



The Power of Invasion in the Hierarchy of Races: Colonialist Discourse in the Uses of Antiquity by the *Cercle Fustel de Coulanges* (1928-1944)

A força da invasão na hierarquia das raças: discurso colonialista nos usos da Antiguidade pelo Círculo Fustel de Coulanges (1928-1944)

Lucas Arantes Lorga¹

Universidade Federal de São Paulo (UNIFESP), São Paulo, São Paulo / Brasil

lucaslorga1@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0260-871X>

Abstract: Founded in the 1920s by a group of teachers opposed to the educational reforms of the French Third Republic (1870-1940), the *Cercle Fustel de Coulanges* made History one of the central pillars of its intellectual reflection. Although composed of professors of philosophy, literature, and even physics, the past—especially Antiquity—occupied a privileged place in its political-pedagogical formulations. The group’s very name reveals this orientation: it’s an explicit homage to Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges (1830-1889), the 19th-century methodological historian and author of the renowned *La Cité Antique*. However, while historiography consecrated Coulanges for that work, the *Cercle* chose to revive lesser-known texts in which the historian outlines a continuum between the Latin spirit of Antiquity and medieval and modern France. Drawing on reception theory, this article proposes to understand such appropriation not merely as a symbolic dispute between Germanism and Romanism—intensified by the wars of 1870, 1914-1918, and 1939-1945—nor as a simple distortion of the historian’s original thought. It also seeks to investigate the colonialist elements underlying this rhetoric. It argues that Antiquity was mobilized, both explicitly and implicitly, as an instrument for reconstructing national identity in the face of wounds inflicted by revanchist nationalism and the contradictions

¹ Bachelor’s and Master’s degree in History from the Federal University of São Paulo (UNIFESP), advised by Professor Glaydson José da Silva. Conducted a Research Internship Abroad at the Musée d’Archéologie Nationale (MAN) in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France, under the supervision of Professor Laurent Olivier. Leader of the CNPq Research Group in Theory of History and Historiography: Márcia D’Alessio.



of French colonial discourse—which required reconciling the experience of having been colonized in the past with the affirmation of France’s role as colonizer in the present.

Keywords: uses of the past; reception of Antiquity; Fustel de Coulanges; Action Française.

Resumo: Fundado na década de 1920 por um grupo de professores contrários às inovações pedagógicas da Terceira República Francesa (1870-1940), o *Cercle Fustel de Coulanges* fez da História um dos eixos centrais de sua reflexão intelectual. Embora composto por docentes de filosofia, literatura e até física, o passado – especialmente a Antiguidade – ocupava lugar privilegiado em suas formulações político-pedagógicas. O próprio nome do grupo expressa essa orientação: é uma homenagem explícita a Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges (1830-1889), historiador metódico do século XIX e autor do célebre *A Cidade Antiga*. No entanto, se a historiografia consagrou Coulanges por essa obra, o *Cercle* optou por resgatar textos menos conhecidos, nos quais o autor delineia um *continuum* entre o espírito latino da Antiguidade e a França medieval e moderna. Com base na teoria da recepção, este artigo propõe compreender tal apropriação não apenas como uma disputa simbólica entre germanismo e romanismo – intensificada pelas guerras de 1870, 1914-1918 e 1939-1945 –, tampouco como mera distorção do pensamento original do historiador. Busca-se, além disso, investigar os elementos colonialistas subjacentes a essa retórica. Argumenta-se que a Antiguidade foi mobilizada, implicitamente e explicitamente, como instrumento de recomposição identitária frente às feridas do revanchismo nacionalista e às contradições do discurso colonial francês – que exigia conciliar a experiência de colonizado no passado com a afirmação do papel de colonizador no presente.

Palavras-chave: usos do passado; recepção da Antiguidade; Fustel de Coulanges; Action Française.

1 Introduction²

As historians, we can, to some extent, control what we write. Although certain elements inevitably escape our intention (Droysen, 2009, p. 56), our texts are predominantly the result of deliberate reflection and research. However, we cannot say the same about how we will be read in the present or the future. The reading of a work always involves a fusion of horizons—dynamic and often conflictual—between the writer,

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the reader, and the text (Gadamer, 1997). Thus, in any act of reception, there is a wide range of possible interpretations and, more importantly, appropriations that go beyond the presumed original intention of the author (Hardwick, 2003; Martindale, 1993, 2006, 2007).

Based on this premise, this article examines the reception and use of the figure and work of the historian Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges (1830-1889) by the *Cercle Fustel de Coulanges*, a group of conservative professors founded in the first half of the 20th century. The central question is how and why this group, through their publication *Cahiers du Cercle Fustel de Coulanges* (1928-1944), chose as its emblem a 19th-century historian of Antiquity and the Middle Ages. To do so, the article first analyzes the historical developments between Coulanges's death and the foundation of the *Cercle*, especially considering the successive identity crises triggered by the wars of 1870, 1914-1918, and 1939-1945. It then investigates the main characteristics of the *Cercle*, its motivations within the educational policies of the Third Republic, and the political and pedagogical role Antiquity played in its program. Finally, it addresses a question rarely explored in historiography: beyond nationalist rhetoric, did Coulanges's work—and its appropriation by the *Cercle*—also contain a colonialist dimension? The central hypothesis is that both the 19th-century historian and the group of professors instrumentalized Antiquity to respond to the identity crises generated by German revanchism, explicitly and implicitly mobilizing elements of colonial discourse.

2 Between Wars: The Fragmentation of French Identity

To understand how a historian who died in 1889 was appropriated by a reactionary group starting in 1928, it is essential to analyze the events that connect these two temporal markers. This research argues that the reception of Coulanges by the *Cercle* should be understood through the metaphor of an archaeological excavation. The professors, therefore, did not have direct contact with the historian's works or original intent, but accessed them through intermediate layers of interpretation and historical experience. These layers, to some extent, help explain how a liberal thinker like Coulanges (Wood, 1989) could be reappropriated by a



reactionary tradition aligned with the ideas of Charles Maurras and *Action Française*. In the context of this research, focusing on French identity, we will argue that late 19th- and early 20th-century France experienced deep wounds to its national self-image. It is through these wounds that the reception of Coulanges by the *Cercle* must be understood.

The first of these crises was the only one on which Coulanges was able to express a concrete opinion. The Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871) triggered a profound disruption in France.³ The swift and humiliating defeat suffered by the country in just one year—referred to by Victor Hugo as “The Terrible Year” (*l’Année Terrible*) (Hugo, 1872)—became one of the defining events of *fin de siècle* France. This military catastrophe contributed significantly to the construction of a narrative of moral, social, and political decline during the French Third Republic (1870-1940) (Angenot, 1989, chap. 18; Digeon, 1992; Girardet, 1983, p. 14; Hartog, 2003, p. 53). Thus began what Claude Digeon called “the German question,” that is, “the complex psychology created in French public opinion by the formation of German unity, sustained by the proximity of a new Empire” (Digeon, 1992, p. 1, our translation).⁴

France, of course, had lost wars before—such as Napoleon’s defeat in 1815. However, the war of 1870 raised deeper questions regarding the continuity of French ideals. Once France was no longer considered the most powerful nation in the continent, the perceived link between the country’s destiny and the future of Europe—and of Civilization itself—was severed (Digeon, 1992, p. 4). Consequently,

³ Even before 1870, Coulanges had already addressed political themes. In *La Cité Antiquie* (1864), his focus was on the brutality of the French Revolution, the perils of democracy, the people’s association with tyranny—as seen in Napoleon III’s coup—and the defense of the “principle of aristocracy” (Dosse, 2003, p. 45; Hartog, 2003, p. 63). However, with *Leçons à l’Impératrice sur les Origines de la Civilisation Française* (Coulanges, 2010), conceived in June 1870 (Fabre, 2010, p. 23)—that is, one month before the beginning of the war—and later in *Histoire des Institutions Politiques de l’Ancienne France* (1888), his attention shifted to asserting the Latin roots of the French past, in opposition to the Germanic legacy. An early response to the so-called German question.

