Introduction

In many ways, the erstwhile European colonial powers are still living in the postcolonial age, in spite of indications that a new era is coming into place. They remain profoundly marked by the lasting impact of their imperialist adventures, as do those whose lands were brought under imperial control, though to varying degrees and in different ways. Their economies and societies, their cultures and values, their relations with other countries, even their present demographic make-up, all bear the imprint of the colonial past.

However, while Britain, France, Spain, the Netherlands and Portugal share many of the main traits of their history and its legacy, there are also clear differences between them. France is not living through the postcolonial experience in exactly the same way as its neighbours. Similarly, its former colonies and protectorates bear the distinct marks of their specific experiences of French rule, influence and culture.

Whether one attributes the rise of the European empires to an almost absent-minded process of chance development, to a systemic and determined set of structural processes or to the triumph of the will, born out of a sense of mission, there are certainly pronounced differences with regard to the ideologies and discourses, through which the different powers rationalised their imperialist enterprises, as well as the systems of rule and administration they set in place. These differences are also reflected in the counter-discourses that developed to challenge the imperial hegemony of the various colonial empires. Moreover, these ideological differences have continued beyond the formal end of empire, assuming new forms appropriate to the changing global context.

It is the specificity of the French dimension of postcoloniality that forms the main object of this book, which in no way intends to provide a comprehensive history of all aspects of French imperialism. It will become clear, however, that this specificity cannot be equated with autonomy. In the first place, the French imperialist dynamic has been from the outset part and parcel of the global phenomenon of imperialism that has by now affected practically all areas of the planet. Furthermore, the interrelations and interactions have not been confined to the economic, political and military domain, but have also operated in the domain of culture and ideas. The imperial powers have never hesitated to borrow certain concepts or values from each other when it was opportune to do so. This is just as true in the case of the anti-imperialist struggles, where the common dimension to the struggle was often grasped through recourse to an internationalist perspective.

In the case of all the European imperial powers, there had developed, at more or less the same time, the same underlying processes that made these countries look beyond their own borders for wealth acquisition, trade and later territory. Similarly, the formal end of each empire did not occur in a vacuum, but was part of a global process of decolonisation and restructuring of power relations.

Nonetheless, the hegemonic discourse of French imperialism assumed specific distinctive forms, as did the counter-hegemonic discourses, which arose to challenge it. This specific distinctiveness has persisted into the contemporary period.

The early voyages of discovery and opportunities for enrichment through trade and plunder were intimately linked with the development of capitalism in Europe and provided the wealth and capital that were to serve as the engine of this development, transforming the economies of the countries concerned in an irreversible historical process. Thereafter, the development of mercantile and then industrial and finance capitalism was inextricably intertwined with the drive to gain control of the resources of as much of the rest of the globe as was feasible.

This was a process that was unlike any imperial endeavour humanity had seen before. As such, it bears only tenuous and superficial comparison to the earlier empires of antiquity, in spite of the spurious comparisons that have been made from time to time, especially with the Roman Empire, particularly in the triumphalist heyday of the British Empire. These were normally made with the aim of magnifying its grandeur, and stressing the benefits of civilisation, which, as in the case of the Romans, are always felt to outweigh the brutalities of conquest. Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, for instance, points to the extent to which the Pax Romana was a role model for the ideologues of British imperialism:

> A century ago, for imperialist Britain (and for other European states with imperial ambitions), the Roman Empire represented a success story. Rome's story of conquest, at least in Europe and around the Mediterranean, was imitated, but never matched, by leaders from Charlemagne to Napoleon. The dream that one could not only conquer, but in so doing create a Pax Romana, a vast area of peace, prosperity and unity of ideas, was a genuine inspiration. (Wallace-Hadrill 2001: 1)

