I had taken this book from her and was looking at it (I could not really read yet) and she scolded me! I am very observant and very curious and I like to know and I like to learn to do unusual things. I certainly did something which was unusual in my family.

*Larissa Schulte Nordholt (LSN): Was it also that your life was unusual for that time?*

CCV: Yes, my life was unusual, but I did not realise it at the time. It has only become apparent to me now, upon reflection. When life was happening, I did not think about it. Everything that was going on, which was totally abnormal, the fact that we had several names, the fact that we could never say where we lived, the fact that we were Jews, which I did not know, it all seemed normal. I came from a family that had not been practising for two generations on both sides, we were part of the assimilated French of Jewish origin. If it had not been for the War, I probably would not have known that I was of Jewish origin. But obviously, we had no choice. Whether this has anything to do with my taste for history, I do not know. Anyway, as much as I had a childhood, I had a normal childhood. I was the unusual normal.

As a result of the War, I knew what it was like to be considered a foreigner in your own country. I think later on I had an implicit understanding of the situation of Africans in their countries under colonialism. Sometimes, when I say to French colleagues: ‘you know, colonisation was effectively occupation’, it quickly becomes very heated, because ‘the occupation’ is, in inverted commas, the German occupation of France. In my opinion the colonial situation was analogous: there are foreigners who arrive and who take all the power. I came to African history in a roundabout way. I was supposed to do medieval history, but I was not sure I wanted to spend the rest of my life in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. In 1960 I had just gotten married and was teaching in a secondary school. My husband was a geographer, who had to spend part of his military service in Algeria. So, I went to visit him there during the school holidays. It was the middle of the Algerian war. I thought Algeria was a wonderful country and I was obviously anti-colonialist. So, while visiting Oran, I had a complete change of direction. I wanted to work on North Africa. At the time in France, there was only one professor working on the history of colonization, as it was called at the time: Charles-André Julien. He worked

on North-Africa, was a socialist and he had written his very first anti-colonial article in 1914.<sup>2</sup> I met with him and discussed what I should do. As a result, I started doing Arabic for three years and then, by coincidence, I was put in touch with Henri Brunschwig. He was a former specialist of German history who had moved into colonial history. He taught at the *Institut des hautes études d'outre-mer*. During the War, he had been in the same prison camp as Fernand Braudel. Now, Braudel, one of the leaders of the Annales School, was involved with the *École pratique des hautes études* (EPHE). The EPHE, created at the end of the 19th century, was a research institution aimed at promoting everything that was new in research.

In the early 60s, Braudel was developing the idea of area studies in the 'Sixth Section' of the EPHE. There was a centre for India, a centre of the Far East and also a centre for Africa. It had to be created from scratch. Braudel asked Brunschwig, who was not a specialist in African history because that discipline did not exist in France at the time. Nonetheless, Brunschwig collaborated to create a multidisciplinary group on the study of Africa south of the Sahara and he was looking for an assistant. I was still a teacher at the time, but I applied – I had to write a research article for him – and became his assistant from '62 onwards. In '66 I completed my doctoral thesis under his supervision and in 1970 my *thèse d'état*, in the end under the supervision of Hubert Deschamps.<sup>3</sup> While Brunschwig had given me the topic, he was not authorized to supervise *thèses d'état*, only doctoral dissertations. So, when I was planning on writing my *thèse d'état*, I needed to find someone else and this was not easy in France at the time. In the anglophone sphere the situation was different. Chairs in African history had been established at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London and in Ghana in 1947. Most of our books were in English as well, the first major work in French was by Joseph Ki-Zerbo, the first Burkinabe historian, in 1972.