⁴ « Par “question allemande”, j’entends le complexe psychologique créé dans l’opinion française par la formation de l’unité allemande, et entretenu par le voisinage d’un nouvel Empire ».



many French thinkers, including Fustel de Coulanges, sought to assign blame for the humiliating defeat through articles in magazines and newspapers (Geary, 2005, p. 43; Hartog, 2003, p. 56-68; Jurt, 2017; Lorga, 2022). More than an academic debate, these intellectuals saw themselves as responsible not only for explaining the defeat but also for imagining the nation's possible rebirth (Digeon, 1992, p. 4).

According to Coulanges himself, France had never sought war (Coulanges, 1871, p. 187-193). However, two culprits could be identified: one external and one internal. As for the former, Coulanges asserted that Prussia harbored an “irrational, instinctive, involuntary aversion, of which they themselves are unaware and which they conceal even from their own eyes” (Coulanges, 1871, p. 194, our translation).⁵ Since 1815, he argued, the Prussians had contested and despised everything French, looking down on any contributions or virtues that might exist west of the Rhine (Coulanges, 1871, p. 193).

As for the second culprit, Coulanges attributed France's defeat to a lack of patriotism. According to him, the French loved everything foreign and despised everything national. For years, “German books were translated, especially those expressing hatred toward France and distorting its history” (Coulanges, 1871, p. 195, our translation).⁶ From this diagnosis, Coulanges (1872, p. 244, our translation) derived a definition of patriotism that would later be adopted as a credo by both the *Cercle Fustel de Coulanges* and *Action Française*:

True patriotism is not love for the soil, it is love for the past, it is respect for the generations that preceded us. Our historians teach us only to curse them and recommend only that we not resemble them. They break the French tradition and imagine that French patriotism will remain. They keep repeating that foreigners are worth more than France and believe that people will love France. For fifty years, it is

⁵ “É uma aversão irracional, instintiva, involuntária, da qual eles mesmos não se dão conta, e que dissimulam a seus próprios olhos”.

⁶ “Os livros alemães eram traduzidos, especialmente aqueles que exprimiam ódio à França e deturpavam sua história”.



England that we have loved, it is Germany that we have praised, it is America that we have admired.⁷

As this excerpt illustrates, the Franco-Prussian War led to an increasing conflation of patriotism and national consciousness with nationalism, in which history played a central role (Girardet, 1983, p. 15). More importantly, it inaugurated what Raoul Girardet (1958, p. 506) termed “revanchist nationalism,” marking French national identity with a lasting antagonism toward its German neighbors.

This revanchist nationalism appears, with certain similarities and differences to Coulanges’s position, in the pages of the *Cahiers*. For the professors, from an internal perspective, revolutionary democracy and the empires of Napoleons I and III were regimes contrary to the true characteristics of good French politics, which they believed was rooted in the Capetian dynasties. Due to the lack of wisdom of such rulers, France’s military and moral strength declined throughout the 19th century, paving the way for German unification (Gallois, 1935, p. 16; Heinrich, 1929, p. 9, 1933, p. 54-55).

Thus, from an external perspective, revolutionary and democratic weakness enabled the realization of what would become one of the enduring specters of French politics in the decades to follow: German invasion and the loss of additional territory. As Pierre Heinrich, a history professor in Lyon, wrote concerning the falsehoods propagated by French history textbooks:

When [...] Wilhelm I and Bismarck undertook to achieve German unity under Prussian hegemony, they were bound to find in Napoleon III, imbued with all the principles and all the chimeras of the revolutionary politics of nationalities, a blind accomplice to their work of violence, which brought us the

⁷ « Le véritable patriotisme n’est pas l’amour du sol, c’est l’amour du passé, c’est le respect pour les générations qui nous ont précédés. Nos historiens ne nous apprennent qu’à les maudire, et ne nous recommandent que de ne pas leur ressembler. Ils brisent la tradition française, et ils s’imaginent qu’il restera un patriotisme français. Ils vont répétant que l’étranger vaut mieux que la France, et ils se figurent qu’on aimera la France. Depuis cinquante ans, c’est l’Angleterre que nous aimons, c’est l’Allemagne que nous louons, c’est l’Amérique que nous admirons ».



third invasion of the nineteenth century and the mutilation of our territory (Heinrich, 1933, p. 55, our translation).⁸

In summary, as noted by Albert Rivaud—philosophy professor and Minister of National Education under Pétain’s regime—“From 1870 to 1914, all of European politics was dominated by the antagonism between France and Germany” (Rivaud, 1933, p. 21, our translation).⁹

After 1870, two events profoundly shaped French identity: the devastating brutality of the First World War and, for the *Action Française* and the *Cercle*, the looming fear of renewed conflict with Germany. The war of 1914, as Eric Hobsbawm (2021) notes, introduced new forms of warfare and had a profound—perhaps unprecedented—impact on both French and European identity. Its brutality, occurring on the very soil that symbolized Civilization and Progress, left lasting psychological scars (Boursier, 2012, p. 221). Jay Winter (2010, p. 226) argues that the trauma of the First World War triggered a symbolic collapse of European identity, leading to a search for meaning amid the devastation. The notion of *shell shock* soon transcended its medical origin, acquiring a metaphysical dimension that reflected broader cultural and psychological disorientation (Winter, 2000, p. 7).¹⁰ One of the most common responses to this rupture was the reappropriation of the past—as both political strategy and psychological refuge (Winter, 2010).¹¹

⁸ « quand [...] Guillaume Ier et Bismarck entreprirent de réaliser l’unité allemande sous l’hégémonie prussienne, ils devaient trouver dans Napoléon III, imbu de tous les principes et de toutes les chimères de la politique révolutionnaire des nationalités, un complice aveugle de leur œuvre de violence qui nous valut la troisième invasion du dix-neuvième siècle et la mutilation de notre territoire ».

⁹ « Depuis 1870 jusqu’à 1914, toute la politique européenne a été dominée par l’antagonisme entre la France et l’Allemagne ».

¹⁰ Jay Winter states that this experience was specific to the Anglo-Saxon world. However, we argue that the shift from medical to metaphorical trauma also applies to France, given the sociopolitical and cultural impact of returning wounded soldiers and the state’s failure to reintegrate them effectively (Cabanes, 2008; Derrien, 2017).

¹¹ The intellectual landscape of 1914–1918 closely resembled that of the 1870 war. According to Peter Schöttler, French historians, once admirers of their German counterparts, were shaken by the perceived irrationality of German aggression and



More specifically, 1914 marked a singular moment for the French far right, particularly for *Action Française*. If, during the first decade of the twentieth century, the reactionary field was still shaping its theoretical corpus and institutional structure, it was with the outbreak of the First World War that the initial apex of its political project emerged (Nora, 1964, p. 130-132; Weber, 1962, p. 103-127).¹² Within this chaotic environment of mounting uncertainty, Maurras and his followers found fertile ground to consolidate themselves as an ordered and unifying alternative. First, by aligning with the idea of the *Union Sacrée* (“Sacred Union”), they demonstrated that, in times of external threat, the Nation had to stand above internal disputes. Second, their campaign against the foreign enemy deepened progressively. Led mainly by Léon Daudet, the most polemical member of *Action Française*, the movement sought to vilify all those of Germanic descent residing in French territory, with a particular focus on the Jews (Weber, 1962, p. 103-127).