This is not to say that this analogy was always applied uncritically. A famous instance of the use of the analogy between the two empires is found in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, where in the first few pages Marlow reflects on the Romans' empire in Britain. He concludes of the Romans that 'they were no colonists; their administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more, I suspect. They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force' (Conrad (1902)/2002: 7), unlike the modern-day imperialists, who were inspired by the 'idea' of the colonial mission and, first and foremost, the devotion to 'efficiency'. As P.J. Marshall has pointed out, the extent to which Britain ever had the means or the will to impose a Pax Britannica was in fact limited in practice (Marshall 1996: 33). Moreover, in the case of France, although references to antiquity had figured large at the time of the French Revolution and the

First (Napoleonic) Empire, French ideologues of later imperialist expansion were more likely to appropriate the garb of a modernising, Enlightenment-inspired project, rather than focusing on examples from the past empires of antiquity.

Such attempts, successful or otherwise, to conquer overseas territories in antiquity and the Middle Ages were of quite a different order from the modern imperialist endeavours, notwithstanding the lasting resonance of Alexander's conquests throughout Asia and his transcendence into myth in parts of India, or the lasting legacy of the crusades in the mindsets of both Europeans and Arabs. It has also become a feature of the 'postcolonial' period for some to cast a shroud of relativism over the imperialist past and relegate it to the dustbin of history, like a burnt-out firework, with no further capacity to impact on the contemporary world. Yet the processes that were set in train and were to become the first steps in the creation of an integrated global capitalist economy are very far from running out of steam, even if, as with steam-power, their original forms have been superseded by new and ever more powerful ones.

The use of the term 'postcolonial' to refer to the latest stage in this process requires some discussion here. It has become common currency to use this as a blanket term, incorporating widely different domains of discourse. On the one hand, it is used to characterise the contemporary historical phase in global economic and political relations. It is also used to characterise the diasporic forces that have led to the displacement of groups of people from the former colonies. In the theoretical domain, it has come to be associated with a particular body of critical theory, especially, although not exclusively, in the field of literary and cultural studies.

Moreover, if the term is considered appropriate for a very large number of different fields, it is, at the same time, notoriously ambiguous. This is the case even if we leave aside the loose use of the term as a synonym or substitute for its frequent partner, the 'postmodern'. The prefix 'post', itself, is given different semantic interpretations by those who care to make these distinctions. Thus, even when 'postcolonial' is interpreted in a strictly chronological sense, there are ambiguities. Does it mean only the period after decolonisation, or the whole period, beginning with the first instances of colonisation and possibly including its present ongoing effects?

This is perhaps symptomatic of a wider terminological difficulty, relating to the common confusion around the term 'colonial' itself and its derivatives. The term 'colonialism' has come to be preferred to that of 'imperialism', or even 'empire', to characterise the European empires. Indeed, this is particularly true of much, if not most, of French discourse, including that which has as its content an anti-imperialist critique.

One of the reasons for this can no doubt be traced back to the primary use of the term 'empire' to denote the various Napoleonic regimes in France itself. A reference to the 'Empire' more often than not relates to the First Empire of Napoleon Bonaparte and, secondarily, to the Second Empire of Louis Napoleon. This certainly provides a partial explanation for the favoured use of 'colonialism' or 'the colonial empire' to make clear the distinction between these two supposedly different entities, though it is clear that there are interrelations and overlap between the two that have often been ignored or insufficiently developed.

Yet the substitution of colonialism for imperialism does raise considerable difficulties, for colonialism is not synonymous with imperialism. It relates rather to a specific territorial stage of the latter phenomenon, when the earlier trading and looting stage had given way to the conquest, acquisition and/or control of land and political power in the colonies, with or without settler colonisation. This stage is now largely superseded, as a result of decolonisation, although significant vestiges remain, both in terms of a number of colonies still directly controlled by a colonial power, as in the case of the French DOM-TOM (overseas *départements* or territories), or in the ongoing, permanent settler presence in former colonies of settlement, in North and South America, Southern Africa and Australasia.

