Colonial oppression in a South Pacific idyll—impressions of New Caledonia

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In his seminal work *History of the Paris Commune of 1871*, published in 1876 and later translated into English by Eleanor Marx, the journalist Lissagary described the deportation of condemned political prisoners to the French penal colony of New Caledonia following the bloody suppression of the commune.

The final chapter, aptly titled "The balance sheet of bourgeois vengeance", tells the subsequent fate of those who carried through the first seizure of power by the working class. Choosing not to exile the communards to nearby Algeria, the victorious authorities punished those who had survived the slaughter of the civil war (over 20,000 were killed) by banishing them far from the streets of Paris—to "this rock, six thousand leagues from their native land", the "sepulchre of the antipodes" in the South Pacific.

The deportations began in 1872. By July 1875, 3,859 prisoners had been landed in New Caledonia, with hundreds more to come. The conditions of their transportation were abominable. Lissagary describes the ships as "moving pontoons" with large cages built on the gun-decks to shut in the prisoners. They were released for no more than a half hour each day for exercise and fresh air. Many "unhappy beings", victims of capricious punishments, were forced to endure the entire five-month passage at the bottom of the hold.

Malnutrition, disease and illness were rampant. When one prison ship dropped anchor off Melbourne en route, 360 prisoners were sick with scurvy out of 588. The working people of Melbourne—no strangers themselves to the hardships of exile—were so moved by their plight that they raised a collection equivalent to 40,000 francs in a few hours. The ship's commander refused to pass on even clothes, food and basic necessities to his prisoners.

On arrival at the port of Noumea the communards were divided into three groups. Some 805 men and 6 women condemned to transportation "in fortress"—that is, indefinite detention—were imprisoned at Ducos, north across the harbour. This group included such leaders as Henri de Rochefort and the anarchist Louise Michel. The majority, consisting of 2,795 men and 13 women, who were sentenced to "simple transportation", were shipped a further 110 kilometers south to the reef-girded Ile des Pins (Isle of Pines). Another 240, described by Lissagary as little more than "galley slaves", were incarcerated in conditions "worse than death" at the settlement of Ile Nou.

The conditions of life were wretched. One wrote plaintively of the years entirely lost: "This life is really too hard to bear, without books... in this filthy penal settlement, exposed to all insults, to all blows; shut up in caves, in the workshops treated as beasts; insulted by our jailers and our comrades of the chain, we must submit to it all without a murmur, the slightest infringement entailing terrible punishment—the cell, quarter ration of bread, irons, thumbscrews, the lash."

Two of us spent three days exploring the Isle of Pines, riding bicycles around the road originally forced through the tropical bush by the exiles. In a quiet clearing, the remains of nearly 200 of them, including five women and six children, are buried. The communards resolutely refused to have anything do with religious icons, so the graves, mostly anonymous, are marked out with stones in perfect rows, lending the cemetery an austere, dignified atmosphere. A simple memorial bears the inscription "Souvenir des Deportees de 1871" (In Memory of the Deportees of 1871).

A stone plinth lists the names of those who lie there, as well as those of another 20 killed when their flimsy escape craft foundered on the reef. The presence of a jar of freshly cut flowers suggested that, despite all the propaganda about the death of socialism and futility of holding egalitarian principles, there are still people who are touched by the lives of the communards. It was, for this writer, particularly moving to spend some moments of reflection in their company.

Nearby, almost reclaimed by the tropical scrub, are the extant reminders of the former colony of Ouro. The communards, who were mainly artisans, built a small town here, but all that remains are a water tower and the crumbling prison where grim, dark isolation cells once entombed those whose sanity finally deserted them.

At the coast, two kilometres away, stand the remains of a wall built by the communards to protect the soldiers who kept them prisoner, and the wharf where the prison ships landed their human cargo. A stone French villa, originally built to house the colony's doctor, has been restored and converted into the island's gendarmerie, guarding a headland overlooking two idyllic bays.

It is scarcely believable that this pristine place—its immaculate white sands, azure waters and silent sentinel palm trees—was once the setting for a monstrous political crime carried out by the nineteenth century European bourgeoisie against the flower of the international proletariat. How determined the French authorities must have been to get the communards as far away from Paris as they could. Sending them to some Noumea prison was not enough. So they displaced the local inhabitants then cast their prisoners adrift on this little island, at once stunningly beautiful but so totally isolated—surrounded by nothing but reef and the vast expanse of the Pacific. One is at a loss to fully appreciate what trauma and hardships they must have faced.

While an amnesty granted in 1880 saw most of the communards returned to Paris, the French continued to operate New Caledonia as a penal settlement until the last convict was repatriated in 1912. Among a total of some 20,000 convicts were 100 leaders of the 1871 Berber rebellion against colonial rule in Algeria. Many of them spent 50 years in exile and became old men before their sentences expired. Faded photographs displayed in the lounge of the Novotel Surf hotel, astride the fashionable beachside location of Anse Vata, show prisoners manacled in chain gangs, and one of a guillotine imported from France, which claimed many beheadings.