In this sense, the First World War intensified the specter of German invasion. For *Action Française* historian Jacques Bainville, in *Les Conséquences politiques de la paix*, the events of 1914-1918 followed the natural laws of History. Germany’s military aggressiveness and expansionism—evident since the 1870 annexation of Alsace-Lorraine—were seen as inevitable consequences of the unification (Bainville, 1996, p. 51; Rivaud, 1933, p. 32). War, in this view, was not incidental but a direct expression of German institutions and customs—concepts Bainville adapted from Coulanges—sustained by enmity toward France and cyclical invasions.

The Second World War played a distinct role. Most *Cahiers* editions were published before 1939, and after France’s capitulation in 1940, references to Antiquity declined sharply. Of the 35 texts released between 1940 and 1944, only two addressed Antiquity, and none confronted the “Germanic question” directly. Instead, focus shifted to

responded through history. A new intellectual battle emerged—what Schöttler calls a “second front”—with Antiquity at its center (Schöttler, 1995).

¹² Edward Tannenbaum (1962, p. 148) notes that the newspaper’s circulation, which averaged 20,000 copies before 1914, rose to 36,000 in 1915 and reached a peak of 156,000 after Maurras and Daudet were placed under house arrest in 1917. Even Jacques Lacan, in his youth, felt compelled to seek Maurras’s wisdom (Joly, 2015, p. 11).



exalting classical culture within the framework of Pétain's National Revolution (Blanc, 1941; Rivaud, 1942). This change likely reflected the political risks of criticizing the Germanic race under occupation.

Still, the Second World War was far from irrelevant to the construction of the French historical narrative. As early as the 1920s, historians were already debating Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles, which placed moral blame for the war on Germany and Austria-Hungary (Cabanes, 2008, p. 44). In 1920, Jacques Bainville predicted that a new conflict was inevitable, arguing that the treaty failed to address the core issue: Germany's decentralization. Worse, it reignited German revanchism, making renewed aggression only a matter of time. For the professors of the *Cercle Fustel de Coulanges*, even a weakened Germany remained a looming threat east of the Rhine. Thus, a constant interplay of temporalities emerged, in which past, present, and future intertwined and influenced one another, at times in asymmetric ways.

In sum, between Coulanges's death in 1889 and the founding of the *Cahiers* in 1928, a series of events reshaped the meaning of Frenchness. The 1870 defeat, the civilizational trauma of the First World War, and the looming threat of renewed conflict in the 1930s marked deep ruptures in national identity, always shadowed by the specter of German invasion. It is through these wounds that the *Cercle's* conflicted reception of Coulanges must be read.

3 *Cercle Fustel de Coulanges*, Pedagogy and Antiquity

With these events in mind, it becomes more tangible to understand why certain sectors of French society radicalized, both to the left and the right. Movements such as *boulangisme* in the 1880s, the debate over the *Dreyfus Affair* at the turn of the century, the creation of *Action Française* (1899-1944) and its consolidation throughout the 1910s and 1920s can all be seen within this contextual-explanatory framework.

In this conjuncture, the *Cercle* began its work. Despite its importance for the formation of a pedagogical project during Vichy France (Gros, 2008, p. 48-67; Olivier, 1998, p. 252), studies that specifically deal with the group are still scarce. Perhaps its proximity to



the *Action Française* has obscured its relative independence as an object of research. Or, as Juliette Fontaine (2022, p. 38) suggests, this neglect may reflect an attempt to forget the history of conservative pedagogical thought in the early 20th century in favor of highlighting progressive positions.

This scholarly gap is evident even in the uncertainty surrounding the *Cercle*'s founding date. While some sources cite 1928 (Gros, 2008, p. 68; Olivier, 1998, p. 252; Weber, 1962, p. 264; Wilson, 1973, p. 133), others indicate 1926 (Bernard, 2017, para. 13; Valenti, 2006, p. 49), and an article in *L'Action Française* claims 1927 (Le Cercle [...], 1941)—a view echoed by Fontaine (2022, p. 37, 45, 49). So far, only Catherine Valenti (2006) and Juliette Fontaine (2022) have specifically addressed the *Cercle* as a research object. Both offer relevant and high-quality analyses, yet they devote only the final third of their studies to the group. Consequently, the *Cercle* remains understudied, and the *Cahiers* continue to be a rich but largely unexplored source for understanding history education in France.

Regardless of the exact founding date, it is well established that the movement was created by Henri Boegner, a professor of philosophy and classical literature, and Georges Cantecor, who also taught philosophy—both secondary school teachers (Gros, 2008, p. 68; Weber, 1962, p. 264; Fontaine, 2022, p. 46). Unlike *Action Française*, the group had a more specific objective: to wage a political struggle within the field of education (Weber, 1962, p. 264; Wilson, 1973, p. 133).

The movement brought together university, primary, and secondary school teachers to discuss issues related to education. More than that, it served as a striking example of the radicalization of debates on French education throughout the 1930s (Fontaine, 2022). Its principal sources of disquiet were closely tied to the issues previously discussed. Fearing the erosion of French identity and growing external threats, the *Cercle* identified its primary adversary in the educational reforms introduced under the French Third Republic.

The *Cercle* had three main concerns, the first being the secularization of education (Fontaine, 2022, p. 48). Enacted through the Jules Ferry laws (1881, 1882) and the René Goblet law (1886), these reforms mandated certification for congregational teachers, replaced



religious instruction with moral and civic education, and formalized the secular nature of schooling. For Catholic movements like the *Cercle*, this represented “a veritable offensive aimed at eliminating the Church and religion from public education” (Duval, 2011, p. 31, our translation).¹³ For them, this was nothing less than a direct attack on one of the most fundamental principles of French identity (Dufrenne, 1930).

The second concern was the controversial *École Unique* project. Unlike the traditional model—primary school for all and secondary education for the elite—the proposal aimed to reduce inequality and democratize access to education (Duval, 2011, p. 54-55; Fontaine, 2022, p. 48). The *Cercle* opposed it vehemently, seeing it as a product of revolutionary democratic corporatism that undermined what they viewed as France’s natural hierarchies. For Pierre Dufrenne, founder of *Revue de l’École* and contributor to the *Cahiers*, the reform failed to recognize that not all segments of society required the same education as the elites (Dufrenne, 1930)—an argument echoed later in Édouard Brémont’s writings on colonial education in Algeria.