Imperialism began its development with the emergence of capitalism in Europe. The booty derived from trade, plunder and enslavement provided the capital for industrialisation at home. The export of labour to the new colonial territories, most notably through the forcible transportation of enslaved Africans, but also of bonded and convict labour from Europe itself and parts of Asia, enabled the establishment of plantation economies, in which the capitalist mode of production found its most brutal mode of expression. The subsequent export of capital overseas carried further the export of capitalism as an economic system. The momentum of imperialism is provided by the intrinsic expansionist economic forces driving capitalism forwards into a globalising system, operating at many different and unequal stages of development throughout the territories that have come under its sway.

Thus, although there are clear distinctions to be made between the different stages of diachronic development, as well as different synchronic variations in the operation of this process worldwide, capitalism and imperialism cannot be distinguished as two separate processes that just happen to occur simultaneously. They are integral to each other, as part of the same process, primarily a process of the economy, although developing also its characteristic political and military aspects, with their own particular institutions and ideologies, which then often acquired a semi-autonomous life, sometimes even in contradiction with the short-, medium- or long-term requirements of the development of the economy.

Thus, colonialism was only a particular stage in the overall development of the global capitalist imperialist economy, which since decolonisation has gone on from strength to strength. The end of European colonialism did not signal the end of capitalist imperialism, nor did it necessarily signify the end of the form of colonialism per se, which could reassert itself as and when required. Not only did the former colonial powers continue to keep up the momentum of the development of capitalist imperialism, without having to maintain the expensive baggage of a colonial state administrative and military apparatus – a process that was inadequately theorised in the immediate aftermath of decolonisation as 'neocolonialism' (Nkrumah 1965). Other powers, which had a record untarnished by colonial blight or which were even able to cloak themselves in the mantle of anticolonialism, such as the USA, were able to join in the process and take it forward to a new stage. The growing economic presence of China in contemporary Africa and elsewhere is also instructive in this respect.

However, it is not just the nature of the whole historical process of capitalist imperialism that is distorted through the isolation of this one part of it, European colonialism, and the substitution of this part for the whole. The privileging of the notion of colonialism also has the effect of exempting or exonerating key players in the capitalist imperialist process, as well as limiting its spatial effects, for colonialism deals only with the relations of power between the European metropolis and the colonised territories in Africa, America, Asia and Australasia. To characterise these relations, the favoured image is that of the wheel, with the metropolitan hub or centre from which radiate the spokes connecting it to the periphery. The lines are simple, direct; it is a simple bilateral process, in which direction comes from the centre and tribute returns from the periphery. As such, however, it is totally inadequate as a representation of the complex, multidimensional set of relations that come into play as a result of the tentacular spread of capitalist imperialism and its unequal levels of development, involving a multiplicity of sub-forms. Even in its direct colonial form, the process brings into being a number of mediating factors at different levels; local participants are engaged at various points in the process and are thus tied into the system, which works not just for the interests of the colonising power, but for all sorts of different median interests too.

It is obviously too simplistic to assume that the casting off of the metropolitan colonial yoke would in itself suffice to break the inexorable progress of capitalist imperialism. A clear case in point is the American colonial experience, where internal colonialism and genocide persisted, indeed intensified, after the end of the British dominion, not to mention the external expansion of American power at a later stage, without the overt trappings of colonialism to begin with, though this was to come later.

For all these reasons, I have chosen to use the global expression of capitalist imperialism to describe the ongoing phenomenon with which we are dealing here. This is a process that arose at a specific moment in history, with particular economic, political, military and cultural characteristics, and was clearly linked with the development of knowledge, science, technology and finance, as well as with new ways of organising the economy along capitalist lines. Accompanying this process was the associated development of new ways of perceiving and representing the world and relations between its peoples, along with new discourses for their articulation. All of these aspects would change in an ongoing process of development, transforming themselves to meet new challenges, to solve new problems, to exploit new opportunities. And just as knowledge, science and technology adapted, refined and developed new theoretical and practical knowledge, so too would the cultural and ideological representations be transformed over the course of these developments. In the latter case, however, as we shall see, some of these forms were to prove strikingly resilient. Having come into being in particular historical circumstances, they acquired a life of their own and have tended to remain on the shelf, even if in a state of ossification, alongside more modern versions.

