



Geography, tropicality and postcolonialism: Anglophone and Francophone readings of the work of Pierre Gourou

Daniel Clayton, Gavin Bowd

IN **L'ESPACE GÉOGRAPHIQUE 2006/3 Tome 35**, PAGES 208 TO 221

PUBLISHER **BELIN**

ISSN 0046-2497

ISBN 2701143251

DOI 10.3917/eg.353.0208

Uploaded: 10/01/2006

Article available online at

<https://shs.cairn.info/journal-espace-geographique-2006-3-page-208?lang=en>



Discover the contents of this issue, follow the journal by email, subscribe...
Scan this QR code to access the page for this issue on Cairn.info.



Electronic distribution Cairn.info for Belin.

You are authorized to reproduce this article within the limits of the terms of use of Cairn.info or, where applicable, the terms and conditions of the license subscribed to by your institution. Details and conditions can be found at cairn.info/copyright.

Unless otherwise provided by law, the digital use of these resources for educational purposes is subject to authorization by the Publisher or, where applicable, by the collective management organization authorized for this purpose. This is particularly the case in France with the CFC, which is the approved organization in this area.

Geography, tropicality and postcolonialism: Anglophone and Francophone readings of the work of Pierre Gourou

DANIEL CLAYTON

School of Geography & Geosciences,
University of St Andrews, Irvine Building, St Andrews, Scotland, KY16 9AL
dwc3@st-and.ac.uk

GAVIN BOWD

School of Modern Languages,
University of St Andrews, Buchanan Building, St Andrews, Scotland, KY16 9PH.
gpb@st-andrews.ac.uk

ABSTRACT.— Readings of the work of Pierre Gourou shed some interesting light on the different bearing that the critical constructs of ‘tropicality’ and postcolonialism currently have on Anglophone and Francophone geography. The paper shows how Francophone appreciation of Gourou has been couched in disciplinary terms, underlining the absence of a strong postcolonial orientation within French geography, whereas an Anglophone literature on tropicality has tended to caricature the involvement of Pierre Gourou and French tropical geography. The need for, and possible means of, closer Anglo-French dialogue over geography’s complicity in tropicality is commented upon.

PIERRE GOUROU, POST-COLONIALISM,
TROPICAL GEOGRAPHY, TROPICALITY

RÉSUMÉ.— Géographie, tropicalité et post-colonialisme : lectures anglophones et francophones de l’œuvre de Pierre Gourou — La lecture de l’œuvre de Pierre Gourou révèle l’influence qu’ont les constructions critiques de la ‘tropicalité’ et du post-colonialisme sur la géographie anglophone et francophone. Cet article montre comment l’interprétation francophone de Gourou a été articulée en termes disciplinaires et souligne l’absence d’une forte orientation postcoloniale au sein de la géographie française, tandis qu’une littérature anglophone sur la tropicalité a tendu à caricaturer l’engagement de Pierre Gourou et de la géographie tropicale française. L’article souligne enfin la nécessité d’un dialogue anglo-français sur cette question de la tropicalité en géographie.

GÉOGRAPHIE TROPICALE,
PIERRE GOUROU, TROPICALITÉ,
POSTCOLONIALISME

Introduction

Anglophone scholars have deployed the term ‘tropicality’ to denote a potent discourse that constructs the tropical world as the West’s environmental Other. The historian David Arnold (1996: 141-168) initially deployed this term in conscious parallel to Edward Said’s (1978) influential discussion of how the Orient has been produced, its meaning regulated, and imperial influence and authority over it exerted, by Western knowledge, institutions and scholarship –by a discourse of Orientalism, or system of representation, that constructs the Orient as inferior to the West. Orientalism and tropicality

operate as discourses of power by dramatising the distance between ‘us’ and ‘them’, and ‘here’ and ‘there’. It is through this process of ‘knowledgeable manipulation’, Said (1978: 55, 327) argued, that partial and value-laden ideas and images of regions such as the Orient and tropics become taken-for-granted, texts ‘create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe’, and Western identity has been elaborated in opposition to foreign lands and peoples. Said (1978: 63-68) describes how Orientalism worked through an ‘imaginative geography’ that rendered the Orient as ‘an enclosed space’ and ‘a stage affixed to Europe’ –an entity created and controlled by Western knowledge, including academic disciplines– and Arnold (2005: 225) similarly describes how, during the early nineteenth century, the British ‘affixed’ India to the tropics through the deployment of alien European categories of nature and landscape. Or as Frederick Cooper (2005: 15) notes, the ideas and methods that Western observers and scholars brought to foreign and colonial regions were “less a natural means of analysis of bounded societies located elsewhere than part of a process of intellectual pacification and ordering of the world.”

Arnold’s point (1996: 141-142) was that the tropics, like the Orient, “need to be understood as a conceptual, and not just physical, space”, and that work on this conceptual space would rectify the bias in the critical literature on colonial discourse towards cultural otherness and its relative neglect of “the otherness of non-European environments”. Western concepts of nature and landscape, and understanding of the relations between climate, race and disease, have also long been endowed with great moral significance. Naming a part of the world ‘the tropics’, Arnold (1996; 2000; 2005) has argued, became a way of identifying a space that was separate from the West, and of judging this space against the northern temperate zone. Tropicality can thus be conceived as a discourse –or complex of Western ideas, attitudes, knowledges and experiences– that, since the fifteenth century, has both created and been shaped by distinctions between temperate and tropical lands, with the temperate world routinely exalted over its tropical counterpart, and tropicality becoming central to the definition of the West as a temperate (moderate and hard-working rather than extreme and indolent) human as well as physical environment.