The third and perhaps most recurrent criticism of the *Cercle* concerned the diminishing importance of *Humanités Anciennes* and the rise of *Humanités Modernes*, particularly in secondary education. This shift occurred as both *Histoire Sacrée* and Antiquity gradually lost prominence in the primary school curriculum throughout the second half of the 19th century, giving way to national history and modern European history (Bruter, 2010). Furthermore, the 1902 reform reorganized secondary education into two cycles. In the first, students could choose between two tracks, and in the second, four options were available. Among these six pathways, two excluded Latin and Greek, yet were still considered equivalent for obtaining the *baccalauréat* (Duval, 2011, p. 52; Fontaine, 2022, p. 48). In this regard, as André Chervel and Marie-Madeleine Compère observe, “from 1880 onwards, the history of the

¹³ « Ainsi les lois laïques prennent-elles l’allure d’une véritable offensive visant à éliminer l’Église et la religion de l’enseignement public ».



classical humanities is one of a long decline, enriched by some short-lived advances” (Compère; Chervel, 1997, p. 166, our translation).¹⁴

In contrast, the *Cercle Fustel de Coulanges* viewed the teaching of *Humanités Anciennes* as the only way to educate young people to become true French citizens and morally upright individuals. Maurice Godron, a professor of classical literature (Fontaine, 2022, p. 48), emphasized that classical education was not merely pedagogical, but also “confers upon an intelligence [...] an unquestionable superiority over anyone hastily specialized who has not benefited from the same disciplines!” (Godron, 1929, p. 24, our translation).¹⁵ This is because, according to A. Debailleul, a professor of English (Fontaine, 2022, p. 48), classical thought represented:

[...] pure reason, the central light of the world, which we are all the more duty-bound to seek out and cultivate in its perfected form as this world grows larger, and as the compass becomes all the more necessary the vaster the ocean to be navigated (Debailleul, 1929, p. 57, our translation).¹⁶

In a time of centrifugal identity fragmentation, as discussed in the first part of this article, classical culture was frequently portrayed as Truth, Reason, Order, and the very Center of Humanity. This centripetal force—or this “compass,” as Debailleul described it—embodied continuity and homogeneity (Debailleul, 1929, p. 41), making it an ideal reference for a movement that denied the legitimacy of all sectors of French society that did not fit within this narrow definition of the Nation.

More than the pinnacle of human civilization, classical culture was intimately connected to French spiritual formation. For the group’s professors, French identity was inseparable from the Greco-Latin genius.

¹⁴ « À partir de 1880, l’histoire des humanités classiques n’est plus que celle d’un long déclin, émaillé de quelques sursauts de courte durée ».

¹⁵ « fortes humanités confèrent à une intelligence, destinée à se manifester exclusivement dans un domaine scientifique, une supériorité incontestable sur quiconque, spécialisé hâtivement, n’a pas bénéficié des mêmes disciplines ! »

¹⁶ « alors qu’il s’agit évidemment de la raison pure, de la lumière centrale du monde, que nous avons d’autant plus le devoir de rechercher et de cultiver à son état parfait, que ce monde s’agrandit, et que la boussole est d’autant plus nécessaire que l’océan à parcourir est plus vaste ».



Debailleul coined a recurring and illuminating expression that emphasized this continuity: the “Greco-Latin-French” culture (Debailleul, 1929, p. 41; 1930, p. 20). Paul Maury, *agrégé* in literature at the Lycée Rollin, summarized this idea succinctly: “There are no French humanities and Greco-Latin humanities [...] We recognize only the humanities” (Maury, 1932, p. 38, our translation).¹⁷

Thus, they did not study the classical world merely to acquire what was most advanced in human thought. To know Greece and Rome was also to know France, which bore the responsibility of being the foremost bastion of civilization in an era marked by harmful ideologies. In the words of Debailleul:

Nothing, then, is more obsolete than the philosophy of progress, of evolution, all that historicism and romantic confusion of the 19th century: between communist excess and super-capitalist excess—which come together to crush us—between the East and the Far West, we are increasingly aware of representing eminently (which does not mean alone) the old truly human civilization, and as even geographically France is more than ever central and, we dare say, the navel of the world, everything leads us to start from it, and its civilization, to restore the hierarchy of intellectual and moral values that the pre-war anarchy had destroyed (Debailleul, 1929, p. 61, our translation).¹⁸

We can therefore affirm that Antiquity lay at the core of the *Cercle*’s political-pedagogical project. This also helps explain why Fustel de Coulanges came to be elevated as one of the central symbols of the French extreme right. According to the historiography, Coulanges

¹⁷ « Il n’y a pas des humanités françaises et des humanités gréco-latines; il n’y a pas des humanités littéraires et des humanités artistiques. Nous ne connaissons que les humanités [...] ».

¹⁸ « rien donc n’est plus caduc que la philosophie du progrès, de l’évolution, tout cet historicisme et ce confusionnisme romantiques du XIX^e siècle : entre la démesure communiste et la démesure super-capitaliste, qui se rejoignent pour nous écraser, entre l’Orient et l’Extrême-Occident, nous avons de plus en plus conscience de représenter éminemment (ce qui ne veut pas dire tout seuls) la vieille civilisation vraiment humaine, et comme, même géographiquement, la France est plus que jamais centrale, et, osons le dire, le nombril du monde, tout nous porte à partir d’elle, et de sa civilisation, pour rétablir la hiérarchie des valeurs intellectuelles et morales, que l’anarchie d’avant-guerre avait détruites ».



was revived by both the *Cercle* and *Action Française* for a key reason. In his *Histoire des institutions politiques de l'ancienne France*, Coulanges appeared to demonstrate that the origins of France had not been contaminated by the Germanic invasions. Dividing French history between two races—the Gauls and the Franks—as had been done by Coulanges's predecessors became a way of framing the nation as engaged in a perpetual struggle. His central argument in support of this thesis was that the institutions inherited from the Roman conquest of Gaul had established such enduring customs and structures that the Frankish kingdoms merely adapted to the preexisting Latin order (Hartog, 2003; Valenti, 2006; Wilson, 1973). The *Cercle* argued that this narrative should be taught in schools to reinforce patriotism and prevent the supposed “denationalization” of young French citizens.

In sum, Antiquity was not merely a source of cultural prestige or an educational ideal for the *Cercle Fustel de Coulanges*; it was the very foundation of their political-pedagogical worldview—a symbol of order, hierarchy, spiritual clarity, and national continuity. Through the elevation of Latin and Greek traditions, the *Cercle* sought to define the essence of Frenchness in opposition to the perceived disintegration of modern society. Fustel de Coulanges, with his thesis of a Romanized France untouched by Germanic influence, provided the historical scaffolding for this ideological edifice. Yet beyond its nationalist deployment, can we also identify colonialist dimensions in these interpretations of the past?

4 Colonial Discourse from Coulanges to the *Cercle Fustel de Coulanges*

With all this in mind, a compelling question arises: why did they exalt the Romans rather than the Gauls? Would it not have been easier to reclaim the culture of the so-called indigenous people of the French territory? This was, in fact, a viable alternative, as evidenced by Camille Jullian—Coulanges's closest student—who pursued precisely that (Nicolet, 2006, p. 226-244). Why, then, in their attempt to counter the Germanic threat of the past, present, and future, did some French thinkers turn instead to Latin identity and the legacy of Rome?



We argue that the answer to this question lies at the intersection of revanchist nationalism—fueled by anti-German sentiment—and the paradoxes of colonial logic that permeated modern European thought. One must not forget that, following the defeat of 1870, the French sought to restore their national grandeur by developing a system, a discourse, and a coherent ideology in support of colonial expansion in Africa and Asia (Girardet, 1972, p. 21-51). More than that, according to Raoul Girardet (1972, p. 145-201), it was anti-Germanism that led the French far right to embrace colonialism on the eve of the First World War. Charles Maurras himself acknowledged that it was no coincidence that *Action Française* celebrated the anniversary of Coulanges in 1905: beyond being a symbolic milestone—the 75th anniversary of his birth—it also coincided with the Moroccan Crisis, triggered by Emperor Wilhelm II's speech in Tangier, in which he declared his support for Moroccan independence (Maurras, 1928, p. 7). Thus, colonial discourse surrounds this reading of Coulanges—but in what ways exactly?