It is the survival and the transformation of these old ideological and cultural forms, as well as the development of new forms of discourse in what has come to be known as the 'postcolonial' world that form the major object of this study. As such,

we shall be looking at ways in which those discourses have retained their power under new conditions, as well as the ways in which they have had to adapt to retain their appeal and capacity to act as vehicles for interpreting the world. Integral to this will be an examination of the counter-discourses that come into being to articulate challenges to the dominant discourse and also contribute to the process of forcing it to adapt. Neither can be considered in a vacuum, but they work upon each other in a process of mutual interrelation, as is the case with the other processes at stake in the domains of the economy, politics and so on.

At this stage, it is perhaps opportune to stress that this discussion is mainly concerned with those discourses that are intimately connected with the question of power, even if the connection sometimes appears to be indirect. In other words, what is ultimately at stake is the issue of discourse as ideology, rather than discourse per se. Secondly, it is taken as axiomatic that ideological discourse cannot be separated from economic and political relations, which will inevitably impinge during the course of the argument, but cannot be fully treated in the space of this text.

However, this book is not simply concerned with discourse/ideology as such, although, as it will emerge, discourse has a very special role to play in the sphere of French 'postcoloniality'. The question of theory is very much at the heart of the matter, with all the problems the definition of theory and its differentiation from ideology entail. The problem of truth, or the objectivity of knowledge, cannot be ducked, however. It is crucial to an understanding of the world and to our ability to change it. It is best therefore to face this issue head-on at the outset and set out the assumptions that will be operative.

The first assumption is that there is such a thing as history. The world as it affects human beings is not changeless, or an endless repetition, without any intrinsic meaning. On the contrary, historical processes derive their meaning from, and for, human beings.

Moreover, historical reality at any given time is the totality of the processes, relations, institutions and ideas that operate in the economic, social, political, cultural, ideological and theoretical domains. These different domains exist in complex interactions, in which each domain may assume a greater relative importance in any particular historical conjuncture. However, the economic processes in which human beings engage in the production of the basic material necessities of life and their development in the course of history, together with the economic relations that govern their organisation, remain of prime importance as a factor in the development of the other historical processes.

The final set of assumptions concerns the nature and role of ideas in the historical process. Ideas, representations and meanings are seen as developing, not in a vacuum, but in an intimate relation with material processes, albeit with a life and a variable systemic logic of their own. It is taken as a basic premise that knowledge is possible, if never absolute. Following on from this, it is considered that ideas, articulated through discourses, have different levels of validity and that there are criteria against which this validity can be measured.

It will be clear that these premises are at variance with much of what comes under the blanket headings of poststructuralist, postmodernist and postcolonialist

thought. The intention here is not to engage in a systematic critique of these bodies of discourse, but to deal with particular issues as they arise.

There will be two areas of particular focus. The first concerns the particular status of counter-discourses that arise to challenge dominant forms of hegemonic discourse and ideology. The second involves the question of the validity of ideas, representations and meanings, whether they explicitly aspire to the status of theory or not, and how this validity is to be judged.

At the end of the day, it is assumed that while there is no absolute truth or knowledge, fixed for all time, there are nonetheless distinctions to be made between theories that satisfy certain criteria of validity better than others. The choice of criteria is, of course, ultimately a matter of personal choice. The choices that are made will nonetheless clearly be influenced to a very large extent by objective factors related to one's particular position in a particular society at a particular time and subjective factors, in which political choices play an important role. These choices involve identification or non-identification with particular social groups, genders, generations and classes, as well as a conscious or passive inclination to accept the status quo or to work towards change, partial or global.