Tropicality has been a deeply ambivalent discourse, with positive and negative strains captured, respectively, in the image of tropical island edens (such as Tahiti) and the spectre of the jungle (such as the Belgian Congo) as “the white man’s grave” (Stepan 2001). Such ambivalence has become the focus of a fast-growing interdisciplinary literature, as has the way tropicality can be traced through a range of disciplinary ventures (such as botany, tropical medicine and tropical geography), and discourses (most notably climatic racism and other species of environmental determinism). Yet whether viewed as the exotic site of a noble innocence and simplicity that the West has lost, or as a fertile yet primitive estate awaiting the civilising and modernising intervention of the West, the tropics have been affixed to Western frameworks of meaning, desire and knowledgeable manipulation –a framework in which tropical peoples have been deemed to be unable to represent themselves and the Westerner observer/scholar decides on what counts as right, normal and true (and what does not).

This literature on tropicality –to which (we will see) Anglophone geographers have made some notable contributions– establishes some important links between geography and the interdisciplinary project of postcolonialism, which, among other things, has deepened understanding of how colonialism and empire operate as discourses of domination

(or systems of power/knowledge) that are animated by images, narratives and representations as well as material projects and feats of power. Recognition that many ideas and practices that have been deemed pivotal to geography's identity and development – exploration, mapping, landscape representation, regional and political geography, urban planning, and latterly GIS– have been pressed into (and designed for) imperial service has prompted soul-searching discussions –particularly within British and North American geography– over the need to ‘decolonise geography’. The discipline's entanglement with empire infuses the argument that geography should be viewed as a power-laden, and historically, geographically and conceptually variegated, constellation of concepts and practices rather than an immutable, autonomous or value-free area of study and knowledge domain (Clayton, 2004). What tropicality adds to this discussion is further proof that geography does not inspect and represent the world from an impartial or unassailable position, and a heightened sensitivity to the colonising and othering work done by ideas of nature and environment.

This paper seeks to augment these debates about tropicality, geography and post-colonialism by calling for more comparative scholarship. To date, tropicality has tended to be treated as broadly European or Western discourse that draws different forms of environmental otherness into an overarching split between ‘the temperate’ and ‘the tropical’. Conceived thus, tropicality can be viewed as a kind of environmental Eurocentrism. Little has been said about whether we need to distinguish between different national formations of tropicality (as others have now done for Orientalism). Does it make sense to talk in terms of shared-common national perspectives –a British, French, Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish or American tropicality– which differ in terms of their make-up and geographical points of reference and application? We will consider British and French tropicality.

There is no space here to provide a detailed comparison of these two national forms of tropicality, or of the evolution of British and French tropical geography. Our more limited aim is to explore what Anglophone and Francophone readings of the work of the French geographer Pierre Gourou –in many ways the inventor and doyen of the field of tropical geography– tell us about wider differences in Anglophone and Francophone critical engagement (especially by geographers) with issues of tropicality and postcolonialism, and, wider differences between French and British traditions of tropicality. This focus on Gourou will yield only partial comparative insights, and in what follows we do not want to imply either that Francophone tropicality is coterminous with the field of tropical geography, or that this (in many ways distinctly Francophone) field of study can be reduced to Gourou's texts and influence. But our choice of focus is not casual. For Gourou's influence on Western understandings of the tropics stretches well beyond both France and the discipline of geography. While his international reputation has never been fully chronicled, commentators have noted that his best-known work, *Les Pays tropicaux* (1947a) “inspired a generation of students” (Gottmann, 1983: 41) around the world, and provided professional geographers, politicians and development strategists with “a zonal imaginary out of which a suite of tropical geographies could be hewn” (Livingstone, 2002b: 159). This text –first published in the year Gourou was elected to his *chaire d'étude du monde tropical* at the Collège de France– went through four editions to 1966 and was used as a university textbook throughout the world. In short, Gourou's work provides us with an important point of connection between Anglophone and Francophone interest in, and geographic research on, the tropics.

We will begin by identifying some significant differences between Francophone and Anglophone readings of Gourou, and then explore what might account for such differences. What part might differences between British and French traditions of tropicality have to play? Do such differences reveal wider differences in the current critical outlooks of Anglophone and Francophone geography? Finally, we will return to some of Gourou's arguments and texts to suggest that one way of exposing and destabilising tropicality (at least in an academic vein) is by thinking about the research sites, geographies of intellectual labour, and spaces of knowledge (such as the field and the university) in and through which authoritative geographical meanings are made and circulated. Accordingly, in the last section of the paper we will point to the importance of identifying and distinguishing between the elementary (core or intrinsic) and contextual aspects of Gourou's tropicality.

