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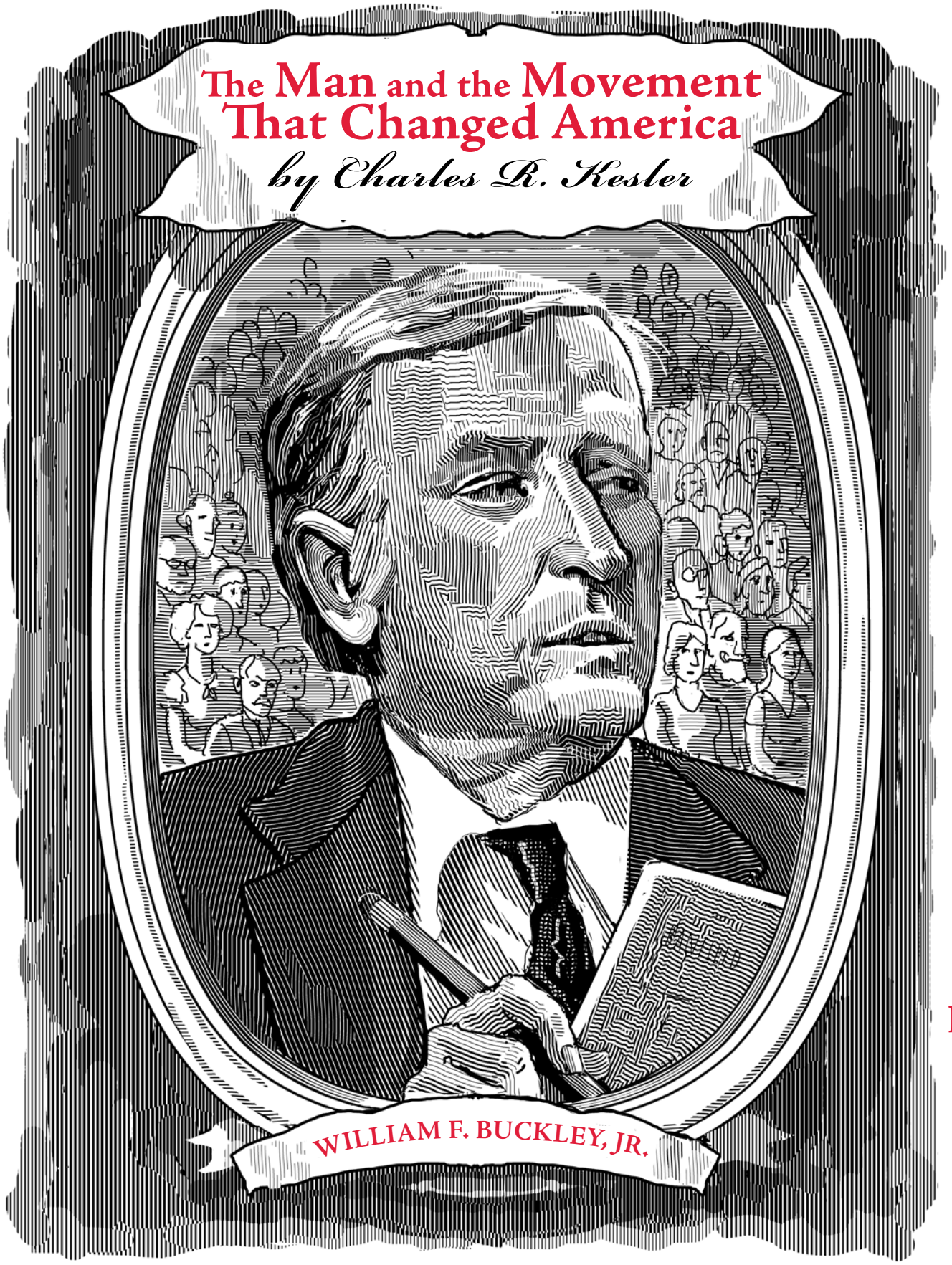

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Book Review by Luke Foster

For the Glory of France

A Counter-History of French Colonization, by Driss Ghali, translated by Ciarán Leglas.
Vauban Books, 302 pages, $22.95