Underlying all of what follows are two basic criteria: first, objectivity and, secondly, critique. Neither of these criteria is considered to be value-free, but they are based on certain assumptions of value. In the first case, objectivity is grounded in the value of knowledge itself, implicit in working towards an ever-closer understanding of the real world in all its aspects. Objectivity is thus understood not just in terms of the rationality of a scientific proof, but also in terms of real practical knowledge, which can be tested through its effects. The second criterion relates to the critical value of ideas, or, in other words, their capacity to challenge assumptions and assist in the process of social change.

Further problematic issues will be dealt with as they arise. The remainder of this introduction will explore further the impact of the development of global capitalist imperialism in the specific domains of land, space and time and the way in which notions and conceptions were reconfigured and transformed through this historical process.

The Land Issue

Within the time frame of the inception and expansion of the process of global dissemination of the capitalist mode of production, or imperialism, to use the shorthand expression, the actual occupation of overseas territory by the imperial powers could be considered to represent no more than a stage in the process, albeit a significant one, except in the cases of settler colonies, such as Algeria, Kenya, South Africa, Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, in Africa, most of North and South America and Australasia, where the settlement became permanent. In the first stages of imperialism, the acquisition of wealth through trade and plunder was seen as the prime goal and reward of the voyages of trade and expansion. It went hand in hand with the battle for the control of the seas, essential to the continuation of the freedom to venture to new parts of the globe to extract new sources of riches.

The takeover of land, with or without colonial settlement, eventually took place for a number of reasons. In some cases, it was necessary to secure trading and other economic interests, to ensure that these activities could proceed without hindrance. In the case of colonial settlement, a combination of problems at home – including the break-up of feudalism, resulting in the loss of livelihood and access to land, as well as religious and political persecution – and the apparent opportunities to make a living from the cultivation of the land made emigration to the colonies an attractive proposition for some. For others, it did not represent a choice: taken into slavery or other forms of bondage, transported as criminals or as political detainees, these unwilling transportees were to form the labour force needed for large-scale plantation agriculture, organised along capitalist lines.

In Algeria, opportunities for settlement were seized as part of a number of forays into social engineering and social experimentation. Followers of Saint-Simon and Prosper Enfantin saw the possibilities it offered to put their ideas for economic and social progress into action (Spillmann 1981; Adamson 2002). The French government also saw the potential. In the early years following the conquest, orphans were shipped out from Toulon to provide wives for the new settlers, made up of army veterans, in the so-called 'military colonies' (Girardet 1993). After the loss of Alsace-Lorraine, their populations were encouraged to settle in Algeria to escape German control. Other colonists made their own way from many different European countries. In 1840, there were 28,000 Europeans in Algeria. By 1848, this figure had increased to 110,000. In 1846 alone, 46,000 had arrived (Girardet 1993).

Control of the land became necessary at a certain stage of development of imperialism, as part of its general logic of forcing through the transformation of the economic mode of production and globalising the spread of capitalism. In specific terms, it allowed for the development of large-scale capitalist agriculture and primary commodity production to take place unfettered by the restraints of feudalism and, subsequently, permitted the conditions to be created for the introduction of industrial capitalism with the export of capital.

Yet control of the soil itself at the microeconomic level was not the prime purpose in the non-settler colonies. The striking depiction of the slicing up of the globe and the colouring in of vast tracts of the surface of the earth on maps and in drawings represent to a far greater extent the push for control at the level of macroeconomics and politics.

In the colonies of settlement, on the other hand, the appropriation of land by the colonists was direct and often brutal, though cloaked in ideological rationalisations of one kind and another. As Jomo Kenyatta summed up the process: 'When the white man came to Africa, he had the Bible and we had the land. And now? We have the Bible and he has the land' (quoted in Mazrui 1990: 6).