Undeterred, I went to see Charles-André Julien, but he was going to retire and sent me to see his successor, Jean Ganiage. He told me two things: 'I am young and will stay here for a long time'. Meaning, there will not be a position for you here and 'women are there to write their husbands' thesis'. I replied, '*merci monsieur et au revoir monsieur*'. I wrote to Pierre Renouvin, professor of international relations, whose courses I had followed and liked. He told me that the next year (1962), there would be two new professors of African history, one of which was Hubert Deschamps. He was a very charming man whom everyone called *monsieur le Gouverneur*, because he had been a colonial governor. He had worked for Leon Blum and the Popular Front in 1936, but had supported Vichy during the war because he was an admirer of Gouverneur Pierre Boisson. For this reason, he shifted careers and became an academic. He had written a *thèse d'état* in anthropology on Madagascar before the war and was given the chair of modern and contemporary history of Africa in 1962. This is how I became a historian of Africa. It was atypical for the time, since I had no particular attachment to Africa. I did not have a colonial officer as ancestor as many others who were involved with Africa did. It was really, let us say, a political choice.

### Changing Times in Academic Paris, the '60s and '70s.

*AIR: You were in Paris during '68 and after. What did it mean for you as an academic and for the writing of (African) history?*

CCV: I came in a bit before '68, but it was a very lively decade in the milieu of young French intellectuals, all more or less Marxist. I was on the left, but not in the Communist Party. Working on Africa was quite innovative at the time because the universities were still very much under the pre-'68 regime. This meant that history was only the history of France or the history of the West. So, for several years, Braudel's center organized a multidisciplinary training course for young researchers. I started working on my *thèse d'état* at the same time. A group of young researchers came to the fore: sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, and some historians, but no historians of Africa. All were interested in the history of the world. In our discussions we questioned all dogmas and debated the organization and political structures of non-Western societies. We questioned the structure of French history teaching divided in ancient, medieval, modern and contemporary periods (*quadripartisme historique*). We also questioned Stalinist dogmas about the evolution of societies from savage hordes, slavery, serfdom, capitalism and eventually, to socialism and communism. We asked whether these ideas made sense for non-Western societies, for example whether the Marxist concept of mode of production could function in non-western societies.

At that same time, there was a great upheaval in the universities. The Sorbonne was considered far too big with 300.000 students and was being divided up into 7 universities. Everyone, from porter to professor, could choose their new institution. A group of humanities and social science researchers were calling for a multidisciplinary institution, these became Paris 7 and Paris 8.

The changes that were being made were very interesting for historians as they created many opportunities. In the end, there were three history centers in the system. Paris 1 was for classical, traditional, but serious historians. The conservatives, who were very anti-'68, were at Paris 4 and the innovators ended up at Paris 7. The result was quite funny: there were lot of full professors, especially of ancient and medieval history at Paris 4, but not very many assistant professors. Whereas at Paris 7 it was the exact opposite. There were only two full professors and a host of assistant professors. The two professors were Jean Chesneaux and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie. They were political antipodes, Le Roy Ladurie was a centrist even if he had a Stalinist period in his youth and Chesneaux was of the (extreme) left. However, they had something in common: they wanted to innovate what it meant to write history. Paris 7 was called a red university, but that was an exaggeration. It was simply left-wing people who wanted to change things. All the assistant professors who were not working on France, automatically chose Paris 7 because the university was planning to abolish traditional chronological divides (the four time periods). This is important when you work on Indian history for example, because stopping at the time of the French Revolution is meaningless. I still remember that it was suggested that I would move to Paris 7. I hesitated because I liked the EHESS, but I had just defended my *thèse d'état* and I had some friction

with my mentor Brunschwig at the time. He was a left-wing man, with a right-wing temperament as he was very paternalistic. There was, on my part, a certain need to cut the umbilical cord. So, I had gone through a terrible summer trying to decide whether I should go to Paris 7. Finally, I decided to go because it was a very innovative place, even if we did not succeed in overcoming the chronological boundaries which some historians were so critical about. The minister of Education simply stated ‘either you accept them [the chronological periodization] or you cannot confer diplomas.’