The french empire was built over two decades in a madcap dash for glory. The left-wing Third Republic, seeking to reclaim national honor after Napoleon III's humiliating defeat by the Prussians in the 1870 Battle of Sedan, seized swaths of North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, Madagascar, and Southeast Asia in a "civilizing mission." The residual glow of that imperial dream still lingered in the mid-1980s, when my parents came to the impoverished and war-torn former Portuguese colony of Mozambique as missionaries. Even then, long after France's official dominion beyond the seas had waned, a French railroad engineer could tell my father without irony that his firm was there laying tracks "*Pour la gloire de la France!*"

Driss Ghali, himself a Frenchman of Moroccan origin who knows the Maghreb well, has written a remarkable book re-evaluating this grand imperial project. In *A Counter-History of French Colonization*, first published in French in 2023 and now available in a polished English translation by the Irish scholar Ciarán Leglas, Ghali warns the French of today not to lose their ancestral spirit of *gloire* in a cringing fit of shame over their ancestors' deeds.

The book's first half details the military, economic, and political history of how France conceived the enterprise of empire. Ghali portrays the true, often sorry state of Arab, African, and Indochinese societies on the eve of French conquest (nowhere did France encounter a functioning republic, and rarely anything like a nation-state) and chronicles the tactics of colonial rule. In the book's second half, he describes the key moments in the empire's end (famously bloody in Algeria and Vietnam, surprisingly peaceable elsewhere), assesses the record of the newly independent governments (catastrophic in Algeria, kleptocratic south of the Sahara, middling in Morocco, and impressive in Vietnam), and calls the French and the once-colonized to a truthful assessment of their relationship.

The Algerian War of 1954-62 in particular has been the *cause célèbre* of postcolonial theory since Frantz Fanon and Jean-Paul Sartre took up the cause of Arab nationalism. Many Westerners now have instinctive sympathy for Islamist and Marxist "liberation" movements, as reflected in the post-October 7 spate of Palestinian nationalist demonstrations on American campuses. Yet Ghali is not shy about offending such sensibilities. He has addressed the consequences of mass migration in what used to be the metropole with two bluntly polemical books, *Français, ouvrez les yeux* (*Frenchmen, Open Your Eyes*; 2022) and *L'identité d'abord* (*Identity First and Foremost*; 2025). *A Counter-History of French Colonization* is more measured, but it does not mince words. One chapter's title proclaims that "Repentance Is a Sickness of the Soul." Mass immigration from the former colonies under a regime of asymmetric multiculturalism and postcolonial guilt has called the very continuity of the French nation into question. On the flip side, mass emigration nets remittances and siphons off ambitious young people, propping up crooked regimes.

How does one answer postcolonial ideology, with its empirically and morally dubious basis and its dynamite implications for the present? One method is that of the long-range howitzer, attacking at the philosophical level of first principles: not all power is unjust, lasting wealth derives from serving others and not from pillage, and outside powers may bring local peace. In English, Nigel Biggar and Bruce Gilley have recently taken versions of this approach with *Colonialism: A Moral Reckoning* (2021) and *The Case for Colonialism* (2023), respectively. But ideology is a fortress uniquely impregnable to direct argument, since it can explain away any objection as false consciousness. The pale-skinned who object to being inherently guilty necessarily do so on account of their structural position; those of darker complexion must be complicit in their own exploitation. The alternative tactic is that of the sapper, who digs a thousand tiny tunnels beneath the fortress wall. By presenting anecdotes that the official narrative dismisses as impossible, one multiplies contradictions in hopes of destabilizing it and salvaging common sense, just as a man whose map repeatedly gets him lost might eventually have to scrap it in favor of navigating by squinting at the sun. Ghali, on the strength of his family history, local knowledge, and detailed research, opts on the whole for the latter approach.