In Algeria, over the period of French control, the major part of the land passed into state or private settler ownership, dispossessing the Algerian population. The fictional character of Mahmoud, in Kateb Yacine's *Nedjma*, illustrates this process well. His ancestors' land has been whittled down to a mere two hectares, as though with each new generation the ground just melted away: 'Mahmoud may well be

seventy or eighty years old – his age doesn't really matter. He has lost too many of his children. He has managed to save these two hectares of land beyond the clearing, whereas his forefathers owned sixty hectares. It seems as though the land of his fathers melts beneath the feet of the newborn generation' (Kateb Yacine (1956)/1981: 196).

As Sartre pointed out, the appropriation of Algerian land was the clearest case of theft in the history of French colonialism. This expropriation was rationalised in a number of ways. Following the practice in other colonies, military campaigns could serve as a cover for the occupation of uncultivated land, in the guise of operational requirements for pacification purposes. Indeed, Bugeaud, during his time as governor from 1840 to 1847, envisaged settlement of the land by former soldiers who had finished their term of service, to produce *colonies militaires* (Girardet 1993), although these were not ultimately successful.

In addition to this military rationale, an often-heard argument employed in the discourse making the case for settler control of the colonised land was that of the *mise en valeur*, or the value added to the soil by the input of the settler's labour and technical expertise, in order to achieve its full potential in terms of production and profit. The logic behind the *mise en valeur* notion was that this could only be achieved with the injection of European expertise. However, it was not in fact the uncultivated or underused land that was of interest to those seeking to transform Algeria into a settler colony; rather it was the fertile land, all of which was already under cultivation at the time of the Algerian conquest, making Algeria largely self-sufficient in food. Moreover, much of the land taken into state control was promptly taken over by speculators, who proceeded to sell it at a large profit straight away, without any input or improvement to the soil (Girardet 1993). Although the argument of the *mise en valeur* was characteristic of the attempt to justify the continuation of the rights of settler ownership in the case of Algeria, it was not of course specific to French colonial discourse, but was very typical of other settler discourses, for instance in the context of the colonies of southern Africa.

In fact, the concentration of land in the hands of the European settlers could only be achieved at the expense of the Algerians who had previously farmed it. All methods were deemed acceptable to further this objective (Sartre 1956: 1374–75). According to figures given by Sartre, the Algerians lost two-thirds of their land within a century (Sartre 1956: 1376). In 1850, twenty years after the conquest, 115,000 hectares were held by colonial settlers. This figure had increased to 1,000,600 in 1900 and 2,703,000 hectares in 1950.[1] In addition, the French state held eleven million hectares in its own right, compared with seven million hectares left to the Algerians.

Much of this land had been confiscated from Muslim religious bodies in the early stages of colonisation (Girardet 1993). The policy of *cantonnement* of nomadic tribes resulted in the further appropriation of tribal common land, which had previously been used for passage or pasture (Girardet 1993). The confiscation of land as part of the punishment for resistance and rebellion was also a familiar method. Following the Kabyle Revolt of 1871, 446,000 hectares were appropriated in reprisals, along with a fine of eleven million francs (Girardet 1993).

In the non-settler colonies, ownership of land in itself was not the key issue, although the transformation of the legal framework for ownership of land appears to have been crucial. Capitalism institutionalised private property in land and imposed a variety of legal frameworks on the different colonies to eliminate previous collectivised ownership of land, organised either through a notional central power or in smaller operational units. Thus, the process of transforming land into a market commodity, making it the object of buying and selling, and removing the labourers from the land, sometimes forcibly, broke organic/ancestral links, permanently transforming the relationship to the land.