And it was indeed very interesting. In the 1970s there was a lot of interest in African history, because of the period of decolonization. I had first year courses with 120 students or so. There was a Paris 7 spirit that has been maintained practically until today, in part because of one laboratory. It was Michel Alliot, our president, who passed me in the corridor one day and said: ‘There are a lot of people working on the Third World here.’ I realized he was right and that we could do something with this. I went to see my boss, Jean Dresch, a geography professor who was a former Sorbonne communist and a great intellectual. I suggested we create a laboratory for the study of the Third World (*Tiers Monde*). This did not exist at the time, since all laboratories were either organized along disciplinary or continental lines. He thought it was a very good idea and gave me carte blanche. At the time it was very simple to create such a laboratory. I simply asked my colleagues whether they wanted to cooperate and then I wrote a letter to the president which was examined by a laboratory commission and they recognized *Le Laboratoire Connaissance du Tiers-Monde*. It was an institute of the university, we were accredited by the ministry in history, geography and international relations. In 1981 the laboratory became associated with the *Centre National de Recherche Scientifique* (CNRS, the overarching national research infrastructure that accredits centers of research, (LSN/AIR).

The Laboratory was built on the concept of the *Tiers Monde*, which was invented by Alfred Sauvy and Georges Balandier in 1952. Alfred Sauvy compared the Third World to the Third Estate of the French Revolution and thus launched the concept.<sup>4</sup> It later became an ultra-leftist idea. Of course, there were also some problems. The doctoral course was called ‘Knowledge of the Third World’ and eventually we had to get rid of the name. It became outdated. That was very difficult because the term ‘non-western’ did not work because it was a negative description. Eventually we changed our name to *Sociétés en développement dans l’espace et le temps*, to highlight the geography and history aspects. It existed for a long time under this acronym, the name later became *Sociétés en développement: études transdisciplinaires*. We always remained transdisciplinary because the goal never changed. At the time, the laboratory was quite strongly oriented towards North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa, because of the specialists that were there. We often had a hard time explaining that we were interested in comparative studies. The CNRS complained ‘You are interested in everything!’ ‘No, we have certain themes and examine them across time and space’, we replied. This was a permanent battle with the CNRS. They did not understand what we were trying to do academically. In fact, what we were doing is quite in fashion nowadays, comparing different parts of the world. The Africa pillar of Paris 7 still exists, but it has become less important. Nowadays

the research center is called *Centre d'études en sciences sociales sur les mondes africains, asiatiques et américains* (CESSMA).

*AIR: Would you say that what you were doing at Paris 7 in trying to compare different parts of the world was 'global history'?*

CCV: Yes, you are right, I do feel like I am 'global', but at the time we were alone in what we were trying to do and we did not call it global history. We called it comparative history. We organized a theoretical seminar. Every year all the doctoral students, regardless of their discipline or subject, had this common weekly seminar. They worked on a theme defined in advance and the seminar was well attended by both doctoral students and lecturers. I learned a lot there, listening to specialists on Africa and others parts of the world. I knew what was going on in Asia, in Latin America and that was something that we all liked very much. When I talk to former graduate students who were there as well, they also tend to have very positive memories.

*LSN: You travelled a lot to Africa in this period. Did you see the changes you describe in Paris also there?*

CCV: I did see things change as I travelled to Africa, on various levels. In '65 I stayed for three months in Equatorial Africa and went all over Congo, the Central African Republic, Gabon, Togo and Chad. I went to learn and observe, but I was not an anthropologist. Rather, I looked for documents, people, for witnesses and oral testimony and I did that for several years. Before I left for the first time, I was a bit worried. What is going to happen to me for three months? I am not yet 30, I am on my own. But it went very well.

The idea in Gabon was to redo the mission of Brazza. I stayed a lot in centres of the *Office de la recherche scientifique et technique outre-mer* (OSTROM) as it was one of the few places where one could stay. What struck me was the extravagant racism of the staff. It was as if they were settlers, the same type of ideas, the same type of conversations. It was very much like the 19<sup>th</sup> century, including the internal quarrels. I had never been to sub-Saharan Africa and I could not believe my ears. They had many preconceived ideas about Africans: lazy, idiotic etc. I am exaggerating a little bit, but for me, what startled me was the blatant racism and on the Gabonese side, the passivity and the silence. It was heavy. It was very different in Congo-Brazzaville. There were the *trois glorieuses*, 1963, the (very impractical) marxist-leninist regime, but many young intellectuals and a very lively atmosphere.