Anglophone tropicality and French tropical geography

This paper stems from a project we had undertaken on Gourou's tropicality. When we started this project we were struck both by how few connections Francophone geographers had made with the literature on tropicality (and Orientalism), and by how little attention Anglophone geographers generally pay to work in other languages. We knew of past exchanges between British, French and American geographers over the aims and scope of geographical research on the tropics and human-environment interactions –not least between Gourou, Carl Sauer and British colonial administrators from the Asian tropics at the 1938 International Geographical Congress held in Amsterdam. Also think back, for example, to Lucien Febvre's critique of the Anglophone tradition of environmental determinism spearheaded by Ellsworth Huntington and Ellen Church Semple, or to Keith Buchanan's call in the late 1960s to have Gourou's 'reactionary' geography cut from the geography curriculum at the National University of Singapore (Arnold, 2000: 16; Power, Sidaway, 2004: 592). Think, too, of the great contrast between Gourou's gloomy assessment of the tropics (and especially of tropical soils) in *Les Pays tropicaux*, and the positive vision of the potential for tropical development associated with his British contemporary and counterpart, B.W. Hodder (1967).

We could of course delve further into this shared history –a history that has revolved around the assessment of how geography conspires against the tropics, and whether our ability to master nature should be seen as a uniquely Western achievement; and a history that is recounted, in part, in Gourou's semi-autobiographical *Terres de bonne espérance* (1982: 395), where he declares “my tropics are attractive; when they exude sadness, it is not for ‘tropical’ reasons” but due to “an unhappy history”. Our point, however, is that this past dialogue has largely been forgotten by a more recent generation of geographers and been deemed quite incidental to the critique of tropicality. We identified a gap between Francophone and Anglophone geographical engagements with tropicality, with the former still revolving around the framework of French tropical geography, and the latter more concerned with how we might place figures such as Gourou and the disciplinary niche of tropical geography in a wider discursive context. Let us reflect further on this gap.

Francophone perspectives

From the Francophone perspective, there seems little doubt that this gap stems from Gourou's pivotal influence on Francophone tropical geography and the exceptional

institutional place that this research focus has had within the Francophone geographical tradition. Jean-Pierre Raison (2005: 327) suggests that while it is possible to think of ‘tropicalism’ (or *tropicalisme* and *tropicalité* in French) as a term, like Orientalism, that “sets the terms of an otherness”, in Francophone geography the term has “a more precise meaning”, namely as one “that was shaped above all by researchers who disagreed with Gourou”¹.

Such disagreement has centred on a number of basic issues: Gourou’s marginalisation of issues of colonialism and revolution; his disregard of issues of political economy, urbanisation and industrialisation; the rural bias of his fieldwork and conceptual framework; and the theoretically under-elaborated quality of his central concepts such as “civilisations” and “*techniques d’encadrement*” (see Bruneau, Dory, 1989, 1994; Gottmann, 1983; Gourou *et al.*, 1984; Nicolai *et al.*, 2000). Furthermore, while Gourou himself –like his British counterpart, Robert Steel– questioned whether ‘tropical geography’ constituted a discrete or coherent field of study, stories about the evolution of French geographical research on the tropics have generally been told in fairly inward-looking disciplinary terms. Historical reflection is geared to the delineation of a set of core concerns: how tropical geography derives and departs from colonial geography and Vidalian possibilism; the post-war establishment of a ‘tropicalist’ paradigm in French geography, through the ideas and methods imparted by Gourou during his time at the Universities of Montpellier (1940-1942), Bordeaux (1942-1945), and latterly at the Collège de France (1947-1970) and Université libre de Bruxelles (1936-1939, 1945-1970); the important supporting role played by the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS) and Office de la recherche scientifique et technique Outre-Mer (ORSTOM); and the demise and overhaul of ‘classical’ tropical geography from the early 1970s onwards under the aegis of Marxist theory and *tiers-mondismes*, and latterly systems theory, spatial modelling and ethno-science (see Bruneau, 2005; Claval, 2005; Raison, 2005).

Only at the edges of this historiography do we find any serious questioning of how Francophone geography has helped to construct the tropics as a space of otherness and invented a disciplinary field and tradition for dealing with it. We get a glimpse of this type of recognition in Dominique Chapuis and Maurice Ronai’s 1976 attack on Gourou’s 1936 book on the peasants of the Tonkin Delta, where, akin to dramaturgical image that Said used just two years later when he described the Orient as a stage affixed to Europe, they question how Gourou’s “inaugural landscape literally functioned [in his study] as the opening of an opera” (Chapuis, Ronai, 1976: 118-119). But Francophone geographers have paid little attention to such matters of discourse and appropriation since then.

Anglophone perspectives

Tropical geography had a much more marginal niche within British geography, in part perhaps because few of Gourou’s seminal works were translated into English. Many of those British geographers who started to work in this area after World War Two had gained a firsthand experience of the tropics from colonial and military service, and research was augmented by British colonial development and welfare policies, which, among other things, led to the establishment of geography departments in universities in Britain’s tropical colonies (Farmer, 1983). But in post-war Britain itself there were no equivalents to the large French science programmes, research institutes and ‘tropical laboratories’ –such as the CNRS-funded Centre d’études de géographie tropicale

1. By ‘Francophone’ we refer mainly to French geographers –and by ‘Anglophone’ mainly to British geographers– though we should not discount the work of French Canadians and Belgians (Gourou had a major influence on Belgian geographical research in Africa).

at the University of Bordeaux 3 (CEGET, 1968-1992), which was overseen by Gourou— that became the institutional bedrock of French tropical geography. By the 1970s the Anglophone study of tropical geography was being subsumed into modernisation theory and was soon supplanted by more radical development and political ecology frameworks (Power, Sidaway, 2004).