Although he did not write specifically about Antiquity, the thought of Albert Memmi (2021) offers a valuable key to addressing this question. According to Memmi, modern colonization imposed paradoxes on both the colonizers and the colonized. The former were faced with the harsh realization that their advantages under the colonial system did not stem from justice, but from usurpation. To resolve this contradiction, they became colonialists—that is, they sought to justify their position of dominance, whether through claims of supposed superiority or through the civilizing mission. The colonized, in turn, were confronted with the brutal reality of unjust oppression. In attempting to process such violence, they often tried to assimilate into the culture of the colonizer, internalizing the very dehumanization imposed upon them. However, upon realizing that such assimilation was ultimately impossible within the logic of colonialism itself, they turned against their oppressors.

But what does this have to do with Antiquity? As we shall see, both Coulanges and the *Cercle* turned to historical narratives—particularly the symbolic relationship between Romans and Gauls—not only to reaffirm French identity in the face of German power, but also to grapple with the paradoxes of colonization. By positioning themselves simultaneously as



colonized in the past and colonizers in the present, they used history as a tool to interpret and reconcile these complex and conflicting identities.

This is because, in addition to being a colonial empire, France in the second half of the nineteenth century was confronted with an unsettling realization about its own origins: the Gauls, by all historical accounts, had been colonized—first by the Romans, and later by the “barbarian” Germanic peoples. In this sense, France appeared to descend from subjugated peoples, a narrative that stood in stark contrast to the image of national greatness it sought to project. It is in this context that Coulanges played a crucial role in attempting to resolve this paradox.

4.1 France in the Role of the Colonized

As previously noted, one of the proposals of the methodical historian was to reduce the influence of Germanic culture in French history, in response to the identity crises provoked by the wars. However, both Coulanges and the *Cercle* also sought to legitimize and normalize Roman colonization, portraying it as a beneficial process for the Gauls. Curiously, segments of the French intellectual elite not only began to view colonization as a civilizing instrument but also came to accept the presumed dehumanization of indigenous peoples.

Such a response mirrored the patterns observed by Memmi. The so-called colonized subject sought to imitate and assimilate into the culture of the dominant power, devaluing their own origins in the process. For instance, in the *Cours Élémentaire d'Histoire de France*, Ernest Lavisse (1913) portrayed the Gauls as a primitive and savage people. After describing their long hair, clothing, homes, and habits tied to nature, Lavisse told students: “If you met a man like that in the street, you would be quite surprised. You would think he was a savage” (Lavisse, 1913, p. 2, our translation).¹⁹ Precisely because of this, Lavisse taught that such primitive peoples greatly benefited from Roman colonization. According to him:

The Romans knew how to do many things that the Gauls did not. But the Gauls were very intelligent. They learned to do

¹⁹ « Si vous rencontriez un homme comme celui-là dans la rue, vous seriez bien étonnés. Vous croiriez que c'est un sauvage ».



everything the Romans did. Then, they built beautiful cities. They dressed like the Romans. The children began to attend school to learn how to read and write, to learn arithmetic and other things (Lavissee, 1913, p. 8, our translation).²⁰

Jacques Bainville (1924) also reinforced this narrative in his *Histoire de France*. According to the author—offering a less conciliatory perspective than that of Lavissee:

To this conquest, we owe almost everything. It was harsh: Caesar was cruel and relentless. Civilization was imposed on our ancestors by iron and fire and paid for with much blood. It was brought to us through violence. If we became superior civilized people, if we had a considerable advantage over other peoples, it is thanks to force (Bainville, 1924, p. 11, our translation).²¹

Bainville even praised the Gauls' capacity for assimilation and presented Roman colonization as the ideal example of a civilizing process. For him, "They had the gift of assimilation, a natural aptitude to receive Greco-Latin civilization [...] Never has colonization been more fortunate, never has it borne more beautiful fruits, than that of the Romans in Gaul" (Bainville, 1924, p. 11, our translation).²² These perspectives reflect the internalization of the colonized described by Memmi—perceiving domination as something positive.

Coulanges was no exception, though he took a distinct approach. In *Leçons à l'Impératrice*, he taught Napoleon III's wife and her court that among Europe's so-called primitive peoples, one stood apart: the Aryans. Despite their small numbers, they embodied embryonic elements

²⁰ « Les Romains savaient faire beaucoup de choses que les Gaulois ne savaient pas faire. Mais les Gaulois étaient très intelligents. Ils apprirent à faire tout ce que faisaient les Romains ».

²¹ « À cette conquête, nous devons presque tout. Elle fut rude : César avait été cruel, impitoyable. La civilisation a été imposée à nos ancêtres par le fer et par le feu et elle a été payée par beaucoup de sang. Elle nous a été apportée par la violence. Si nous sommes devenus des civilisés supérieurs, si nous avons eu, sur les autres peuples, une avance considérable, c'est à la force que nous le devons ».

²² « Ils avaient le don de l'assimilation, une aptitude naturelle à recevoir la civilisation gréco-latine qui, par Marseille et le Narbonnais, avait commencé à les pénétrer. Jamais colonisation n'a été plus heureuse, n'a porté plus de beaux fruits, que celle des Romains en Gaule ».



of Civilization. Unlike the peoples of Oceania—who, he claimed, could count only to three—or those of the Americas, who reached five at most, the Aryans possessed advanced arithmetic, a moral and metaphysical religion, and the institution of the family, especially monogamy (Coulanges, 2010). The Gauls, as a branch of this race, were thus seen as already predisposed to civilization.

However, this was not enough. They indeed “[...] brought with them, as elements of civilization, first agriculture, the sedentary spirit, some industries, but above all two great things, religious sentiment and the institution of the family”.²³ Nevertheless, they failed to make significant progress after arriving in Gaul. According to Coulanges:

They brought all that from Asia: they added almost nothing to it. They lived a dozen centuries in Gaul without any great progress being noted; for the clan system, druidism, are only very weak developments of primitive institutions. I therefore do not believe that once in Gaul they did much for civilization (Coulanges, 2010, p. 55, our translation).²⁴

They were missing something essential to develop and emerge from their primitive state. According to the historian, this transformation only occurred with the arrival of Greco-Roman Civilization, “to whom we owe much, and whose spirit, so to speak, grafted itself onto our own” (Coulanges, 2010, p. 55, our translation).²⁵

Coulanges thus outlined three possible scenarios in response to the invasions of Gaul. One possibility was that Gaul might have remained independent, but it would have continued at the same civilizational level

²³ « Nos Gaulois sont une branche de cette grande race, et nous avons vu qu’en arrivant dans ce pays ils apportaient déjà avec eux, comme éléments de civilisation, d’abord l’agriculture, l’esprit sédentaire, quelques industries, mais surtout deux grandes choses, le sentiment religieux et l’institution de la famille ».

²⁴ « Ils apportaient tout cela de l’Asie: ils n’y ont presque rien ajouté. Ils ont vécu une douzaine de siècles en Gaule sans qu’on puisse signaler de grands progrès; car le du clan, le druidisme, ne sont que de très faibles développements des institutions Primitives. Je ne crois donc pas qu’une fois en Gaule ils aient beaucoup fait pour la civilisation ».