When I went to the Ivory Coast in '67 there was no mixing. There were the whites, the expatriates, including the ORSTOM researchers, in four small houses, one next to the other, who had drinks together in the evening, but who had very little contact with the Ivorians, except to do surveys. And when I went back, in '72, I think, you had some very big, very important Ivorian characters who were admitted to white society for business reasons. But real mixing was only after '75.



*AIR: What was Dakar like in that period?*

CCV: Dakar was very different, there was more mixing. The first time I went was in '67. But in the Medina, the women did not speak French, I had trouble finding someone to talk to. Nowadays, the school is in French, but then few girls went to school.

*LSN: You also wrote a history of African women. Where did you find the inspiration to write about women in particular?*

CCV: That was also thanks to Paris 7 in a way. Michelle Perrot was appointed at the same time as I and she worked on women. She set up her research group on the history of women at Paris 7. She could not do this at Paris 1, as women were still writing their husbands' theses, after all! When I went to see Deschamps about my *thèse d'état*, he asked me 'but are you not married?' and I said, 'yes, I am', 'but you do not have children', I answered that I did. The interesting thing was that he did not pursue the topic further. He was a very proper person.

*AIR: Were you often asked questions about your children?*

CCV: No, I had the tendency to very strictly separate the personal from the professional. So, I suppose most of my interlocutors did not even imagine that there were two little girls (and later four children) with their father back in France. But I did not have many contacts with other women and men did not ask questions about children, because it was not their problem.

*LSN: How did you find the material for the book on women in Africa?*

CCV: I spent six months at a foundation in Washington, reading all the English-speaking anthropologists who had been working on the subject and legal archives. I only worked a little on the more recent periods. Only recently, I learned that Fatou Sow, an important Senegalese feminist sociologist, is the daughter of a teacher at the *Ecole Normale de Rufisque*. And this is a broader phenomenon, as women of a certain importance of more recent generations are the daughters of teachers. What struck me in particular about the young women of that generation was their extraordinary ability to navigate different worlds and this was true for the men of my generation as well. Young Senegalese researchers nowadays are completely bicultural as well. They are totally francophone and also Senegalese, they travel between these two cultures, in a completely natural way. They are very sensitive to both cultures.

*AIR: How did you see Africa change academically?*

CCV: I never wanted to become a 'cooperant' or have a regular post in Africa. I did not want to, for very specific reasons. There was practically no postgraduate training at the French-speaking universities in Africa. Many African colleagues came to study in



France. When they went back home, they got jobs, but they were not treated the same way as French ‘cooperants’. In Dakar, they had the same titles and lived on the same campus, but the African academics received local salaries and had to pay rent for their houses, whereas those from France were housed for free with salaries ten times higher. There were some who got along very well, but I did not like it. I could not have done that kind of thing. In the seventies, I went to Africa a lot to do teaching assignments for six weeks or so, but that was different.

After ’71 I started to teach very regularly in Africa. The first three years at the University of Dakar, where I was in the law and economics department. It was Samir Amin who invited me. He was a well-known leftist professor of Law at Poitiers and then Dakar. The whole programme was French, however. There was not a word about Africa and all the staff, by the way, were French as well. From 1974 onwards, when I had befriended Boubacar Barry, I also taught in the history department, for six-week stints. There was no *professeur titulaire*, which was necessary since they still followed the French system. So, I was habilitated by the University of Dakar as thesis supervisor. I got to know five generations of Senegalese researchers and that was a real privilege. This continued until 1984, when there were the first *thèses d’état* and Dakar became the only place in francophone Africa where one could do a thesis of the third cycle. Afterwards there were grants sponsored by the French government. As a result, I had many students at Paris 7, although in practice not as many as my signature might suggest. There were many specialists at Paris 7, but they had not defended their *thèse d’état*, so they directed, and I signed. So, I was responsible for about 50 theses.<sup>5</sup>

*LSN: Which of these theses do you remember most?*

CCV: There were a couple. First of all, the thesis by Achille Mbembe. I asked him, ‘why do you not go and work with Jean Francois Bayart since you are interested in international relations?’ He wanted to work with me, though. He worked very independently. And Ibrahima Thioub, part of the fourth generation. There was also Boubacar Barry, then Mamadou Diouf, then Mohamed Mbodj, then Ibrahima Thioub, then Adrien Benga. Since the sciences were strongly represented at Paris 7, it was a little less poor and this money also benefitted the humanities. As a result, we could invite students from the Global South. This was very interesting since the seminars were very mixed as a result. But this ended with the *Loi Pasqua* (a law making immigration into France more difficult, LSN/AIR). At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century there are very few African doctoral students left since there are no grants left.