It is in this context—thirty or so years after the disappearance of tropical geography from British geography— that Anglophone geographers have re-discovered the tropics, via an alternative interdisciplinary route, with a predominantly theoretical and historical focus, and without a strong sub-field to argue over or honour (e.g. Driver, 2004; Driver, Martins, 2005; Livingstone, 2002a: 43-73). Neither Gourou, nor the field of tropical geography, should be exempted from this critical focus. Arnold (2000), for instance, views Gourou as a key architect of twentieth-century tropicality who played an important role in the complex post-war reconfiguration of the colonial world as a ‘backward’ and ‘developing’ world.

However, the Anglophone literature that implicates Gourou in tropicality has reinforced a curiously narrow image of his concerns, and a homogenous picture of French tropical geography. Arnold (2000:10) observes that for Gourou “there is scarcely a trace of the Edenic... [and] poverty and pathogenicity are all pervading”. And David Livingstone (2002b: 160) begins a recent paper on the history of what he calls “moral climatology” (how climate has long served as a way of moralising about human difference) by commenting on “the censorial tenor of Gourou’s tropical geography”, and how the “pessimistic, pathological and pestilential” view enshrined in *Les Pays tropicaux* can be regarded as emblematic of an age-old tropicality in which “temperate normalcy [has] remained inviolate”. Such remarks epitomise a more widely held Anglophone image of Gourou as the purveyor of a negative tropicality.

It is not hard to see why such judgements have been made. “The first problem in the development of the hot and humid regions”, Gourou declared in *Les Pays tropicaux* (1947a: 7), “is a problem of salubrity”. On the whole, he continued, “tropical soils are less favourable to man than temperate ones”. And, “Compared to the temperate countries, tropical regions are struck by a certain number of inferiorities”. Tropical nature is generally “baneful to man”, and “does not favour the progress of civilization” (Gourou, 1947a: 29, 49-50, 174). These were the terms and images by which Gourou became best known outside France, and Arnold and Livingstone rightly draw critical attention to the essentialist character and demeaning tone of many of his pronouncements about the tropics. As Arnold (2000: 16) perceptively observes, in Gourou’s hands “the image of the tropics as a world set apart by nature, a world characterised by poverty, disease, and backwardness... acquired a new scientific authority and specificity.”

Yet there was always more to Gourou than this. For he romanticised as well as demonised parts of the tropical world, and insisted that his examination of tropics started with civilisation rather than nature. Indeed, Gourou might be regarded as one of the twentieth-century’s most ambivalent tropicalists. He both eulogised the virtues of the monsoon and delta civilisations of eastern Asia, and lamented the threat to human well being that tropical nature (particularly in Africa) presented. The narrower readings of him offered by Anglophone scholars might be justified on the grounds that the aim of much of this work has been to offer broad surveys of tropicality rather than carefully contextualised studies of individuals such as Gourou². Nonetheless, this narrowness is curious given the importance that this literature generally accords to context, variegation and differentiation.

2. Indeed, Arnold’s (2005) book on the ‘tropicalization of India’ contains a finely contextualised study of the botanist J.D. Hooker.

If Gourou's tropicality was more multifaceted than recent Anglophone scholars have let on, then so was the wider field of French tropical geography (which Anglophone scholars tend to see as coterminous with Gourou's contribution). As Michel Bruneau (2005) and Jean-Pierre Raison (2005) intimate, while French geographical interest in the tropics has been expressed in colonialist modes, it has also been articulated in paternalist and preservationist modes, and latterly (and yes, partly in critical response to Gourou) in Marxist, *tiers-mondiste*, developmentalist and ethnographic modes. Such labels help us to characterise the type of work done by Francophone geographers and scientists working in different periods and parts of the tropical world, and as Paul Claval (2005) shows, individual geographers sometimes worked in more than one mode. Out of this plural history comes a variegated –and in many ways ambivalent– image of Francophone geography's links with tropicality: an image in which the production of geographical knowledge should neither simply be reduced to power and ethnocentrism nor read as the unfettered product of an autonomous or impartial field of study.

What might account for these differences between the trenchant critique of Western representations of the tropics promulgated by Anglophone scholars (and captured in their critical exposure of Gourou's pessimism), and the more variegated representation of the tropics to be found in the Francophone geographical literature? Let us think about two –historical and intellectual– sets of issues.

Why the gap?

The British versus the French tropics?

A first possibility is that such differences reflect underlying differences between British and French styles of colonising, representing and studying the tropics. Did the British have a more monolithic and exploitative relationship with the tropics than the French? Does this help to explain the acuteness of Anglophone critical reaction to tropicality? We want to suggest that while such questions may warrant detailed investigation, they are liable to generate as much confusion as they are clear answers to our questions. On the one hand, it is possible to see some broad similarities between British and French tropicality. By the nineteenth century, Britain, France and other European powers shared a Eurocentric vision of empire that rendered the tropical world as a “fabricated singularity” (Livingstone, 2002b: 47). On the other hand, we should resist the idea that tropicality is characterised by a set of discursive procedures (such as projection, erasure and debasement) that remain constant in their application in different parts of the tropical and colonial world.

