

V. Dimier, *Le gouvernement des colonies*, PUB, 2004. summary

Much has been written by colonial historians and anthropologists about the differences between the colonial administrations of France and Great-Britain as practised in their Tropical African dependencies. One will remember the famous controversy which occurred in the 1960s between M Crowder, a British anthropologist, and H Deschamps, a French historian, on the subject<sup>i</sup>. The former described the French system as a very centralized, unified and bureaucratic system based on direct rule, namely the destruction of native authorities and their replacement by French officers. The main task of these officers was then to act as the typical civil servants of the legal-rational state envisaged by M Weber<sup>ii</sup> : they would mainly enforce the law prescribed by Paris regardless of native society's customs and particulars. By contrast the British system was regarded as very decentralized, pragmatic and based on Indirect Rule. It meant to respect native customs and chiefs and rule through the latter by means of persuasion and advice. For M Crowder these basic differences rested on the political culture of both countries, the French being Republican, that is more dogmatic and contemptuous of traditions and local autocrats, the British being more aristocratic in mind and then more pragmatic and likely to respect the aristocratic chiefs and customs of the native societies. In this way he conveyed assumptions which had been largely held in British academic circles...but which were not so much accepted in some French ones. H Deschamps was indeed representative of some French historians or anthropologists who had called into question these comparisons: for them no differences existed between French and British colonial administrations both being based on Indirect Rule.

Unlike most historians we will not try to resolve this controversy. We will not try to see which of these comparisons are well grounded as far as real practices of colonial administration and government are concerned. We will rather see who made these comparisons and why. This will lead us to analyse the work of some scholars who took part in the organization of the Tropical African colonial administrators' training in the 1930-50s and who wanted to develop a science of colonial administration meant to compare the colonial administrative systems of the different colonizing nations. Comparing their scientific discourse we will try to discover what was at stake behind the comparisons they made. We will see then how their analysis of colonial administration were influenced in each country by a conception of government and authority specific to a certain elite, but also by strategic considerations connected to a peculiar international and national (institutional) context.

Indeed we tend to think that scientific discourses as other discourses may be driven by ideal representations of the reality, and may be used for political or other purposes...In this sense we also tend to call into question the culturalist and deterministic assumptions which are usually used for comparing French and British administration and government. Like B Badier<sup>iii</sup> we tend to think that social facts -whether they are deeds or discourses- are not particularly induced by national culture or "character". If they can be linked to specific conceptions of society and government, they are also influenced by individual and conscious strategies.

We will mainly base our analysis on the work of two persons who played a major role in the production of this discourse in the 1930s-50s : M Perham, Director of the Institute of Colonial Studies (1945-1948) and Reader in Colonial Administration at Oxford (1939-1948) and R Delavignette, a former colonial administrator in French West Africa, Director of the Colonial School (1937-1946) and teacher on compared colonial administration and native policies from 1937 at this School. The following archives have been consulted : M Perham's Papers; R Delavignette's papers; archives of Oxford and Cambridge universities, London School of Economics and Political Science; archives of

the Ecole Coloniale, Ecole Libre des Sciences Politiques, Ecole Nationale d'Administration, Centre des Hautes Etudes d'Administration Musulmane. Archives of the French and British Ministries for the colonies; Ligue of Nations and United Nations minutes and reports.