*AIR: Did Africans succeed in getting posts in France?*

CCV: The first (and only) time that an African was elected as *maître assistant* in history at a French university (Paris 7) was about twenty years ago. This caused a revolution amongst francophone universities in Africa. They were very proud. Unfortunately for us, he left for Canada. We have a few African specialists in geography, sociology and anthropology in France, but none in history.

### African historiography and global history

*LSN: Regarding the theme of African history; what was your role within the UNESCO project of the General History of Africa?*

CCV: In 1964 UNESCO decided to fund the writing of a General History of Africa, a universal history if you will. It took thirty years! I believe the last volume was published in French in 1998. In the meantime, I travelled a lot in Africa. I wrote two chapters in different volumes. UNESCO recently decided to relaunch The General History of Africa, but it is a very different project from the first one. The first General History of Africa was a completely mixed committee with African historians, most of them English-speaking. I participated in the volume on medieval history, with Jan Vansina, I think. I also participated in the volume edited by Adu Boahen, who was a great historian. I remember the discussions when we were working on the original volumes. We met in Ghana to organize the last volume on the 20<sup>th</sup> century and there were discussions between the Soviet and the American historians, these discussions were very political in nature, rather than historiographical. But still, these were very useful because there are always a lot of choices to make, scientific or not.

The relaunched General History of Africa six or seven years ago had a completely different committee. There were African historians based in Africa, African American and Afro-Caribbean historians, and then there was me and initially also Paul Lovejoy, a Canadian of American origin. It was interesting from the start, but also complicated, not because of the African colleagues, we have been working together for a long time, we know each other. But, on the African American and Afro-Caribbean side, I had to show that even though I was white, even though I was a woman, even though I was not a Muslim, I could still have a voice. The project is meant to update the previous volumes and correct its errors. It is also different because it is supposed to be a global history of Africa, including the diasporas. It was felt that the last volume of the previous series was incomplete and uneven and it therefore needed to be updated. The manuscript has now been finished and should be published online by UNESCO shortly.

*AIR: What is the place of Africa in Global History?*

CCV: The place of Africa is as important as that of any other continent, but of course it is also different. The specificity of Paris 7 was precisely to see history from the perspective of the continent that one is studying. The whole world of historians is seizing the concept of Global History, everyone is doing it now. I wonder whether western historians are perhaps a bit overconfident in thinking that they are so learned that they can write global history for the whole world. I share the position with others that one needs to understand the relationship between different parts of the world and you cannot understand those relationships without looking at the history from both sides. Romain Bertrand did this with his history of Indonesia, a history *a parts égales*.<sup>6</sup> If you want to know the history of Indonesia, you have to know the history of the Netherlands, and vice versa. But most historians, French or other Europeans who write the history of others, especially the

history of Africa, do not realize that what they are doing is very Eurocentric. They hardly read the books on African history, so they do not know what they are talking about. When we talk about the global history of France, it is very interesting, but it does not draw on historians from the Global South. The decolonization of Europe has started but is not finished.

*AIR: Do you suggest that Africa is still marginalized in global history today?*

CCV: Yes, today we still do not know enough about Africa. There is still a certain rejection of African history in the West. Africans have been marginalized for a very long time for historical reasons. This has happened since the beginning of black slavery; it started with the contempt for black people and the construction of anti-black racism. This then becomes almost definitive in the 17th century. It is ingrained in western thought and therefore hard to uproot.

*LSN: What role do you see for the history of Africans written by Africans in Africa? The material circumstances are making this a difficult endeavor – getting a visa is becoming increasingly difficult for instance. It is very difficult for African historians to enter the debate, sometimes as a result of what Europeans and Americans do. Do you see a way to change that or to facilitate change?*

CCV: It is true that it is very difficult for an African researcher from an African university to enter the international debate. It depends on the countries, whether they have the resources, although the internet has corrected some things. But you need a lot of time. And then there are a few African researchers who circulate all around the world. But as far as African history itself is concerned, unfortunately at the moment many of the best histories are written by African historians at international universities who publish in the United States, in Canada, or in Germany, since they have the means.

