

Snapshots of colonial violence

by Frédéric Rousseau

Like machine guns, Kodak cameras make it possible to celebrate Western “modernity”. But to what extent do the photographs show European violence in Africa and Asia?

On: Daniel Foliard, *Combattre, punir, photographier. Empires coloniaux, 1890-1914*, Paris, La Découverte, 2020, 455 pages, €23.

From among hundreds of thousands of photographs, Daniel Foliard has researched, located, found, collected and finally selected a certain number of snapshots which, while documenting British and French colonial violence, also bear witness to the evolution of the sensibilities of the two societies with regard to the latter. Gradually, though increasingly at the start of the 20th century, European societies were more and more exposed to images of violence *in* the colonies.

Without overestimating the impact of the press on the societies of the Belle Époque, it is this visual economy consisting of the circulation of pictures, uses and constructed social imaginaries that the author interrogates throughout his volume, while systematically comparing the British and French experience.

In terms of violence, what do we see that we allow ourselves to show, and what do we see that we do not show? Did photography make European violence in Africa and Asia perceptible? Or did it rather filter, distort, censor and acclimatise it? These are some of the fascinating questions addressed in this book.

The photo and its commentary

Starting in the 1890s, thanks to technical progress, the increasingly smaller size of the equipment and falling prices, there is a rapid democratisation of ownership of a camera and the practice of photography.

But while thousands of voyagers criss-cross the planet – soldiers providing the largest contingents – “the most extreme reflections of their experience” are rarely photographed. For the purpose of this book, Foliard deliberately takes a step back, choosing to isolate, from among his imposing corpus, “the discordant shots of the violence that enveloped the extra-European conflicts of the late 19th and early 20th centuries”.

From the outset, the author announces that any view, no matter how horrible, should in no way be separated its commentary. He thus carefully resituates and comments on each of the images reproduced. Very quickly, even before considering what the images show, the photographic act is addressed as “a component of the colonial arsenal” which participates in the enterprise of domination of territories and bodies.

The camera, like the weapon, constitutes a marker of Western modernity and power. A tool both of self-glorification for the perpetrators/viewers of executions of “rebel” leaders and of propaganda aimed at the populations to be subjugated, the practice of the photographic trophy became commonplace. The views were accompanied by the intended humiliation and terror of the racialised victims who were supposed to be vanquished and subjugated over and over again.

Nonetheless, uncertainty remains about the true effects of the punishment inflicted on the conquered populations: Was it about a return to the colonial order or bearing witness to an unbreakable resistance?

Celebrating the superiority of Western power

All the colonial armies practiced photographic communication. The pictures circulated from one imperial centre to another, the main operators imitating each other. The idea that not everything should be shown to the home publics also emerged

very quickly. A subtle effort is undertaken to make colonial expansion visible in the home countries without, however, creating inopportune visual and political scandal.

Starting in 1895, the colonisation of Madagascar allowed French officers to structure the production of images of conquest in a way that was more systematic and carefully considered – i.e. controlled. From 1896 on, Gallieni managed to enlist photography into the service of the colonisation of the island.

As for the British, they immortalized their highly unequal battles against the “fanatical” Mahdist troops in Sudan, which they fought with machine guns and Kodak cameras. Here again, a celebration of superior white and Western power, and also of modernity and technology, whether in terms of combat or the industrial mode of asserting and immortalising European superiority. The British tightened their control over the production and circulation of images during the war in the Transvaal. Censors also appeared for the first time.

At the same time, humanitarian uses of photography were becoming commonplace. Thus, the Belgian atrocities in the Congo were the subject of international visual denunciation. We know, moreover, that the denunciation of “severed hands” will be – unjustly – turned against the Germans during their brutal invasion of Belgium in August 1914.

It should be noted, incidentally, that not all enemies were treated in the same way. It was also easier to exhibit the violence of rivals. Finally, what could be shown in the south of Africa could not be in London. This is what makes it possible to sketch out a geography of visualisations. But is this not a trompe-l’œil geography? The author notes that “the harshest images of the use of force are not apparent everywhere”.