### 1) The construction of a scientific discourse.

Comparing French and British colonial administrative systems has been a long tradition amongst French and British colonial theorists or officers (Lord Cromer, Lord Lugard, JL Delanessan, H Lyautey....). But from the 1920s these comparisons became the privileged field of some specialists in colonial administration, especially R Delavignette and M Perham. These people were taking an active part in the training institutions and programmes for colonial administrators : the Colonial School in France or the Colonial Administrative Service Courses organized in Oxford, Cambridge and the London School of Economics from the end of the 1920s. They contributed largely to the development and teaching of a new kind of science, what they called a "science of colonial administration" : implementation of native policy and colonial administration had to be studied in their day to day working, that is mainly at the local level, where native policies were carried out and where colonial administrators dealt with native societies. The approach had to be comparative : one had to compare the colonial principles and practices of the different colonizing nations. It also had to be historical and sociological : one had to explain why specific practices were adopted by those nations. And national "characters" or traditions were usually considered to be the most determinant factors. The institutionnalisation of such science was imperfect in both countries and was part of the same movement which led to the development of social sciences within colonial administrators training: specific courses were organized (in England lectureship and readership were created, in France a specific "chaire" was set up). In both France and Britain attempts were also made to set up research institutes, but these attempts were more or less successful. R. Delavignette's hope to transform the colonial school in a research centre was never fulfilled. In Oxford the role of the Institute of Colonial Studies remained very limited. Nevertheless, one great difference may be noticed between French and British situations: in England this science was institutionnalized in prestigious universities and became the field of academics like M. Perham. In France it was institutionalized in a vocational school which was cut from Parisian universities, that is from the scientific and intellectual world and was mainly taught by a former colonial administrator who lacked academic legitimacy. This difference may explain why in the long run M. Perham's analysis gained more recognition than R. Delavignette's. Indeed despite agreeing on comparing the same thing and using the same approach, both drew different conclusions from their comparisons. M. Perham (as other British at this time) saw many differences while R. Delavignette (and other French analysts) saw many similarities. Both tended to praise the same concepts and apparently the same conception of colonial administration : native policy and indirect rule.

### 2) Principles of native policies.

Considering their disagreement one may wonder whether it was not due to some misunderstanding as to the meaning of the concepts used and praised: those of native policy and indirect rule. After analysing their discourse, I conclude, however, that their definitions of these concepts, more generally their conceptions of colonial government, were quite similar. Concerning "Native policy", it is worth noticing that the concept was very popular in France and Britain but was as ill-defined in both countries. Usually it meant to respect native cultures and institutions as long as they were not opposed to British or French conceptions of civilisation, it meant to develop native societies on their own lines ("l'évolution dans la tradition"), which was a very ambiguous aim in itself. Indeed, it left particularly imprecise the kind of society and government which could evolve eventually from such a process. As a result it could be, and was, interpreted differently by different people according to the way they considered European Civilisation in its relationship with African cultures. For those who were

persuaded that culture was something genetic and then could not be transmitted from one people to another, it only meant to let native societies as they were and let them evolve according to the harsh law of nature. For those evolutionists who still regarded colonisation as a civilising mission and progress as a law of history, it was a necessary step in the impending evolution towards the kind of society already reached by the European: considered in this way the ultimate aim of native policy was not different from that of assimilation. Finally, there were those who were more influenced by the fonctionnalist theories of the inter war period, who considered colonisation as a cultural contact more or less destructive for native societies and who began to recognise the value of the later. For them, it aimed at mitigating this clash of cultures and at finding a new adjustment made up of native and European elements. Of course this mixture could vary greatly from one person to another according to his conception of what part of tradition should be or could be kept and what should or could evolve. Amongst these different interpretations, M. Perham and R. Delavignette's were apparently closer to the third one but their position did not separate radically from the evolutionists' either. What was clear in their concept of native policy were the methods it implied to rule 'native' 'races', that is the type of government it embodied. Indeed in their discourse assimilation meant the imposition on native societies of a law which was regarded as universal. It was then linked to an idea of government based on force, coercion and grounded in purely philosophical or legal considerations. By contrast the native policy they envisaged rested on more tactful forms of government and was supposed to proceed mainly from knowledge of native societies. In a way it was very close to the idea of "gouvernementalité" defined by M Foucault<sup>iv</sup> : one has to govern not by force or rule of law but by using patience, diligence and knowledge, by taking into account people's will, fear and interests in order to use them and reach the objectives desired. One has to influence rather than coerce and act on societies through diverse social policies. In this sense, the colonial state did not merely aimed at keeping order and justice through the use of force and rule of law. It was also to become an agent of social welfare acting through a certain art of government and this art was first to be used by its local agents, those who had a day to day contact with the native societies and then could have the best knowledge of them: the territorial administrators, that is the Commandants de Cercle or District Officers.