*LRC: Toyin Falola, for example.*

CCV: Yes. For a long time, he was disparaged by fellow Africanists because he published too much. He is misunderstood. I think he operates at a certain level of excellence. It is his purpose to bring people from Nigeria and get them involved in African history and that is why he publishes so much. So, this is something that we also had very strongly in Paris 7, i.e., the desire to always involve young researchers in our projects. We did not want to create meetings of specialists who were all very experienced, but always to have a mixture of doctoral students, young internationals and African researchers. And it paid off! A lot of African history in French is written by Africans, much of it unpublished. All this work, these theses, are kept in university libraries, such as at Paris 7 and now also at Paris 1. So, I am not saying that everything is very good, obviously, but it is a mass of documentation that I, like others, have used - while citing them of course! - to write works of synthesis. Harmattan is also sometimes criticized for publishing too much,

as their business model is built on publishing a lot. But if it had not been for l'Harmattan, there would be much, much less African history being published. It is starting to change with more local publishing houses appearing. Karthala has a very different policy, few publications but of high quality and subsidized. We need a certain indulgence and comprehension for the difficulties of getting published and we need to read!

*LSN: We would also like to ask you something about political engagement and specifically about one's political engagement as a teacher of history. You are seen as an engaged historian. What do you think is the role of political engagement in history? Can you separate the two?*

CCV: It is a difficult question. I am engaged, definitely, but I am not an activist. That is to say that activism is not part of my teaching. Engagement means one should not fool oneself. If I choose subjects, it is because they are subjects that engage me. I chose to work on Africa because of independence and decolonization. And these are not neutral subjects. So, yes, these preconceptions obviously made me engaged in what I was studying. If I was against decolonization, I would not have chosen to study Africa. That being said, from the moment I started working on the subject, it was a question of being as rigorous as possible with regard to everything I found on the subject and accepting it if I was wrong. For example, I really liked my American colleague William Cohen, who was working on racism in French history and he was convinced that anti-black racism was more developed in the United States than in France. France was characterized by the absence of racism he thought. During the interwar period, France had been considered a kind of paradise for black Americans who came to France, who found out that there was no legal segregation and that they were free in a way. But he studied the archives and soon realized that if we did not have the same racism as in the United States, that did not mean that there was no racism. So, he wrote a much more nuanced book than he was originally planning to.<sup>7</sup> Of course, this book was received very badly in France. The French were angry that they were told that they had racist instincts after all. This is an example of someone who did research and found out he was partly wrong.

*LRC: You yourself wrote about the problem of race and the concept of race in African history and in the writings of Cheikh Anta Diop, and how we changed the way we talk about the concept.<sup>8</sup> I guess the concept still underlies a lot of our assumptions about Africa when we write about Africa in Europe. So, I would like to ask you what place you see for ethnicities, for 'race', in the history of Africa?*

CCV: This is a difficult problem. Why use the word race? Some would say it is better to use the phrase 'ethnic origin', but that is just paraphrasing to say the same thing. Ethnicity was conceived of by the Germans in the late 19th century to denote African states. They used the word 'ethnicity' because 'the state' was European in their imagination. Of course, it was not. And I actually find that on the French side, historians,

entrepreneurs and sociologists have shaped the debate using ‘race’, without inverted commas, thinking in the American sense of the term. But I am not sure that they do not have a few remnants of classic racism in the back of their minds. And so, we should use another word that takes into account different cultural-historical contexts. But I do think when I read people who use the word in an acceptable sense, I understand what they are saying and therefore I can agree with their ideas. I think perhaps we should try to find another word in French, because of the historical connotations in French that are very explicit and pejorative. Yet, it is now used by French intellectuals indiscriminately, especially since English is becoming more and more widespread in higher education in France, and so this confusion between languages and uses of the word ‘race’ is becoming more and more prevalent. Nevertheless, racism exists and removing the word race does not remove racism. For this is the great French confusion: even if we no longer speak of racism, it still exists.