Thus, we do not have any images of the violence perpetrated against aboriginal populations in Australia. The relative invisibility of the most shocking “excesses” in the official documentation bears witness to the authorities’ awareness of the effects of images on public opinion and to the effectiveness of the filtering done by the conquering forces, the government or the police.

A school for violence?

From 1907 on, even if we find analogous processes with respect to German Namibia or British India, the French conquest of Morocco is particularly well documented – including the most extreme horrors. From this point of view, it was involved in a new expansion of the perimeter of publicity of war violence: a way of telling the world about the destructive capacities of the French army. All the more so inasmuch as numerous photos were reproduced and widely disseminated in the form of postcards.

Were photographs of atrocities a means of teaching about the violence of modern warfare? The answer is not obvious. But the fact remains that its modalities and ravages were perfectly documented and widely exhibited during the various conflicts preceding the Great War. It seems that prudishness about the European dead was fading at the turn of the century. Nonetheless, we have to admit, as Foliard says, that if many saw, few looked:

The cliché of indifference to the horrendous photographs was already circulating at the end of the 19th century. The idea of a Belle Époque that is avid for horribly illustrated news, that is voyeuristic and ready for war, is thus undermined. (p. 379)

But then the question has to be raised: How does violence in colonial territories differs from “normal” political and military violence? Foliard assures us that “in the colonial situation and in many extra-European conflicts of the time, violence is excessive. [...] The degree of force imposed on bodies goes beyond the limits of war”.

The violence is indeed excessive, but does that mean that in the home country or in European conflicts the violence is not excessive? In general, can we agree that the limits set to war are systematically extended when an army – a Western army, in this case – which is heavily armed is involved in irregular and asymmetrical warfare against a largely civilian population which is unarmed or has only extremely rudimentary weaponry, whether outside Europe and in Europe itself? The crushing of the Paris Commune, for example, is part of this long, endless series. This could argue in favour of using the notion of “violence in the colonies” rather than that of “colonial violence”. This would allow us to think the continuum between empire and home country and vice-versa.

“Brutal” images

And what about “normal” symbolic violence? It is only at the end of the volume (p. 396) that the author evokes the “missing images”, those of “slow, normal violence, of structural violence, the effect of famines”. In my view, this is the main blind spot in the book, which is otherwise remarkably precise, nuanced and tactful.

Indeed, to conclude, let us call into question one of the author’s stated positions. He insists on the selective nature of his collection and, quite rightly, his first criterion concerns the connection between the photo and other archives that allow us to contextualise the image and the conditions of its production and then conservation. This connection is well established here.

But the second criterion is more debatable. The author says that he is fully aware that many of the images may be shocking or moving or “impose certain feelings”. No doubt. Even to the point of “blinding” the reader, he maintains, before again regretting that some of his images are impossible to neutralise. Moreover, the fact that “ the selection presented here [is] weighed by what is considered acceptable or too shocking” today raises issues.

Likewise, his claim that “certain images which are too brutal are not included in the book” (p. 17) is rather disconcerting. For what makes an image “too brutal”? What is at stake here is nothing less than the question of the status of the archive. Every society makes use of processes of iconisation, and if there is a risk, it is, in my view, a risk of iconic images being misused.

I have trouble imagining such a euphemisation in order not to present, in images, the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto or the liberation of the death camps. What sensibilities are we supposed to be protecting? Why should we “disarm” a shocking image “rather than being subjected to it”, as the blurb on the back cover puts it.

As for the argument that “those who reproduce the image would be [inscribed] in the circle of violence that they could try to break”, it is difficult to endorse it. I would argue, on the contrary, that being subjected to a shocking image and subjecting others to it is one of the indispensable triggers for getting us to rethink the politics of our pasts. In order to act in the here and now.

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