By the late eighteenth century, the representation of the tropical world as a bountiful estate had become central to the way both the British and the French envisioned imperial expansion as a rational project of cultivation and improvement (Arnold, 2005). This vision and project had its roots in a common plantation experience, and it persisted through to the twentieth century, when British and French colonial figureheads such as Frederick Lugard and Albert Sarraut saw Europe as bringing the redemptive powers of Western civilisation and technology to the tropics. However, during the course of the nineteenth century Anglo-French confidence became undermined by a common colonial encounter with tropical diseases, and by the end of the century apocalyptic visions of the

environmental harm caused by the commercial exploitation of the tropics had crept into the British and French colonial psyches (Mackenzie, 1997). British and French observers commented at length on the enervating and pestilential quality of tropical environments, and by the time we get to Gourou and post-war models of development, climate and disease had long been used as markers of tropical backwardness, inferiority and danger.

It is thus tempting to see British and French (and we might add American) representations of the tropics as broadly comparable. However, we should not downplay differences in the way Britain and France encountered and colonised the tropics – their different systems of colonial trade and settlement, different structures of imperial government and colonial rule, and different imperial and philosophical categories (republican citizenship versus liberal universalism, for example). Such differences, which were acutely apparent to contemporary observers like Edmund Burke and Abbé Guillaume Raynal, deserve more attention.

Thus while further analysis along these comparative lines may be rewarding, it will not – in our view – yield a sufficient response to our question, because knowledge and discourse are not the marionettes of underlying historical forces. As Said consistently argued, we are neither completely caged by dominant discourses and the worldviews of our day, nor completely free of them. Both agency and episteme are at work in what we can write, do and think. And so to a second perspective on the gap we have identified. Does it have more to do with the different languages that Anglophone and Francophone scholars speak, and their different cultural, political and epistemological commitments?

British versus French geographical scholarship?

Three observations come to mind. First, the term ‘environment’ was not commonly used in French geography until the 1980s, and the field of environmental history has developed more slowly in France than in Britain and North America, and with less connection to the fields of imperial history and postcolonial studies (Ford, 2001). Second, the acuteness of Anglophone critical reaction to tropicality arguably reflects the greater potency of environmental determinism in Anglophone geographical thought (and especially American geography) than in the French geographical tradition, which was shaped by a more complex and malleable ‘possibilist’ tradition. But third, and perhaps decisively, the postcolonial agenda that spirals around Said’s work (the French translation of *Orientalism* appeared in 1980) has had a much deeper impact on Anglophone geography than it seemingly has on Francophone geography. The lack of any sustained treatment of issues of Orientalism and Eurocentrism in the recent *Dictionnaire de la géographie et de l’espace des sociétés* (Lévy, Lussault, 2003) seems to be indicative of the absence of a well established postcolonial orientation within French geography and other disciplines (see Blanchard, Lemaire, 2004). As Jean-François Staszak (2003) implies, there has been remarkably little discussion of what might explain this absence, or of how Francophone geographers view the resurgence of interest in colonialism and empire within Anglophone geography. While the reasons for this are undoubtedly more complex than we can possibly recount here, and the following observations are tentative, a few things do seem clear.

If, as many Anglophone scholars have argued, French intellectuals and academic structures have struggled to fully embrace the relativist spirit of postcolonial assertion – and especially its deep suspicion of Western universals and metanarratives, and concomitant interest in ‘situated knowledges’ – then in important respects it is because the

break-up of France's overseas empire was viewed as the rejection of the gift of a uniquely and universally accessible French culture. As Tony Judt (2005: 282) notes after World War Two the French extolled "the virtues of a seamless cultural assimilation" tying France to its overseas possessions in ways that would have been unthinkable to the British or other European colonial powers. It is against this backdrop that we need to interpret what James Le Sueur (2003: 115) sees as the "cruel paradox" that independence struggles presented to French intellectuals: of deciding whether to defend "the universal values of their personal, collective, and national identities" against the violence perpetrated by European colonisers, or to side "with a people who largely denied this universalism."

While Francophone geographers have begun to reconsider the connections between geography and empire, there has been a much less fulsome discussion of the spatiality of colonialism and empire than there has been in Anglophone geography. To what extent is this situation tied to the cultural trauma caused by French colonial retreat and the forms of colonial amnesia it bred? Can the absence of a strong postcolonial agenda within Francophone geography be put down to the paradoxical impulses of French universalism and republicanism, as others have argued in more general terms (see Cooper, 2005: 135-49)?

The point of this potted discussion of intellectual positions is not to berate Francophone geography or exalt Anglophone geography. Indeed, the development of postcolonialism within and beyond geography has been criticised on various grounds, and especially for portraying the West as all-seeing and all-knowing, and its knowledge systems as impervious to subversion and re-invention by the Other (Driver, 2004). In dredging up onerous images of otherness from the past, this critical orientation also runs the risk of reinforcing the ideas and practices it seeks to question (Clayton, 2004). These (and other) objections concerning the so-called 'postcolonial turn' in Anglophone geography are important and merit fuller discussion. However, we might start to mitigate some of them by attending to the ways in which tropicity operates as a two-way relationship between 'temperate' and 'tropical' agents and influences, rather than as the simple projection and monolithic imposition of Western desire and power –albeit still an unequal relationship that Western 'tropicalisers' seek to control, partly by disavowing the involvement of the 'tropicalised'. Let us start to draw this paper to a close by relating this last point to Gourou.

