



Review of

Sean Mills, *The Empire Within: Postcolonial Thought and Political Activism in Sixties Montreal*

(Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2010), 303 pp.

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In *The Empire Within* postcolonial historian Sean Mills examines the forces that shaped radical theory and activism in Montreal during The Sixties, against the backdrop of the Quiet Revolution and the emergence of the modern Quebec state. Mills rejects the idea that Quebec sovereignty, still an ongoing issue in Canada, can be adequately understood with reference only to Canadian history, culture, and politics. Instead he argues that the rise of radical activism in Quebec must be viewed in light of international movements for colonial independence, racial and sexual equality.

The Empire Within is organized into two parts. The first section examines how radical intellectuals in Montreal used the language of decolonization to frame their own oppression. Mills does a good job of establishing the political, economic and cultural subordination of the *Quebecois*, using statistics on income, infant mortality, and employment. He argues convincingly that English Canada, the Quebec provincial government under Premier Maurice Duplessis, and American economic interests had banded together to rob Quebec of her natural resources, exploit her predominantly French-speaking workforce, and cultivate the province as a market for manufactured goods, mirroring the domination of the Third World.

The second section of the book deals with intersecting movements in Quebec during the 1960s. Mills argues that decolonization theory offered a “grammar of dissent” that enabled activists to communicate across barriers of class, sex, race, and language (10). He proves his point through chapters on Montreal’s Black power movement, Quebec feminism, Francophone separatism, and organized labour. Mills also includes a chapter on the October Crisis of 1970, situating the Front Liberation Quebecois (FLQ) in its context as one among many similar organizations of the time.

Mills’ book reveals the power present in moments when multiple theories—decolonization, Black power, Marxism, feminism, and others—overlap, making intersectional analysis and solidarity possible. Connecting intellectually with other movements provided Quebec intellectuals with a framework in which to theorize their own experience and made activists feel they were part of an international movement for justice and freedom. The bibliography suggests that Mills conducted nine interviews with activists from the period, and the book includes with seven pages of black and white photographs from the period. This, together with its focus on the concrete locations, people, and practices of the various liberation movements gives his work a nostalgic feel.

Mills offers an engaging description of how Montreal’s intellectuals and activists were conscientized by the anti-colonial writing of Frantz Fanon, Jacques Berque, Albert Memmi and Aimé Césaire, and black power writers such as C. L. R. James, Stokely Carmichael, and Malcolm X. Yet he also highlights the dangers in uncritically adopting parallels between

Francophone Quebecois and “racialized” North Americans or colonized people of the Third World. Some Quebec intellectuals, such as Pierre Vallières have argued that French-Canadian workers, like American blacks, had been exploited for centuries as cheap labour within an Anglo-American capitalist system. Yet Mills notes that by asserting their identity as *Nègres blancs d'Amérique* (White N*****s of America) Quebec intellectuals defined “racialized” people as outsiders to Quebec nationalism.

There is a certain irony in a predominantly white French-speaking people reading *Black Skin, White Masks* or *Wretched Of The Earth*, and identifying not with their own mother country, but with its colonized subjects. An intersectional analysis would have been useful here, examining how class and language combined to affect constructions of race. Mills seems to take it for granted that the *Quebecois* were not racialized as non-white, yet since race studies have revealed the power dynamics at work in racial designations it seems reasonable to at least ask how impoverished *Quebecois* were constructed racially during the time period. At the same time, racial claims such as those by Vallières, and the widespread use of decolonization and Black power theory, raise issues of ownership, commodification, and co-option for those of us who use postcolonial analysis to examine our own experiences of oppression and privilege within a First World context.

Less convincing than Mills’ argument that anticolonialist thought provided a shared resource for Quebecois militancy is his argument that anticolonial activism “became a mass movement...providing a framework through which democracy was re-imagined as encompassing individual and collective sovereignty and social solidarity” (9). While he certainly establishes that such was the case for specific people and organizations, he fails to make his case when it comes to the kind of mass mobilization that would enable a reimagining of democracy.

Although nostalgic, Mills’ description is never over-idealized. He is careful to highlight the hypocrisy, inadequacy and ignorance of the people, organizations, and movements he describes. He notes that decolonization theory’s misogyny and overt masculinity disempowered women even as it empowered men. He notes also that while developing a sharp critique of their own colonization, Quebecois intellectuals remained blind to the ongoing colonization of First

Nations people in Quebec and elsewhere. Mills also highlights authoritarian tendencies within the FLQ, such as their denunciation of then Defence Minister (later Prime Minister) Pierre Trudeau as a “faggot.”

Mills ends his historical analysis in the early 1970s, at a point where the *Quebécois* bourgeoisie gained power and a vision for their economic and political future with which they were reluctant to part. Resulting class conflicts fractured the vision of a uniform Francophone oppression. Mills describes how the labour movement prioritized working class solidarity over issues of language or Quebec sovereignty, and how Marxists such as Charles Gagnon became disillusioned as the movement for nationalism became increasingly bourgeois.

The Empire Within is based on Mills’ doctoral thesis, and bears many of the marks of its former incarnation, including a heavy emphasis on endnotes and bibliography. Oddly, the book is short on indexing, with many key subjects, such as Francophone separatism, left out. While the text would have benefitted from a heavier editorial hand, its stylistic limitations do not detract from the valuable content of the work. The book is number 23 in McGill-Queens University Press’ Studies on the History of Quebec, which focuses on materialist historiography of Quebec, and makes a valuable contribution to that series.

As a theologian I would have liked a deeper analysis of liberation theology’s role in shaping and legitimating dissent. Mills highlights the work of Gustavo Gutiérrez, who gave a summer seminar at the University de Montreal in 1967, and he gives brief mention of the rise of social justice Catholicism. Yet I would have welcomed a sharper analysis of the role of ethics and theology within the nascent Quebec movements, especially as the power of the Church as a domineering force was dwindling in the province. Overall, *The Empire Within* is a fascinating glimpse into a decade of political upheaval whose effects are still being felt today.