²⁵ « nous allons porter notre attention sur la Grèce, à qui nous devons beaucoup, et dont l’esprit s’est pour ainsi dire greffé sur notre esprit ».



as before—much like the Gauls who settled in Ireland and Wales, who, according to him, remained “intellectually, morally, and politically weak before the English conquest” (Coulanges, 2010, p. 74, our translation).²⁶ A second scenario was that Gaul might have been colonized by the Germanic peoples, whose civilization was “virtually nonexistent” (Coulanges, 2010, p. 75, our translation).²⁷ In that case, Gaul would have inherited the rudimentary and anarchic institutions of the barbarian tribes, which produced little other than internal and external warfare. In this sense:

Gaul conquered by the Germans would likely have lost its political institutions and its religion; and the Germans would not have put in their place neither viable institutions, nor religion, nor civilization (Coulanges, 2010, p. 75, our translation).²⁸

The third and final scenario—that of Roman conquest—was, according to Coulanges, the victorious one. Rome not only prevented Germanic invasions and the destruction of the Gallic people but also left a profound civilizational legacy. Roman domination brought with it a structured model of political and social organization, as well as strong cultural and religious influences. This impact can be observed in various aspects, such as:

[...] institutions, the regime of the city, that is to say a regular system of elective magistrature, with a Senate and popular assemblies. As a political principle, the habit of discipline. As a social principle, the equality of all before the law. Their religion is rather refined, material no doubt, but it offers at least the advantage of being favorable to the development of art. Their civilization, it is that which they borrowed from the Greeks, it is almost exactly the one that blossomed in Athens; they have great cities, beautiful constructions, temples, theaters, aqueducts, roads. If they seize Gaul, it is

²⁶ « combien elle est restée faible intellectuellement, moralement, politiquement avant la conquête anglaise ».

²⁷ « La civilisation était, chez eux, presque nulle ».

²⁸ « La Gaule conquise par les Germains aurait vraisemblablement et les Germains perdu ses institutions politiques et sa religion; et n’auraient mis à la place ni institutions viables, ni religion, ni civilisation ».



likely that by settling there, they will bring all that with them
(Coulanges, 2010, p. 75, our translation).²⁹

Finally, to fully consolidate and legitimize this process of assimilation, Coulanges not only demonstrated how Roman domination had been beneficial, but also sought to prove that it had been voluntary on the part of the Gauls. According to the historian, there was no violence forcing the colonized population into submission. On the contrary, what was remarkable was that “Gaul, thus subjugated, remained faithful to Rome, and did not reclaim its independence [...]” (Coulanges, 2010, p. 83, our translation).³⁰ Even more remarkable, he argued, was the fact that “it was not force that kept the country in submission” (Coulanges, 2010, p. 83, our translation),³¹ but rather that “the true reason for Gaul’s exceptional docility toward Rome was that Rome rendered it a great service: it saved Gaul from the Germanic invasion” (Coulanges, 2010, p. 84, our translation).³² In short: “Gaul renounced its nationality, its religion, its language, its name; it renounced all that without regret, without constraint; it made itself Roman” (Coulanges, 2010, p. 93, our translation).³³

We see, then, in Coulanges’s view, that the Gauls fully assimilated to the customs of their conquerors. More than a mere historical fact, this fusion was something to be celebrated. In this sense, the true identity

²⁹ « Mais voyez ce qu’ils apportent : comme institutions, le régime de la cité, c’est-à-dire un système régulier de magistrature électorale, avec un Sénat et des assemblées populaires. Comme principe politique, l’habitude la discipline. Comme principe social, l’égalité de tous devant la loi. Leur religion est assez raffinée, matérielle sans doute, mais elle offre du moins l’avantage d’être favorable au développement de l’art. Leur civilisation, c’est celle qu’ils ont empruntée aux Grecs, c’est à peu de chose près celle qui s’est épanouie à Athènes ; ils ont de grandes villes, de belles constructions, des temples, des théâtres, des aqueducs, des routes. S’ils s’emparent de la Gaule, il est vraisemblable qu’en s’y établissant, ils y apporteront tout cela ».

³⁰ « c’est que la Gaule, ainsi assujettie, soit restée fidèle à Rome, et n’ait pas ressaisi son indépendance [...] »

³¹ « Et ce n’était pas la force qui retenait le pays dans la soumission ».

³² « Le vrai motif de cette singulière docilité de la Gaule à l’égard de Rome, c’est que Rome lui rendait un très grand service: elle la sauvait de l’invasion germanique ».

³³ « Gaule a renoncé à sa nationalité, à sa religion, à sa langue, à son nom; elle a renoncé à tout cela sans regret, sans contrainte; elle s’est faite romaine ».



of France could not be understood without acknowledging its deep entanglement with Greco-Roman history—or, more broadly, with the history of Civilization itself. As a consequence, the culture of the so-called colonizer was fully incorporated, despite the dehumanization of the peoples presumed to be the original inhabitants of France.

We can thus see the utility of breaking away from the Gallic heritage. But another question arises: why the Romans and not the Germanic peoples, given that both occupied the position of colonizers? This preference is not self-evident, especially considering that there was a strong Germanic tradition in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century France, which associated the Germanic legacy primarily with liberty and democracy (Calvié, 1988, p. 12-20).

Let us return to Memmi. For him, the colonized rebel upon realizing that full assimilation into the colonizer's world is ultimately impossible. Yet the Roman Empire—though symbolically revived by Italy (Assis, 2022)—lacked the tangible presence of the modern Prussian “barbarians.” This absence allowed French intellectuals to idealize Gallic assimilation as a completed and successful process. Since the Romans were “dead,” no rupture could occur; the shift from assimilation to rebellion was foreclosed. The same could not be said of the Germanic legacy, which, after 1870, became the defining counterpoint to French nationalism.

Coulanges developed this thesis throughout his life, most extensively in *Histoire des Institutions de l'ancienne France*. In the first volume, focused on the Frankish monarchy, he pursued two main goals: first, to refute the notion that the kingdom of Clovis was democratic or liberal—an explicit critique of the Germanist tradition; and second, to demonstrate that Frankish institutions largely followed the Roman *modus operandi*, from administrative titles to core structures like tax collection and military organization (Coulanges, 1888).

More than that, Coulanges aimed to show that Roman colonization had been so powerful, beneficial, and widely accepted that even the so-called barbarians were indirectly civilized by Latin institutions and the Roman spirit. In this view, there was no true barbarian colonization—only the arrival of new peoples within a still-operative imperial framework. As he put it, “The Frankish kings found in Gaul an administrative executive



system that the Romans had established there and to which the populations had become accustomed” (Coulanges, 1888, p. 185, our translation).³⁴ Therefore, they brought little or nothing of their Germanic culture; after all, “These [Frankish] kings did not think of looking to the past; they took what they found in the present” (Coulanges, 1888, p. 275, our translation).³⁵

This set of theses was the main reason behind the *Cercle*’s intellectual preference for Coulanges. George Cantecor, the founder of the group, eloquently expressed this position in an article entitled “L’Intérêt National de l’Oeuvre de Fustel de Coulanges” (The National Interest of Fustel de Coulanges’ Work). For him:

The romantic historians, fascinated by Germany, first invited their readers to a pitiful contempt for our race and for Latinity in general. According to them, the Gallo-Roman world would have been frightfully corrupted and absolutely emasculated. It would have collapsed on its own, and the old classical civilization by which it had lived would have vanished without return, if the Germans, fortunately, had not invaded Gaul (Cantecor, 1930, p. 17, our translation).³⁶

However, according to Cantecor, fortunately there had been neither a weakening of the Greco-Roman spirit nor a true Germanic invasion—in other words, no new civilizational contribution had been made to the territory of Gaul. In his words:

There was no conquest. This is certainly, of all Fustel’s innovations, the most paradoxical. For is it not certain, is it not established by the least contestable testimonies that the Germans occupied Gaul in the 5th century and shared and

³⁴ « Les rois francs trouvèrent en Gaule un système de cadres administratifs que les Romains y avaient établi et auquel les populations étaient habituées ».

³⁵ « Ces rois ne pensèrent pas à chercher dans le passé; ils prirent ce qu’ils trouvèrent dans le présent ».

