

Faculty Development Grant 2010-2011 – Leonard R. Koos
Communard Narratives of New Caledonia
Report

The 2010-2011 Faculty Development Grant that I received represents for me the absolute beginning of my work on the narratives written by ex-Communards who, following their arrests and convictions in the wake of the Paris Commune in 1871, were subsequently deported to the remote French penal colony of New Caledonia in the Pacific Ocean. On the one hand, political deportees like Henri Rocherfort, Achille Ballière, Pascal Grousset, and François Jourde escaped from the colony in 1874 and were able to begin to publish while in exile in England, Belgium, and Switzerland accounts of their incarceration, escape, and return to Europe. On the other hand, political prisoners like Louise Michel, Henri Brissac, Jean Allemane, and a number of others remained in the penal colony until the 1880 Amnesty law and upon their return to France in the course of the 1880s began to publish narratives of their experiences there. Each of these two periods correspond to two rather different perspectives on the part of the early Third Republic when dealing with the Paris Commune and the deportation of convicted Communards, the former dominated by censorship and an attempt to impose an official narrative of these events, the latter constituting a liberalization of the discursive management of potentially oppositional narratives of these events. In addition to this, the experience of deportation and incarceration in the New Caledonian penal colony understandably determined the psychological and political evolution of the thought and writings of ex-Communards. The texts and documents that I examined, whether written by the ex-Communard themselves or produced by governmental or other quasi-official sources, were essentially informed upon by these two varying contexts.

In preparation for the grant period, my readings focused primarily on the history of the Commune and the early Third Republic as well as on that of the French colonization of New Caledonia and the establishment during the Second Empire of a penal colony there. As I began to work on the proposed research project of the grant, I concentrated on the prison narratives produced by the deported ex-Communards as well as other texts that they wrote (fictional, autobiographical, and non-fictional) following the definitive return to France of these political prisoners in the 1880s and beyond. In addition to these primary texts, I also consulted a wide variety of ancillary and secondary texts and documents. For example, I spent a great deal of time looking through metropolitan newspapers and journals in the 1870s for discussions of the recent historical event of the Commune, the deportation, etc. As well, I also examined a number of texts written from the 1860s onwards that treated the theory and practice the New Caledonian penal colony. These diverse readings helped to contextualize in an extremely effective and necessary fashion the prison narratives at the center of this inquiry.

In the course of this research, I gained a far better insight into the process by which the deportation took place in the 1870s (from the specially established *Conseils de guerre*, to detention of future deportees in coastal forts, to ultimate their residency in New Caledonia. As well, I was able to comprehend the complexity of the New Caledonian penal colony and the political prisoners' place within it (for example, in the context of the three different sites of incarceration that it contained, each destined for different types of convicted prisoners and with different conventions, liberties, etc.).

Based on these readings, I found that the revolutionary rhetoric that dominated the Commune was frequently employed when describing the organization of the various sites of incarceration in New Caledonia, in an analogical way frequently evoking leftist conceptions and tropes of class organization and struggle in the depiction of the power structure of the penal colony. Interestingly, in the majority of these the Commune narratives, this leftist ideological perspective did not extend to the colonial context of New Caledonia and its indigenous population, the Kanaks. Many of these narratives perpetuate the clichés of racial and cultural difference that were commonplace in French colonial discourse since the 1830s. One reason for this seeming contraction might have to do with the fact that colonial administrators frequently used the Kanaks to hunt down and return to the penal colony escaped prisoners, thus creating an adversarial relationship between the prisoners and the indigenous population. The notable exception to this was Louise Michel, who learned the Kanak language, taught Kanak children, and ultimately published several works in the 1880s on Kanak folklore and culture. As well, Michel makes explicit an analogy between the struggles of the French working class in the nineteenth century French society and the Kanak people in the context of French colonialism, prescribing the same type of revolutionary solution for both groups. Finally, my research revealed interesting details regarding the flow of information (and misinformation) on the subject of the New Caledonian deportation in early Third Republic France. While government and other quasi-official sources frequently downplayed in the 1870s the dimension of hardship endured by these political prisoners, frequently depicting the penal colony in New Caledonia as a tropical paradise, the first narratives to appear in the second half of the 1870s (written by escapees Rochefort, Jourde, and Grousset and published outside of France) attempted to “correct” such narratives of obfuscation, but also add their own hyperbolic dimension of ideological fiction that equally diverges from the daily realities of penal colony life. In many respects, the informants on both sides of the issue provide a case study for how both official and oppositional narrators negotiate between ideological values and experiential reality in a contested period of political repression and censorship.

As with all scholarly projects, a number of previously unknown texts and new themes asserted themselves in the course of my research. As I contemplate the continuation and development of this project in the context of the sabbatical leave that I have received for the fall semester, several areas stand out as warranting additional inquiry, particularly since they have not yet been treated in existing scholarly commentary. First, I will be interested in examining the French-language newspapers that were published in London by ex-Communards in exile in the second half of the 1870s. Second, I would like to research more extensively the popular literature produced in the 1870s and 1880s, either published in book form or in shorter formats in journalistic sources, that treated the recent historical event of the Commune and the New Caledonian deportation of political prisoners. Finally, I would like to examine in greater detail the literary texts that ex-Commune deportees like Michel, Grousset, and Rochefort published in the final two decades of the nineteenth century which, while not literally representing their political exile in New Caledonia, might nonetheless reveal details about the evolution of their political thought given their prison experiences.

In addition to texts available to me through interlibrary loans and digital sources, the research for this project was supported by two week-long trips to Paris, France to

consult primary and secondary sources in June, 2010 and January, 2011 (the \$500 in expense money that accompanied my grant was applied to the airfare of the second trip). While in Paris, I spent a majority of my time in *Bibliothèque Nationale de France*, but I was also able to consult court documents of the specially established *Conseils de guerre* on the trials of some of the ex-Communards housed in the *Archives Nationales*.

I have already been able to begin disseminating the preliminary results of the this research project. To date, I have delivered two conference papers derived from this grant's research at two major professional meetings in my discipline: "Revolution in Paradise?" delivered at the Nineteenth-Century French Studies Colloquium and "Common Bonds: Political Prisoners and Kanaks in Nineteenth-Century New Caledonia" delivered at the annual meeting of the PAMLA. The first of these papers dealt with historical issues related to the deportation of ex-Communards in the 1870s and the work of the escaped prisoner Henri Rochefort (focusing primarily on his novel *L'Évadé* [1880] and his six-volume autobiography *Les Aventures de ma vie* [1896]). The second of these papers focused on how the major autobiographical narratives of this corpus (those by Rochefort, Brissac, Michel, ballière, Grousset, and Jourde) negotiate the issue of racial and cultural difference of the indigenous Kanaks in the colonial context of New Caledonia with the radical leftist political thought that emerged in the Paris Commune. The first of these papers is currently circulating as an article. Following the delivery of the second paper at the PAMLA conference, the organizer of the panel (a specialized one on nineteenth-century Western representations Pacific cultures and their populations) indicated to the participants that he was in contact with several publishers about the possibility of an essay collection on the topic of the panel. The other panel participants and I are currently awaiting the details of such a publication.