Regardless of one's knowledge of the brutal history of New Caledonia, any visitor cannot but be struck by its ongoing consequences. The fabric of everyday life is conditioned by French colonial rule, which has not,

even now, been relinquished.

The most obvious contrast is between the lot of the indigenous Kanaks, the Melanesians who make up 44 percent of the 200,000 population, and that of the Europeans. The latter, a mixture of the Caldoches, descendants of the original settlers, and French public servants, military personnel and business employees, are 34 percent of the population, but almost exclusively occupy the upper social layers. Also in evidence are descendants of labourers brought in from Indonesia, Vietnam, Japan and elsewhere in the Pacific to work in the mining industry as the supply of forced convict labour began to dry up at the turn of the last century.

The capital, Noumea, is a socially polarised, rambling, somewhat down-at-heel provincial city, where low-paid workers live in slum conditions, while the well-off occupy residences overlooking their own version of the Cote d'Azur with expansive views of the tourist beaches and yacht harbours. The well-to-do can be seen, even during normal working hours, taking a stroll, jogging in their chic exercise gear or bicycling around the waterfront boulevards, while Renault and Fiat cars whiz past, as in Europe, on the right-hand side of the road.

With almost everything imported, living costs are high. Even basic foodstuffs come from elsewhere—much from far-flung current or former French colonial possessions. It is surprising to find, in a tropical country such as this, everyday fruits and vegetables—from apricots to asparagus—served up from tins bearing overseas labels. Overhearing foreign tourists regularly swapping complaints over the cost of accommodation, restaurant meals and wine, one is left wondering how ordinary working people cope.

A layer of Kanaks, particularly those who have acquired a knowledge of a foreign language, work in the hospitality and tourism industries—usually as kitchen staff, waiters, drivers, cleaners, baggage handlers and front-desk personnel. There are also those who work in the mines and nickel smelter. Bitter industrial disputes involving low paid workers in the Kanak and Exploited Workers Union are not uncommon. At the same time, many Kanaks continue to live in primitive, subsistence circumstances in outlying rural villages.

Social divisions are ingrained and pervasive. Searching downtown Noumea for the right bus stop to return to our hotel, we were assured by one smartly dressed woman speaking perfect English that "nobody catches the bus". Nearby, the central public transport exchange was alive with Kanak passengers getting on and off buses to and from all parts of the island. We soon detected that joining the queue at any bus stop, waiting Kanaks would deferentially move to the outside and rear of the shelter—in a kind of unspoken gesture of segregation.

It is not hard to find groups of impoverished Kanak youth wandering the streets of Noumea. Their t-shirts, bearing images of the late Jamaican reggae musician Bob Marley, serve as a conscious emblem of their alienation. However, as is usually the case with Marley's followers, the mixture of religion and drug use which he espoused transforms any rebellious instincts into resignation and passivity. In their demeanor, these young people appear to have been brought to a political dead-end. One is not surprised to find displayed in the market stalls the ubiquitous Marley paraphernalia alongside the blue, orange, green and yellow flag of the moribund Kanak nationalist movement, the Front de Liberation Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS) or Kanak Socialist National Liberation Front.

Recent tourist publicity has adopted the slogan "Kanak culture, French flavour" to give the impression of an equal social partnership to the outside world but the Kanaks are a disenfranchised people, who have suffered 150 years of bitter defeats. In common with indigenous peoples throughout the Pacific, the Kanak experience of European colonisation was one of land alienation, repressive racist laws, incarceration, state-condoned killings and near extinction as a people.

The FLNKS was formed under the leadership of a layer of educated Kanaks who had been radicalised while studying in France during the late 1960s. In 1984, it launched the most recent in a series of struggles for Kanak independence and proclaimed the Provisional Government of Kanaky. Settlers retaliated by killing 10 Kanaks in an ambush at Hienghene—the self-confessed killers were eventually acquitted by a Noumea court. The massacre was followed days later by the murder of a prominent FLNKS leader, Eloi Machoro, by paramilitary marksmen. His death sparked streets riots all over New Caledonia. French paratroopers were flown in and a six-month state of emergency declared as Kanak militants erected barricades across the countryside.

Conditions of near civil war prevailed throughout the mid-1980s, coming to a climax in April 1988, just days before the French presidential election. A group of Kanaks captured the gendarmerie on the island of Ouvea, killed 4 gendarmes and took 27 hostages, although 11 were subsequently released. Ouvea was declared a "zone militaire" and 300 troops were flown in under the command of the head of the French elite anti-terrorist squad. The military stormed the cave where the Kanaks were holed up, killing 21 Kanaks and 2 policemen. The troops reportedly tortured and beat civilians during the operation. An inquiry by Amnesty International eventually forced the French Minister for Defence to admit that "acts contrary to military duty" had been committed.

The newly-elected minority Socialist Party government in Paris immediately moved to bring the crisis under control. Prime Minster Rocard brokered a deal—the Matignon Accord—with the principal FLNKS leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou and anti-independence leader Jacques Lafleur. In line with similar political arrangements elsewhere, the nationalist leadership abandoned its struggle for independence, as well as their empty invocations of socialism, in return for a place in office and access to business opportunities and financial resources.