³⁶ « Les historiens romantiques, fascinés par l’Allemagne, invitaient d’abord leurs lecteurs à un mépris apitoyé de notre race et de la latinité en général. À les entendre, le monde gallo-romain aurait été effroyablement corrompu et absolument dévirilisé. Il se fût écroulé lui-même, et la vieille civilisation classique dont il avait vécu se fût évanouie sans retour, si les Germains, par bonheur, n’avaient envahi la Gaule ».



reshared it endlessly, at the mercy of descents, inheritances, alliances, their wars among themselves and their treaties? Nothing is more certain indeed, nor better established. The whole question is whether one must give to this occupation the name of conquest. This name, indeed, implies the *idea of a certain mode of taking possession, of a certain use of the conquered thing, of certain consequences inherent to this form of occupation, which mode, use, and consequences are precisely lacking in the installation of the Germans in Gaul* (Cantecor, 1930, p. 25, our translation, our emphasis).³⁷

We see, in this definition, that a true invasion would imply an institutional and cultural transformation of the subjugated people. To admit, therefore, that the Germans had invaded Gaul would be to recognize their civilizational contribution to France—something inconceivable to the group’s revanchist nationalism. However,

Fustel felt compelled, as a scholar and as a patriot, to examine closely, through the texts and according to the detail of the facts, what truly were, in the 5th century, the Gallo-Romans and the Germans, in terms of aptitudes, morals or character, *and which ones civilized and regenerated the others* (Cantecor, 1930, p. 17-18, our translation, our emphasis).³⁸

³⁷ « Il n’y a pas eu de conquête. Voilà assurément, de toutes les nouveautés de Fustel, la plus paradoxale. Car enfin n’est-il pas certain, n’est-il pas établi par les témoignages les moins contestables que les Germains ont occupé la Gaule au Ve siècle et se sont partagée et repartagée sans cesse, au hasard des descendance, des héritages, des alliances, de leurs guerres entre eux et de leurs traités ? Rien n’est plus certain en effet, ni mieux établi. Toute la question est de savoir si l’on doit donner à cette occupation le nom de conquête. Ce nom, en effet, implique l’idée d’un certain mode de prise de possession, d’un certain usage de la chose conquise, de certaines conséquences inhérentes à cette forme d’occupation, lesquels mode, usage, conséquence font précisément défaut à l’installation des Germains en Gaule ».

³⁸ « Fustel s’est senti obligé, comme savant et comme patriote, d’examiner de près, sur les textes et d’après le détail des faits, ce qu’étaient vraiment, au Ve siècle, les Gallo-Romains et les Germains, comme aptitudes, mœurs ou caractère, et lesquels ont civilisé et régénéré les autres ».



Louis Dunoyer, professor of physics at the Sorbonne and president of the *Cercle*, aptly summarized this idea of the innate hierarchy between Romanization and Germanization. In the first volume of the *Cahiers*, in 1928, Dunoyer stated that:

[...] Fustel shows to what extent democratic passions distorted the ideas about what the 5th-century invasions were, about the relations between the Romanized Gallic population and the Germanic soldiery, *not as conquerors, but welcomed by the Empire* (Dunoyer, 1928, p. 23, our translation, our emphasis).³⁹

These quotations—recurrent in several references made by the group to Coulanges—reveal an essential point. The convergence between revanchist nationalism and the logic of colonial discourse became a powerful tool for confronting both the identity crises that weakened the idea of nation and the historical paradox of a France that had been, at once, dominated and dominant. The choice of the Romans as a symbol of French identity, and of Coulanges as the intellectual guide of the movement, was not the result of chance, but rather a political-intellectual strategy to reconcile a past of supposed subjugation with the need to assert civilizational sovereignty in the present.

However, at the beginning of this section, we wrote that France held a dual position within the colonial dynamic and, therefore, had a double paradox to resolve: that of the colonized and of the colonizer. Did Coulanges and the *Cercle* also connect Antiquity and colonialism in order to pacify the colonial project?

4.2 France in the Role of the Colonizer

As we have seen, both Coulanges and the *Cercle Fustel de Coulanges* employed certain key concepts in their analyses. When discussing Antiquity, they focused primarily on categories such as “Romanization” and its counterpart “Germanization” as well as “Civilization” and even

³⁹ « Fustel montre à quel point les passions démocratiques ont faussé les idées sur ce qu’ont été les invasions du Ve siècle, sur les rapports de la population gauloise romanisée avec la soldatesque germanique non point conquérante, mais hospitalisée par l’Empire ».



“Race.” With this in mind, one should not overlook the intellectual context in which Coulanges’s works were produced and the environment in which they were later received. Charles Darwin had published *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, five years before *La Cité Antique*, but ideas of evolution, competition, and the survival of the fittest were already strongly associated with the academic production of the period (Williams, 2011, p. 89-139). Thus, the 1860s—when Coulanges shifted his focus from Antiquity to the study of racial relations in the formation of France—were marked by the consolidation of anthropological and racial explanations that ranked human societies as more or less advanced (Patou-Mathis, 2013, p. 34). Moreover, as Edward Said (2003, p. 11) aptly noted, most of the prominent writers of the nineteenth century were fully conscious of the reality of Empire and were deeply embedded in a racializing logic.

Authors such as Hingley and Woolf contribute to the study of the historiography of Antiquity by demonstrating that these categories have their own historical trajectory and do not necessarily reflect reality. Since the period of Roman expansion, binaries such as civilization versus barbarism and *humanitas* versus *feritas* have shaped Rome’s imperial logic, establishing a hierarchical view between “Us” and “the Others.” This interpretative framework was later instrumentalized by Modernity, which drew parallels between the imperial processes of Antiquity and the colonial logic of the modern era (Hingley, 2010). According to Richard Hingley,

This powerful idea was received and transformed by Western powers during the 19th century to justify imperial relations. In the early 19th century, it was interpreted that Rome had spread a unique “civilization” across a considerable part of the world, including areas that today lie within Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. This idea provided a conceptual legacy to be emulated by modern nations that revisited and reinterpreted Rome’s imperial ambitions, offering Europe, and especially Western Europe, a precedent with respect to imperial ambition (Hingley, 2010, p. 70-71, our translation).⁴⁰

⁴⁰ “Essa idéia poderosa foi recebida e transformada pelas potências ocidentais durante o século XIX, para justificar relações imperiais. Durante o início do século XIX, interpretou-se que Roma disseminara uma “civilização” única através de uma parte



Coulanges's work offers a peculiar formula—one later emulated and expanded by the *Cercle* in relation to the French colonies. As previously noted, Gallic cultural development advanced *pari passu* with Roman conquest. For Coulanges, invasion was the essential vehicle of Civilization. In outlining three scenarios for Gaul—independence, Germanic occupation, or Roman conquest—he allowed no space for cultural survival post-invasion. In his view, conquest entailed total institutional and cultural imposition, erasing the sociability patterns of the vanquished.

There was also a central element in this narrative. Germanic civilization, in fact, could have transmitted its institutions and beliefs to Gaul. However, the Gauls were “saved” by the prior arrival of a Civilization—with all the weight this term carries—that was more advanced and therefore more powerful and enduring. In adopting this position, Coulanges implicitly acknowledged the existence of a clear civilizational hierarchy, which shaped the fate and agency of subjugated peoples permanently—whether for good, as in the case of the Romans, or for ill, as in the case of the Germanic tribes. Yet embedded in the theoretical structure of the historian's work is an almost unspoken law: the weaker has no capacity to transmit its way of life to the stronger. Within this framework, there is no room for hybridity or meaningful resistance.