Thus, without directly justifying the colonial project on first principles, Ghali's early chapters accumulate anomalies to render today's vengeful, Manichean narrative of European guilt and native innocence less plausible. The pre-colonial world was no Garden of Eden. In 1830, when France invaded Algiers, it was a haven for corsair slavers and a tinderbox barely tamped down by the Ottomans. In Morocco, French generals like Louis-Hubert Lyautey worked with the rump state that the monarchy had become to subdue unruly outlying tribes, in the process teaching the Moroccan elite much about how to run a modern state. In the Congo, as elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, the native kings and soldiers who most eagerly rallied to Pierre de Brazza's Tricolor were likely to be those previously threatened with slavery by their neighbors. In the Tonkin Delta, the local peasants cheered when French ships drove Chinese pirates from the river. Ghali's overarching theme is "the banality of the colonial": oppression of one group by another is in fact the default human condition. And sometimes the sting of foreign rule can bring unexpected benefits, like overcoming the local divisions of tribe and tongue through the imposition of a common language and administrative structures.

Ghali is surely right to say that the abuse of power is as old as Cain and Abel. But if the history of Western empire is merely another chapter of the tawdry story of the *libido dominandi*, it would either imply that the whole world is stained with guilt—from Mehmet Ali's Egypt to Shaka's Zululand, from Montezuma to Moscow—or that guilt is itself just another means of domination from which we should liberate ourselves. The interesting cases are the ones where those with superior power do *not* in fact wield it tyrannically but attempt to rule for the benefit of the ruled, despite great temptation to do otherwise. And Western history does offer many such cases, even in some of its darkest episodes. For example, Ghali details one of the worst atrocities of French colonial rule: the Congo-Ocean railroad construction project in the late 1920s, which relied on tens of thousands of native forced laborers and worked 15,000-25,000 to death by starvation and disease. And yet even in this horrifying instance, parliamentary inquiries and the investigative journalism of Albert Londres soon brought the story to the attention of the French public.

Conquest of Algeria, by Félix Henri Emmanuel Philippoteaux

The railroad project was drastically reformed to allow the workmen proper medicine and food.

Similarly, Ghali argues that the brutality of the French conquest of Algeria was the exception, not the rule: in the 1830s, a generation before the main colonial ventures, the prevailing military doctrines were still those of scorched earth derived from the Napoleonic Wars. France learned it was both more decent and more effective to win trust from local populations by pacifying regions gradually and demonstrating the benefits of French rule. Napoleon III offered the best proposal in Algerian history for a federated arrangement that could have secured the loyalty of both Arab chieftains and French *pieds-noirs* settlers.

This pattern suggests that the West has a capacity for self-criticism and self-correction that sets it apart from other present and past civilizations. Bartolomé de las Casas's remonstrances with the Spanish Crown, Edmund Burke's prosecution of Warren Hastings for the offenses of the East India Company, William Wilberforce's abolitionist oratory in Parliament, and Abraham Lincoln's Socratic refutation of Stephen Douglas on the American Great Plains reflect the same spirit. The highest virtues of the West do not stem from self-satisfaction but from an aspiration to meet an objective standard of natural right. Even two serious and uniquely Western contemporary vices—postcolonial self-loathing and exoticized multiculturalism—are recognizably corruptions of this aspiration.

Here, *A Counter-History of French Colonization* lacks depth on the subject of the spiritual and philosophical dimensions that define a civilization. The book's meticulous middle section on colonial governance ("A Raw Deal (1905-54)") deploys a great deal of economic and institutional data to evaluate the record of the empire in *material* terms, but says little about its religious legacy. The merits of French rule as Ghali describes it largely equate to the exports of secular, republican France: the end of slavery (which had crippled human capital development), education for women, protection for religious minorities, and the medical knowledge to begin to overcome tropical scourges like malaria, tsetse fly, and leprosy. This last success was won by brave doctors working in the Indigenous Medical Assistance system, often at the cost of their own lives. But even these real victories for human dignity are like flowers cut from their roots. Equating the West with "modernity" or "technological superiority" is a dangerous simplification. Exporting powerful tools without Christianity, which both bolsters reason and restrains it with mercy, can lead to horrors.