### 3) Conceptions of colonial administrators.

Here again R Delavignette and M Perham's conception of colonial administration were quite similar in that: the colonial administrator's main task was to apply locally the native policy defined by the central government. More precisely he was supposed to adapt it to local customs and traditions, which means that the lines of this native policy should be general enough to allow for different interpretations according to circumstances and that the system should be very decentralized, leaving him great responsibilities and power. No control from above was regarded as desirable. Rather, everything was to rest on the self-control, morality and personality of the territorial officers, as well as their faith in the goals and plans of the colonial ministry. As a consequence, good recruitment and teaching in the principles of colonial government and native policy were essential to the good working of the system. Even more important were their knowledge of native society and their closeness to the native rulers. Indeed, the second aspect of their role was their work in close co-operation with the representatives of native communities, the chiefs or councils of elders (Indirect Rule). These had to be maintained and allowed to govern their people according to tradition. The colonial administrator's task was then to educate them in better government and convince them to help with implementing the native policy. This control was supposed to vary greatly according to the loyalty and evolution of the native society: at one extreme the colonial administrators would be merely "the wind behind the throne", at the other, the chiefs could be dismissed: between these two extremes laid a great range of possibilities. In this system the chief was to be an active agent: he had to be representative enough to convey his people's will and inform the colonial administrator of it; and he had to have enough

authority over his people to persuade them to collaborate with him. But here as well this could vary greatly according to the context. In any case the enforcement of native policies would not proceed through the rule of law, but through a personal relationship and varying compromises between the local representatives of the colonial state and the representatives of the local societies. In this sense, the local system of colonial administration was, on one hand, integrated in a bureaucratic, rational-legal type of administration as described by M. Weber: the colonial administrators were first of all civil servants with the defined status, and their role was defined by reference to the central government. But, on the other hand, the system was nearer in certain ways to the traditional or even charismatic types of leadership: everything rested on the man, his qualities, his morality, his "esprit de corps", his capacity for exerting influence and his personal relationship with the local society's elite, rather than on general, impersonal and constraining rules, which in any case, lacked legitimacy for the people governed. Because the colonial administrator envisaged by M. Perham and R. Delavignette was not a mere agent of execution whose behaviour was crystal clear to the eyes of the centre, the system lacked the transparency and regularity of the weberian bureaucratic system. That is why it was so difficult to prove that principles of indirect rule were followed in practice. That is also why it was so easy for it to be a matter of controversy. On the other hand the very fact which made colonial administration more personal also made colonial domination, at least idellay, more human and less oppressive. Indeed thanks to the compromises between colonial administrators and native elites, native societies were supposed to exert a kind of self-government. For some people, the system of indirect rule was even considered to be a substitute for liberal Western democracy. This may explain why this system was so popular amongst government circles both in France and in Great-Britain.

## 5) A science

In so far as R Delavignette and M. Perham had quite the same conceptions of colonial administration, one may wonder whether their disagreement was not linked to strategic considerations, whether their scientific discourse was not driven by political, institutional or other interests. To grasp these interests, we will first focus on the ambiguities of their science and of their scientific discourse. Indeed this discourse was supposed to convey reality but in fact the position of these people, between the scientific and political fields, makes it difficult to distinguish in their discourses what was normative or positive. More generally their science was based on a contradiction: the system they envisaged was so dependent on circumstances and rested so much on the man and the "magical power" of the colonial administrators, that one may wonder how far it could be systemized and rationalized. Moreover experience on the spot and "esprit de corps" were considered by these authors to be the most important elements in the training of colonial administrators, which made the necessity for their science more relative. Their course clearly meant to inculcate this "esprit de corps", that is some doctrine concerning the aims and methods to be followed by colonial administrators. Why then did they insist in presenting their work and teaching as "scientific" ? One reason may be found in the need to find a new legitimacy for colonial administrators. In their conception of colonial administration this legitimacy rested mainly on certain qualities (in Britain those of the gentleman) and expertise ('negotiate with native leaders'). But more and more, this was challenged by the development of the technical services whose legitimacy was based on science and specialized knowledge. Thus one may wonder whether their science of colonial administration was not meant to transform colonial administrators into specialists, "technicians in native policies" (R Delavignette). As we shall see in Britain this search for a new legitimacy was to lead to a certain rivalry between institutions which were in charge of colonial administrators training. The most significant one is the battle which took place between the London School of Economics and Political Science and Oxford University concerning some courses (especially the Colonial Administration Course). Through this battle the LSE was clearly trying to challenge Oxford University supremacy in producing and educating the British elite while Oxford

was trying to keep this supremacy. Because of this battle and because interests at stakes were important M. Perham's science of colonial administration was quickly institutionalized in both these prestigious universities. By contrast such stakes did not exist in France, which may explain why R Delavignette attempts to integrate the Ecole Coloniale in the University and to create a centre for colonial studies similar to Oxford Institute of Colonial Studies failed. This failure had to have some consequence if we consider the aim that R Delavignette had in mind when devising this centre: to inform an international opinion, to serve as a centre for propaganda, an objective which was also shared by M. Perham. Indeed their science also meant to serve political stakes structured around the Permanent Mandate Commission set up by the League of Nations after the first world war. And their controversy was clearly linked to these stakes,