The FLNKS entered the talks calling for a vote on self-determination to be held within five years, with only Kanaks and first-generation settlers having the right to vote. Lafleur's governing party, however, demanded the vote be put off until 1998 and kept open to all residents with French nationality. The agreement confirmed direct rule from Paris until 1998, while guaranteeing amnesty to a number of Kanak militants. Within a federation of three autonomous provinces, it offered a limited form of Kanak self rule in the two most underdeveloped provinces away from Noumea.

The accord was ratified by an 81 percent majority in a national referendum in which only 37 percent of the electorate voted. New Zealand journalist David Robie, in his book *Blood on their Banner—Nationalist Struggles in the South Pacific* (1989), characterised the accord as a "diplomatic triumph" for Rocard, emphasising how the future of New Caledonia remained "at the mercy of French metropolitan politics".

The accord effectively defused the independence movement. With any vote on independence deferred for at least a decade, money was poured in to building a Kanak infrastructure, training public servants and establishing a base in the lucrative mining industry. A year later, in response to widespread feeling among Kanaks that they had been betrayed, Tjibaou and his deputy were assassinated by a follower who had been arrested during the military assault on Ouvea. Tjibaou's legacy is now enshrined in a cultural centre that bears his name. Opened in 1998 and occupying 8 hectares some 10 kms from central Noumea, it was funded by the French state to the tune of $US60 million.

The centre, which was designed by Italian architect Renzo Piano, known for his work on the Pompidou Centre in Paris, is an architectural wonder, housing precious sculptures and cultural artifacts. It is both a principal tourist attraction and, through the promotion of a Kanak cultural revival, a base for the development of a privileged middle class layer of Kanaks. It represents, above all, the incorporation of the Kanak leadership into the colonial status quo. A prominent display glorifying Tjibaou's political biography is evidence that the centre is a recognition by a grateful French

ruling elite of services rendered.

The promised referendum on independence has never materialised. Under the terms of a second accord, the Accord de Noumea, signed by the FLNKS and French President Lionel Jospin in 1998, any serious moves towards independence were again put off for at least another 15 or 20 years. In the meantime, New Caledonia remains a contemporary outpost of French imperialism.

France retains significant economic and strategic interests. The main island, Grande Terre has the world's largest known nickel deposits—holding about a quarter of all known reserves—and is the third largest producer after Canada and Russia. It is also the second largest cobalt producer. Nickel is critically important in the defence industry, and has recently been designated a "strategic material" to ensure the French state can maintain a close watch over its production and distribution.

There are about a dozen mining centres owned by the Societe Le Nickel (SLN)—originally financed in 1910 by the Rothschild corporation—and the Societe Miniere du Sud Pacifique (SMSP), a legal entity made up of New Caledonia's three provinces (North, South and Loyalty islands). The SLN monopolises all processing through its ownership of the sole smelter at Dioniambo—a grimy eyesore that dominates the northern outskirts of Noumea en route from the international airport. The smelter has a workforce of 1,400, making the capital a significant concentration of industrialised workers.

An influx of foreign capital is being urgently sought to open up the underdeveloped parts of the country and redress economic "imbalances". Earlier this year the French government stepped up its financial commitment to a joint nickel-mining project with Canadian mining giant Falconbridge. It agreed to a series of tax concessions in order to ensure that the project, which is facing a crucial feasibility deadline at the end of the year, goes ahead. An additional $US620 million will be injected in the joint venture's capital, while the French will also act as a guarantor for loans to be contracted by New Caledonia's Northern Province.

In the south, a $US1.8 billion nickel mining project is scheduled to be fully operational early 2007. The Goro-Nickel project capital is owned by Canadian mining giant Inco, a Japanese consortium, Sumic, with 10 percent owned by the SMSP. The combination of the two Canadian-driven projects and the upgrading of existing SLN operations will bring nickel production capacity to some 200,000 tonnes per year within the next three to four years.

New Caledonia also remains a key French military outpost in the Pacific. This year marks the 20th anniversary of the bombing in 1985 of the Greenpeace flagship, the *Rainbow Warrior*, by the French Secret Service. Recently released documents show the crime was personally authorised by late president Francois Mitterrand. This act of state terrorism, which resulted in the death of one crewman, took place as the vessel was moored in Auckland and preparing to protest against French nuclear weapons testing at Mururoa Atoll. The operation was based in Noumea and the agents were dispatched from there by yacht to secretly enter New Zealand.

The substantial military presence remains obvious. Bastille Day celebrations on July 14 saw two warships moored next to the yachts in the Baie de L'Orphelinat, while a military parade involving helicopters, heavy armoured vehicles and troops armed with semi-automatic rifles testified to the significance of France's permanent garrison in New Caledonia. The islands were the centre for the US Pacific command during World War II and adjacent to major naval and air battles—a reminder that the expanses of the Pacific have always been and remain an arena of inter-imperialist rivalry and contest.

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