A Counter-History of French Colonization suggests that the French and their subjects both made a version of this error at times. "Under colonization, it became commonplace to confuse the construction of a bridge with the arrival of progress," Ghali acknowledges. Yet, "it is to civilization that one must address oneself if one is to develop a country." (*Civilisation* here would probably be better translated as "culture" or "mores.") Ghali does address French attempts to reach the soul when he describes the colonial education system, which despite severely limited resources managed to steep some colonial elites in French learning. Conversion to a foreign way of seeing the world is perilous and difficult. He implies that Europeans never had to undergo such a process:

> In their youth, Descartes, Pascal, and Chateaubriand received a bicultural education, at once steeped in French civilization and the Greco-Latin heritage. This is true, but they were never led to believe that they were Greeks or Romans. They were French and only French, Antiquity serving to cast a welcome light upon their moral and intellectual origins.

But Descartes and company are a misleading analogy for Léopold Senghor and Félix Houphouët-Boigny, who as the fathers of Senegalese and Ivorian independence sought to maintain and adapt French institutions in West Africa. The better comparison would be to the Gauls between the time of Vercingetorix and Clovis: men whom the Romans at first subjugated and then made so Roman in mind and heart that, when conquered by Germanic barbarians in turn, they successfully taught them a Romance language. It is possible to learn the art of civilization and adopt a new history—Senghor even joined the Académie française.

But such a radical assimilation is like religious conversion and often depends on it. To the extent that France has a great mission to achieve on behalf of the world, her status as "Eldest Daughter of the Church" must play a central role. Without that identity, it makes little sense to say that for France to become a northern province of the Islamic Caliphate (as in the nightmare scenario of Michel Houellebecq's 2015 novel *Submission*) would be a fundamental betrayal of Frenchness. The vast missionary legacy of France in the world receives little direct treatment in Ghali's work. But if Rome is the exemplar of all Western politics, then the imprint of an empire depends on its spiritual magnanimity, a *noblesse oblige* born from the confidence of having something to teach.

At moments, Ghali's account addresses this indispensable religious element of culture. In a grim assessment of the Maghreb's stagnation since independence, he concludes, "The question of moralizing or civilizing the human being by making him more honest, gentler, and more educated does not arise. Islam is not Catholicism. It has not managed—or does not want—to create a new man." If catechesis matters so much, then missionaries like Saint Charles de Foucauld, who gave his life in Southern Algeria in 1916 to convert the Berbers, deserve a more central billing in the story: Where did they succeed, and where did they fail? Where were they agents of the empire, and where its harshest critics? Although Léon Gambetta, the anti-clerical prime minister of the 1880s, famously quipped that "secularism isn't to be exported," the Third Republic (1871–1940) often restricted missionary evangelism even as it relied on mission schools and hospitals. Now France is seen (and resented) in Africa as an exporter of libertinism. But Christians from south of the Sahara may play an increasingly large role in the fate of France: I have seen parish churches in rural France attended only by old noble families and recent arrivals from Côte d'Ivoire.

A Tocquevillian aspect of the empire's story is that most of the colonies did not develop, under French rule or after, the ingredients of a healthy civil society that could make self-governance humane and effective in the democratic age. The colonial institutions that left the most enduring positive imprint were those, like the army, where an aristocratic spirit prevailed: hundreds of thousands of native troops fought with distinction for France in both World Wars, in Indochina, and in Algeria until the end (Ghali's own father endured a German *Stalag* in World War II). This mutual warrior recognition is the spirit embodied by Abdelkader, the emir who led decades of resistance to French rule in Algeria. Ghali quotes him, commending his attitude for the present: "Others could have struck me down, others could have put me in chains; but Louis-Napoleon is the only one who defeated me."

Even for those who now hate her, France remains alluring. As she uproots the last remnants of her military presence in Mali, Chad, Senegal, and Côte d'Ivoire, as jihadis, Chinese interests, and Russian mercenaries move in to fill the vacuum, and as American hegemony trembles, Napoleon III and Abdelkader's spirit of mutual magnanimity is increasingly needed if the 21st century is to prove happier than the 20th.

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