##### 5) International co-operation and rivalries.

After the first world war, France and Great-Britain were given by the League of Nations the former German territories, which changed in several ways the way they had to legitimate themselves in the eyes of the world. First the League of Nations set up in the Covenant (clause 22) some common principles officially accepted by the mandate powers and by which you could judge their government towards native peoples in their mandated territories, but also by extension in their dependencies. As a supra-national organisation it did not have any means to enforce these principles and sanction possible infringements. Nevertheless the system made moral sanction and criticism easier, all the more because these could be made publicly in a political forum, the Permanent Mandate Commission. Secondly the mandate powers had to prove regularly to this Commission that they were governing their territories according to the principles they abided by. And the proofs given were not to be mere political statement and intentions. They had to be real evidences, practical results and facts presented in an annual report which had to answer the questionnaire devised by the Commission. In a way the legitimacy process became as much the politicians' business as that of "specialists in colonial administration". It is worth noticing that R Delavignette and M. Perham were both more or less directly connected with the League of Nations. Finally, the new legitimacy process led to a kind of rivalry between France and Great Britain, each country trying to prove to the world their good will in following the League of Nations principles. This "arguments race" increased a tension which was permanent between France and Great Britain at this time and which gained in momentum in the thirties with German colonial claims. In the context of these claims, foreign criticism, expressed either from a rival or neutral power, became much feared in both countries. Thus one will understand the great efforts displayed by French and British theoreticians, scientists and their respective governments to prove that their colonial administration were abiding by the League of Nations principles. Of these principles, one could say that they were quite imprecise: experienced nations had to rule those people who were not "yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world" with in view their welfare. They had to educate them in self-government, even though the date of this outcome was not given. In this sense their government had to be more educative than repressive and authoritarian. Still, this principle could be interpreted in different ways: you could educate them towards a democratic model of government. In fact, as discussions went on within the mandate commission, it was more and more interpreted by the members of the latter in terms of "indirect rule" and "native policy". One may guess that the prestige of Lord Lugard, the so called inventor of "Indirect Rule" and British representative to the Commission from 1922 to 1936, had something to do with it. In these circumstances, one understands that to present French colonial administrators as incapable of Indirect Rule as the British did, was in fact to accuse them of not being able to rule in a liberal and educational way and to abide by the League of Nations principles. For the British to say that the French were bureaucrats and incapable of Indirect Rule was to accuse them of imposing their law and being incapable of compromises with the native societies and their leaders. In sum it was to accuse them of using force rather than influence, repressive rather than educative means of government. It is no wonder that the French members of the commission were unhappy with these

comparisons and tried to prove they France was also able to apply Indirect Rule. The minutes of the Mandate Commission debates show that a controversy similar to R. Delavignette and M. Perham's happened between French and other -especially British- representatives. In both cases the disagreement about possible differences or similarities between both systems of colonial administration dealt with a specific mandate, the French Cameroon, and gain in momentum in the thirties...at a time when Germany's was claiming back her former colonies and especially the French Cameroon. That French government gave much importance to international and more especially British opinion was particularly clear in attempts made after the second world war to give a more legal (and more visible) recognition to the native chiefs (and then to Indirect Rule). Unfortunately these attempts were too late as international stakes and political debate within the United Nation had changed.

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<sup>i</sup>Crowder, M, "Indirect Rule. French and British style", *Africa*, July 1964, , vol 34, n°3, p.197-204.

Deschamps, H, "Et maintenant Lord Lugard ?", *Africa*, Octobre 1963, vol 33, n°4, p.294-305.

<sup>ii</sup>Weber, M. *Economie et société*, Paris, Plon, 1971.

<sup>iii</sup>Badie, B, *Culture et politique*, Paris, Economica, 1993, (3ème édition).

<sup>iv</sup>Foucault, M, "la gouvernementalité", *Actes*, été 1986, n°54, pp. 6-14