*LSN: Since we are nearing the end of our conversation, and since you have already mentioned some pieces that you plan to write, what is a current project that you are excited about?*

CCV: I have had some very big projects recently that have taken up a lot of my time. There is of course the General History of Africa project! I also worked on an exhibition at the museum Quai Branly, *L’Afrique des routes*. I worked with a curator, Gaëlle Beaujean, specialist at the Musée du Quai-Branly and we tried to show the history of sub-Saharan Africa through objects. The main purpose was to show, through objects of art, that African cultures, people and ideas have circulated all over the world for a very long time. This exhibition was available for one year, 2017, and I took care of the catalogue as well.<sup>9</sup> I have also done a lot of work in the last few years, more so than in previous years, on the history of African slavery. I worked on a series as historical adviser and this series included fifty very long interviews with great international historians on the issue. So, I compiled a book containing these interviews.<sup>10</sup> My more recent plan was to tell my story, how I worked on African history and travelled a lot. When I travelled to Africa, in the evenings I used to write to my husband and children what I was doing, being the good wife and mother that I was! These notes proved to be very useful material to reflect on my trajectory and previous projects.<sup>11</sup> Now, for my next book, I would like to explore the following puzzle. From the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, observers (such as Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza), journalists (such as Albert Londres), novelists (such as André Gide) and even our Parliament often spoke out and wrote against colonialism. In dealing with colonial scandals various governments repeatedly assured the world they would solve these problems. Nonetheless, an enormous majority always remained deaf or blind. Why did nothing ever change and did only national liberation wars (Indochina, Algeria, Cameroon) bring change?

## Notes

- \* Anne-Isabelle Richard is a University Lecturer at the Leiden Institute for History and co-editor in chief of *Itinerario*. Her work is situated at the intersection of European and Global history.
- Larissa Schulte Nordholt is a lecturer at the Leiden Institute for History. She is interested in questions of activism in historical scholarship, activism as a decolonizing practice and historiographical decolonization and emancipation in the broadest sense. She recently finished her PhD-thesis Africanising African History about the historiography of UNESCO's General History of Africa/l'Histoire générale de l'Afrique (1964–1999).
- 1 Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Le choix de l'Afrique. Les combats d'une pionnière de l'histoire africaine* (Paris: La Découverte, 2021).
- 2 Charles-Andre Julien, 'L'indigénat', *La Lutte Social*, Oran, 16/23 July 1914.
- 3 Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Brazza et la prise de possession du Congo. La mission de l'ouest africain, 1883-1885* (PhD Dissertation, École pratique des hautes études, Paris, 1966), Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Le Congo au temps des grandes compagnies concessionnaires: 1898–1930* (Paris: Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 1972).
- 4 See: Alfred Sauvy, 'Trois Monde, une planète', *L'Observateur* 118:14 (August 1952), Alfred Sauvy and George Balandier, 'Le "Tiers Monde": sous-développement et développement', *Population* 11:4 (1956), 737–41.
- 5 See: Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, 'Access to Higher Education in French Africa South of the Sahara', *Social Sciences* 10:173 (2021), doi: <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10050173>.
- 6 Romain Bertrand, *L'Histoire à parts égales. Récits d'une rencontre, Orient-Occident (XVIe–XVIIe siècle)*, (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2011).
- 7 William B. Cohen, *The French Encounter with Africans. White Response to Blacks (1530–1880)* (London: Indiana University Press, 1980).
- 8 See: Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, 'Cheikh Anta Diop et l'histoire Africaine', *Le Débat* 1:208 (2020), 178–190.
- 9 <https://www.quaibranly.fr/en/exhibitions-and-events/at-the-museum/exhibitions/event-details/e/lafrique-des-routes-36991/>.
- 10 Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Les routes de l'esclavage: histoire des traites africaines VIe–XXe siècle* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2021).
- 11 This resulted in the autobiography already mentioned in the introduction: Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Le choix de l'Afrique. Les combats d'une pionnière de l'histoire africaine* (Paris: La Découverte, 2021).