Elementary and contextual aspects of Gourou's tropicity

While Gourou produced a remarkable –and in many ways genuinely humane– body of knowledge about the tropical world, we should not overlook how and why his work can be viewed as a form of epistemological violence. Perhaps the most basic aspect of Gourou's tropicity was his adherence to a Western model of knowledge, broadly accepted in his day, in which the locational, transactional and embodied dimensions of research (his fieldwork and use of assistants and interpreters) are largely effaced in his published work. His tropicity can be traced back to his inter-war work in Indochina and is rooted in a claim to intellectual sovereignty and self-containment –his self-understanding that his work from *Les Paysans du delta tonkinois* (1936) onwards was born from "purely scientific concerns", as he put it (Bowd, Clayton, 2003: 152-155). Here, as in much of Gourou's other writing on Indochina, he not

only romanticises the peasant landscape and culture of the Tonkin Delta, representing it as a “stabilised civilisation in material and aesthetic harmony with the natural conditions” (Gourou, 1936: 576). He also speaks to French colonial and metropolitan audiences as an expert. What gives his representation of the delta as a beautiful, fragile and timeless landscape wider meaning and importance is the political implication that the peasants needed to be insulated from the contaminating influence of colonialism and modernisation.

That the effacement of the transactional nature of his fieldwork might be excused on the grounds that such a thing was ‘not done’ in his day, or pardoned on the grounds that he later acknowledged his debt to his Vietnamese assistants in interviews, is, for us, beside the point. Rather, we should focus on how certain images, statements and diagnoses about the Tonkin Delta (its chronic overpopulation, for example) drawn from Gourou’s work gained meaning and legitimacy in France and Indochina partly on the basis of this model of rational and disembodied knowing. It was on the basis of this model –and as an independent scholar rather than as a direct servant of the colonial state– that Gourou influenced French thinking about Indochina and was invited to sit on a Popular Front Government commission on the abuses of French colonial power in Indochina. He exposed the limits of French colonialism in Indochina without being openly critical of the colonial regime. Like other French Orientalists and Africanists, he neither fully acquiesced in colonialism’s powers and privileges, nor completely rejected the colonial system that made his work possible.

Livingstone (2003: 44–45) suggests that it is by working through the idea that all forms of knowledge production take place somewhere, and are “the compound product of personal observation, trusted testimony... [and] shared cultural resources” that we might arrive at more careful assessments of how knowledge acquires authority. Such arguments help us to cast the critical spotlight on the way Gourou (1972: 135) sought what he called “a rational, hierarchised geography” that could be produced with the objectifying tools of geographic inquiry (and particularly cartography) and gave the Western scientist-scholar special access to tropical realities –realities that, by implication, ‘tropical’ peoples were ill-equipped to discern themselves.

One of the most innovative aspects of the methodological flight that took Gourou from a regional to a continental and zonal scale of analysis –from the Tonkin paddy fields to the tropics at large– was his insistence that geographical judgement on the tropics should stem from the application of this rationality to the comparative study of population densities and distributions, and their correspondence with “levels of civilisation” and “*techniques d’encadrement*”. It was from this recognition of the core relationships between population pressure, land use, landscape organisation, and civilisational (or cultural) coherence that Gourou devised an approach that accentuated the differences between the temperate and tropical world. It seemed clear to him that the developed countries of the temperate belt had wrested their development and control over nature from a number of interdependent dynamics that began to coalesce during the seventeenth century and provided the peoples of the Eurasian landmass with an unrivalled ability to adapt nature for human use: demographic growth, medical progress, increases in agricultural and industrial productivity due to scientific invention and mechanisation, and state-building (Gourou, 1971: 25–47). This, in fine, was the historical yardstick against which Gourou judged the tropical world, and its spatial equivalent can be found in his 1940 work *La Terre et l’homme en Extrême-Orient*, where he

presents an idealised contrast between “familiar” (and by implication ‘normal’) European landscapes, such as the Norman bocage, and the “different standards” of landscape organisation in the Far East (Gourou, 1940: 88-89).

Thus we suggest that we cannot assess Gourou’s connection to tropicality unless we come to terms with this relationship between authorship and authority. Yet ironically, Gourou started to bring more of the tropical world under the aegis of this model – during the 1940s and 1950s – during a period when it started to be vehemently questioned by colonised peoples. In his *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1955: 32-36), Aimé Césaire attacked what he dubbed Gourou’s “tropicalité” – his “impure and worldly geography”, which pronounced that no civilisations comparable to Europe had ever developed in the tropics; a geography, Césaire continued, that cast a “geographical curse” over the tropics and made Gourou a “guard dog of colonialism”. Césaire argued that Gourou’s zonal imaginary preserved the temperate/tropical binary that underpinned European and American colonial and then neo-colonial exploitation of the tropical belt.

Gourou’s ‘neo-colonialist’ reassertion of tropicality in a scientific-modernist mode was not only challenged at an intellectual level. Tropicality was also combated in altogether more visceral ways in a series of jungle and guerrilla wars in Malaya, Indochina, the Congo and Kenya, and that reached a head with the Vietnam War. Gourou gave hardly any credence to this world of nationalist and communist insurgency. Rather, during the 1940s and 1950s he helped to dampen the trauma of French colonial retreat by suggesting, at the continental scales of Asia and Africa, and the global scale of the tropical world, that the tropics was beset by problems that predated and superseded colonialism and the predicaments of decolonisation and Cold War aggrandisement. His colleague Charles Robequain (1952: 87) was near the mark when he wrote in a review of post-war geographical work on Asia that in “the confusion of events” it was important to discern “certain permanent factors underlying the shifting sands of history”. Gourou tried to make sense of the world in this permanent way, but did so by granting the tropics an eternal geography – an everlasting geography that he exoticised in both positive and negative ways. This helps to explain why Gourou’s comments on colonialism and decolonisation were both scant and in lack consistency. He defended colonialism in some regions and at some scales – especially the French Federation of Indochina – but questioned its legitimacy and effectiveness at others – at the regional scale of the Tonkin Delta, and in British Iraq, Jordan and Kenya (Gourou, 1936: 378, 473, 478-479, 576-578; 1947b; 1953: 110-125; 1954). He was particularly bitter about the way the Americans translated his book on the Tonkin Delta without permission, and supplied B-52 bombers with copies of his maps of the Tonkin dykes – providing Yves Lacoste with the immediate grist for his celebrated formulation that “geography is foremost a way of waging war” (Gourou to Gottmann 17 June 1965, Fonds Gottmann).