As Woolf aptly pointed out, Coulanges was part of a trend among late 19th- and early 20th-century historians marked by two tendencies:

First, a belief that not all races had an equal potential to participate in civilization; and second, a faith in the absolute validity of the values of European culture, seen as the heir to the civilization of the classical world. Both ideas were part of the legacy of European imperialism [...] (Woolf, 1998, p. 5).

While in Coulanges this relationship is implicit and indirect, the same cannot be said of the *Cercle*. This becomes particularly evident

considerável do mundo, incluindo áreas que, hoje, se encontram dentro da Europa, do norte da África e do Oriente Médio. Essa idéia forneceu um legado conceitual a ser emulado pelas nações modernas que revisitaram e reinterpretaram as ambições imperiais de Roma abrindo à Europa e, especialmente, à Europa ocidental, um precedente no que diz respeito à ambição imperial”.



when examining General Édouard Brémont's article entitled "Choses Musulmanes et Choses d'Enseignement au Maghreb" (Muslim Matters and Educational Matters in the Maghreb) (Brémont, 1935). Published in May 1935 and spanning approximately 48 of the edition's 56 pages, the text explicitly advocates for differentiated education in the colonies, grounded in their historical formation.

Brémont's article was situated within a context that illuminates several key themes of the present study. As reiterated throughout this text, following the war of 1870, France and Germany engaged not only in a geopolitical rivalry but also in an intellectual confrontation in which History played a central role. As Claude Nicolet (2006, p. 244-258) aptly demonstrated, part of this struggle also took place in the African colonies. The so-called "battle for erudition," waged by the French in territories such as Tunisia and Algeria, was accompanied by a massive archaeological effort to justify their colonial presence. The core argument was that France was "restoring" the Roman heritage in Africa, thereby completing the civilizing mission begun by the Roman Empire in Antiquity.

The case of the Maghreb is illustrative. According to Claude Lepelley (2016), the Roman ruins present in Maghrebi territory came to be regarded as titles of ownership that legitimized the return of civilization through modern colonization. Arab-Islamic history was dismissed as a civilizational void, while the supposedly autochthonous peoples—the Berbers—were portrayed as savages saved by the Roman conquest. Part of Maurras's project and that of his followers, as aptly noted by Olivier Dard (2017, p. 7-9), was precisely to ground French colonization in a Latin union consolidated around the Mediterranean. France, Italy, the Iberian world, and Roman Africa would thus offer protection against the growing Germanic and Anglo-Saxon influence.

In this sense, Brémont's argument is directly influenced both by this context and by the interpretative framework outlined by Coulanges. It unfolds in two stages: rapprochement and distancing. First, he claims that North Africa is not truly Oriental but rooted in the Hellenistic world. Traits such as piracy, poetry, oral tradition, limited education for women, harems, Cretan-Minoan architecture, and intense religiosity—illustrated by figures like Apuleius and Saint Augustine—are thus framed as Western.



There is, in this thesis, a curious mobilization of certain Orientalist elements. Features that would typically be associated with a negative view of an imagined and exclusionary East—constructed through the logic of Western othering (Said, 2003)—are now reappropriated as signs of apparent inclusion. Yet the purpose remained the same: to deny these peoples any real agency and to reinforce stereotypes that naturalized and legitimized colonial domination. And what enables civilizational exchange between societies? As in Coulanges, the answer lies in invasion.

“It is commonly admitted that North Africa was invaded by Arab masses. Nothing is more inaccurate” (Brémond, 1935, p. 7, our translation).⁴¹ With this statement, the general begins listing the invasions that took place in North Africa and argues that Western incursions were both more numerous and more enduring than the Muslim ones (Brémond, 1935, p. 7-12). He ultimately concludes with a pointed question: “Why then refuse to admit the importance of this European influx, which is certain, and believe in an Oriental invasion that everything contradicts?” (Brémond, 1935, p. 12, our translation).⁴² This supposed affinity with European—particularly Greco-Latin—culture provided Brémond with a rationale for France’s continued colonization of Africa. In his words: “Whether one likes it or not, history will unite the destinies of France and North Africa. The ruin of one would mean the ruin of the other” (Brémond, 1935, p. 45, our translation).⁴³

If Latin culture serves to unite African peoples with France, we must not forget that the environment in which they live limits them (Brémond, 1935, p. 44). Therefore, there is no point in insisting on a classical education for these populations. As the Roman Empire did with its colonies, the French should focus on providing practical instruction to the conquered peoples. After all, “those who are fed with Latin and

⁴¹ « Il est communément admis que l’Afrique du Nord a été envahie par des masses arabes. Rien n’est plus inexact ».

⁴² « Pourquoi donc se refuser à admettre l’importance de cet afflux européen, qui est certain, et croire à une invasion orientale que tout dément ? »

⁴³ « Qu’on le veuille ou non, l’histoire a lié les sorts de la France et de l’Afrique du Nord. La ruine de l’une serait la ruine de l’autre ».



Greek die of hunger” (Brémond, 1935, p. 36, our translation).⁴⁴ They should not study to become lawyers, teachers, or politicians; their needs, according to Brémond, lie elsewhere.

We can identify two factors that help explain the overtly colonialist nature of this argument and its connection to the indirect discourse of Coulanges and the *Cercle*. First, Brémond used Greco-Latin culture to justify the invasion and occupation of North Africa by the French, while simultaneously denying these populations a classical education, which the *Cercle* itself defended as the best possible education, in favor of a practical learning approach. Antiquity was thus instrumentalized as a way to bring these populations closer for domination and push them away for domestication.

Secondly, we observe an echo in the historical narrative of Roman and barbarian invasions in Gaul. The discussion is the same, upon closer inspection: an indigenous population, whether Berber or Gallic, is invaded by the Romans and undergoes significant civilizational progress. With the fall of the Empire, barbarians—whether Muslim or Germanic—invade the territory. However, the strength of Greco-Latin culture and institutions is so powerful that, even with a change of rulers, there remains only one true origin for that territory. In this formal logic, the variables may change, but the conclusion will always be the same: progress is only granted through the invasions of more advanced civilizations and races, with Greco-Latin culture at the pinnacle of this hierarchy.

5 Conclusion

The analysis of Fustel de Coulanges and of the *Cercle Fustel de Coulanges* reveals how historical discourse can be strategically mobilized in moments of national rupture. More than a mere intellectual reappropriation, the use of Antiquity served, in both cases, as a tool for reconstructing a shaken identity, seeking symbolic stability amid the aftermath of military defeats and social disorientation. The figure of the Roman conqueror—rational, orderly, civilizing—was opposed to the

⁴⁴ « Ceux qui, nourris de latin et de grec, son morts de faim ».



image of Germanic chaos, allowing Coulanges and the *Cercle* to project a purified narrative of French origins rooted in Latin continuity.

However, this narrative did not only respond to revanchist nationalism; it also provided a framework through which the contradictions of French colonialism could be negotiated. By portraying Roman domination as voluntary and civilizing, and by equating the Gauls to the colonized peoples of the modern world, the *Cercle* naturalized the civilizational hierarchy that underpinned colonial ideology.

This dual positioning—colonized in memory, colonizer in the present—reveals the deep paradoxes embedded in the construction of French national identity. In confronting the wounds left by defeat, occupation, and internal fragmentation, both Coulanges and the *Cercle* found in the ancient past not only a source of legitimacy, but a political instrument to reconcile domination with dignity. The uses of Antiquity, therefore, must be read not as neutral echoes of the past, but as active agents in the ideological production of empire, identity, and historical meaning.

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