In these ways and more, Gourou’s ‘impure and worldly geography’ forestalled the possibility opened up by decolonisation of exploring how tropicality has been implicated in the mutual (albeit hierarchical) constitution of nation and empire, metropole and colony, and citizen and subject. For all he wrote about ‘civilisations’, Gourou was slower than many of his students (especially, perhaps, Paul Pélissier), to move away from a binary, diffusionist and top-down train of thought in which polarities between ‘here’ and ‘there’ – the temperate and the tropical – are accentuated, and the knowledge and practices of the tropicalised are subordinated to the gaze of the Western scholar, who assumes the right to diagnose and judge.

As these points about the elementary aspects of Gourou's tropicality begin to suggest, it is important to establish how projects such as his, and criticism of it, came into focus at historically and geographically specific junctures. We need to think about the contextual aspects of his tropicality, and of how and why this discourse is now placed under the critical spotlight. The immediate aftermath of World War Two explains as much about the agenda that Gourou set in the late 1940s as the period 1968-1973 (culminating in the Sahel drought) does about Francophone criticism of his work and the reshaping of tropical geography in France. And different Anglophone and Francophone responses to postcolonialism help to explain why Gourou's work has and can be historicised from different perspectives. In fine, it is important to think about how such discourses such as tropicality have been put together –and pulled apart– in specific (and some ways irreducible) times, spaces and projects such as Gourou's.

Conclusion

We have sought to show that past and present commentary on Gourou's work and influence gives us a useful window on to wider questions of tropicality and the treatment of postcolonial issues within Anglophone and Francophone geography. Collectively, Anglophone and Francophone readings of him point to a central paradox in his work: that while he was deeply sympathetic to the plight of the tropics, he was committed to a scholarly (and in some ways specifically French) version of Western universalism that exalted his 'rational' and 'hierarchical' geography over other ways of knowing and made his cartography of the tropics a cartography of intellectual appropriation.

The readings of Gourou that we have touched on also reveal that, to date, critical engagement with tropicality and postcolonialism at least as they have been propounded by Arnold and Said (although neither critical project is reducible to the work of just these thinkers), have been more accentuated in Anglophone geography than they have been within Francophone geography. We have tried to think about what might account for this difference, but sense that discussion is only in its infancy. We thus see this paper as a provocation to further dialogue and debate. While at a general level it appears that Britain's and France's different cultural and intellectual experiences of decolonisation have played an important part in the development-absence of a strong postcolonial agenda, and that institutional dynamics matter too, there needs to be more comparative work on geography's entanglement with tropicality.

The paper has traced some of the biases and limitations in both Anglophone and Francophone readings of Gourou, and we would like to end by suggesting that if we are to gauge the colonising power of tropicality, yet avoid the interpretative problems and excesses of postcolonial studies (noted above), we need a geographical approach that considers both its elementary and contextual aspects. Further Anglo-French dialogue will hopefully generate not only a fuller understanding of the different agendas (historical, institutional and epistemological) that have infused Anglophone and Francophone geographical interest in 'the tropics', but also yield more critically nuanced and contextualised accounts of the ways and extent to which tropical geography and tropicality can be viewed as discourses of power and modes of othering.

References

- Arnold D. (1996). *The problem of nature: Environment, culture and European expansion*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- ARNOLD D. (2000). "Illusory riches': Representations of the tropical world, 1840-1950". *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 21(1), p. 6-18.
- ARNOLD D. (2005). *The tropics and the traveling gaze: India, landscape and science, 1800-1856*. Seattle: Washington University Press.
- BLANCHARD P., LEMAIRE S. (dir.) (2004). *Culture impériale 1931-1961: les colonies au cœur de la République*. Paris: Éditions Autrement, coll. "Mémoires", no. 102.
- BOWD G., CLAYTON D. (2003), "Fieldwork and tropicality in French Indo-China: Reflections on Pierre Gourou's *Les Paysans du delta tonkinois* (1936)". *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 24(1), p. 147-68.
- BOWD G., CLAYTON D. (2005), "Tropicality, Orientalism and French colonialism in Indochina: The work of Pierre Gourou, 1927-1982". *French Historical Studies*, 28(2), p. 297-327.
- BRUNEAU M. (2005). "From a centred to a decentred tropicality: francophone colonial and post-colonial geography in Monsoon Asia". *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 26(3), p. 304-322.
- BRUNEAU M., DORY D. (dir.) (1989). *Les Enjeux de la tropicalité*. Paris: Masson.
- BRUNEAU M., DORY D. (dir.) (1994). *Géographies des colonisations*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- CÉSAIRE A. (1955). *Discours sur le colonialisme*. Paris-Dakar: Présence Africaine.
- CHAPUIS D., RONAI M. (1976), "Morceaux choisis". *Hérodote*, 1(1), p. 118-124.
- CLAVAL P. (2005). "Colonial experience and the development of tropical geography in France". *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 26(3), p. 289-303.
- CLAYTON D. (2004). "Imperial geographies". In DUNCAN J., JOHNSON N., SCHEIN R. (eds.), *A Companion to cultural geography*. Oxford UK and Malden USA: Blackwell Publishers, p. 449-468.
- COOPER F. (2005). *Colonialism in question: Theory, knowledge, history*. Berkeley, London: University of California Press.
- DRIVER F. (2004). "Imagining the tropics: Views and visions of the tropical world". *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 25(1), p. 1-17.
- DRIVER F., MARTINS L. (dir.) (2005). *Tropical visions in an age of empire*. Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press.
- FARMER B.H. (1983). "British geographers overseas, 1933-1983". *Transactions, Institute of British Geographers NS*, 8(1), p. 70-79.
- FORD C. (2001). "Landscape and environment in French historical and geographical thought: New directions". *French Historical Studies*, 24(1), p. 125-134.
- GOTTMANN J. "Fonds Gottmann". Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France.
- GOTTMANN J. (1983). "The bounty of the tropics". *Review of Terres de Bonne Espérance*. London: Times Literary Supplement, Issue 4163, p. 41.
- GOUROU P. (1936). *Les Paysans du delta tonkinois, étude de géographie humaine*. Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient, Éditions d'Art et d'Histoire.
- GOUROU P. (1940). *La Terre et l'homme en Extrême-Orient*. Paris: Armand Colin.
- GOUROU P. (1947a). *Les Pays tropicaux: principes d'une géographie humaine et économique*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- GOUROU P. (1947b). "For a French Indo-Chinese Federation". *Pacific Affairs*, XX(1), p. 18-29.
- GOUROU P. (1953). *L'Asie*. Paris: Librairie Hachette.

Acknowledgements

Our thanks to the editors and four anonymous referees for their useful and challenging comments. We are grateful to the participants at the 'Géographie, exploration et colonisation' seminar, Université de Bordeaux 3, in October 2005, where a version of this paper was presented, for their input, and especially to David Arnold, Michel Bruneau, Paul Claval and Felix Driver for stimulating conversations around the themes of the paper. All errors remain ours.

- GOUROU P. (1954). "Une paysannerie africaine au milieu du xx^e siècle: les Kikuyu et la crise Mau-Mau". *Les Cahiers d'Outre-Mer*, 7(28), p. 317-341.
- GOUROU P. (1971). *Leçons de géographie tropicale: leçons données au Collège de France de 1947 à 1970*. Paris: Mouton.
- GOUROU P. (1972). "La carte et le raisonnement géographique". *Cahiers ORSTOM*, série "Sciences humaines", IX (2), p. 135-136.
- GOUROU P. (1982). *Terres de Bonne Espérance: le monde tropical*. Paris: Plon.
- GOUROU P. (1984). "La géographie comme 'divertissement'? Entretiens de Pierre Gourou avec Jean Malaurie, Paul Pélissier, Gilles Sautter, Yves Lacoste". *Hérodote*, 33, p. 50-72.
- HODDER B.W. (1967). *Economic development of the humid tropics*. London: Methuen.
- JUDT T. (2005). *Postwar: A history of Europe since 1945*. London: William Heinemann.
- LE SUEUR J. (2003). "Decolonizing French universalism". In JAMES D., LE SUEUR (ed.), *The decolonization reader*. London, New York: Routledge, p. 110-125.
- LÉVY J., LUSSAULT M. (dir.) (2003). *Dictionnaire de la géographie et de l'espace des sociétés*. Paris: Belin.
- LIVINGSTONE D. (2002a). *Science, space and hermeneutics*. Heidelberg: University of Heidelberg, Department of Geography, coll. Hettner Lectures - 5.
- LIVINGSTONE D. (2002b). "Race, space and moral climatology: Notes towards a genealogy". *Journal of Historical Geography*, 28(2), p. 159-180.
- LIVINGSTONE D. (2003). *Putting science in its place: Geographies of scientific knowledge*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- MACKENZIE J. (1997). "Empire and the colonial apocalypse: the historiography of the imperial environment". In GRIFFITHS T., ROBIN L. (eds.). *Ecology and empire: Environmental history of settler societies*. Edinburgh: Keele University Press, p. 215-228
- NICOLAI H., PÉLISSIER P., RAISON J.-P. (dir.) (2000). *Un géographe dans son siècle. Actualité de Pierre Gourou*. Paris: Karthala.
- POWER M., SIDAWAY J.D. (2004). "The degeneration of tropical geography". *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 94(3), p. 585-601.
- RAISON J.-P. (2005). "'Tropicalism' in French geography: Reality, illusion or ideal?". *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 26(3), p. 323-338.
- ROBEQUAIN C. (1952). "Review of Asia's Lands and peoples". *Pacific Affairs*, 25(1), p. 86-88
- SAID E. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Random House.
- STASZAK J.-F. (2003). *Géographies de Gauguin*. Paris: Bréal.
- STEPAN N. (2001). *Picturing tropical nature*. London, Chicago : Reaktion Books.