This was a common feature of colonial occupation in the case of the various colonial powers, even though the methods and the rationalisations of the practices might have differed significantly. In India, for example, in the northern and eastern regions of Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, UP and so on, the British, for instance, through Cornwallis's 1793 Act on Permanent Zemindari, created an intermediary class of landowners, with the function of collecting taxes from the peasantry, from whom their interests naturally became divorced. The *ryotwari* system, introduced early in the nineteenth century in the Madras and Bombay presidencies, made the peasantry into proprietary holders of government land, with the obligation of paying a rent-tax fixed at such a high level that non-payment and consequent loss of the land often ensued (Marx, 'The Future Results of the British Rule in India' (1853), in Marx and Engels (1959)/1975: 30). These transformations of the traditional landholding structures were brought about, not least, to enable the effective taxation of the peasantry, in a system in which a sizeable proportion of the revenue derived from the land tax. For instance, H. Palmer quoted a figure of £20 million in land tax revenue, out of a total of £64 million collected by provincial governments in India in 1937 (Palmer 1942).

The need to increase revenue, in the face of the British East India Company's financial difficulties, had also been the prime motive for the direct annexation of land, as set out in a minute in council in 1848, in which, according to Marx commenting on Disraeli's speech to Parliament of 27 July 1857 in an article published in the *New York Daily Tribune*, 'was laid down the principle, almost without disguise, that the only mode by which an increased revenue could be obtained was by enlarging the British territories at the expense of the native princes' (Marx, 'The Indian Question' in Marx and Engels (1959)/1975: 46). This was achieved through the setting aside of the principle of adoption, in the absence of natural heirs, giving the Company and later the state the right of annexation of property in such cases, as well as by the calling into question of title and the right to exemption from land tax. None other than Disraeli himself was to call this practice into question, no doubt in defence of the sacred rights of private and especially landed property, making it clear that revenue was the prime consideration for the government 'to disturb the settlement of property', in a country where the land tax was 'the whole taxation of the state' (quoted in Marx and Engels (1959)/1975: 47). After the retaking of Lucknow in 1858, there was a wholesale confiscation of the lands of Oudh by the British government, by way of reprisals for involvement in the

uprising, variously known as the Indian Mutiny or the First Indian War of Independence (Marx and Engels (1959)/1975: 132–43).

The discourse that articulated this process from the point of view of the coloniser, as well as the feelings of dispossession on the part of the colonised or enslaved that resulted from it, had little to do with the actual irreversible nature of the changes effected, which affected not just actual ownership and ownership rights, but the qualitative use to which the land was put, as Edward Said has pointed out (Said 1993: 271–73). The capitalisation of land was the essential basis for the transformation of the whole economy along capitalist lines. However, the discourse used to justify it emphasised due legal process; the rule of law and administrative rationality were portrayed as major contributions to progress.

While this was a common theme in the discourses of the imperial powers, there were nonetheless significant differences in the forms that these discourses assumed. In Algeria, although much of the land was acquired through the unsubtle method of confiscation as a punishment for resistance activity, the principle of equality was also brought into service. This was done through the aberrant use of the inheritance provisions set down in the Napoleonic *code civil*, enshrining the principle of equal inheritance of family property.

This code ensured the fragmentation of the traditionally collective tribal property and thus its gradual purchase by speculators. In 1873, commissioners were given the task of transforming large tracts of undivided property into a jigsaw of individual lots, at the time of inheritance, some of which bore little relation to reality. In the *douar* of Harrar, the commissioner in charge discovered fifty-five joint owners of a total amount of eight hectares of land. It only needed one of these to be 'persuaded' to ask for redistribution for the complexities of the ensuing procedure to bring the whole lot on to the market, where it could be snapped up for next to nothing by European speculators. Thus, the introduction of the code civil had the effect of deliberately destroying the landownership system and consequently much of the social structure in Algeria, but it was nonetheless presented as one of the benefits of French civilisation (Sartre 1956: 1375).

Ownership and control of the land were not just about inheritance and property rights. There was a whole important ideological dimension to the way in which the relationship to the land was perceived. Issues concerning the relationship to the land were also articulated through various types of narrative discourses and, in particular, the modern novel, of which Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* is a prime example. As Edward Said has put it: 'The main battle in imperialism is over land, of course; but when it came to who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, who won it back, and who now plans its future – these issues were reflected, contested, and even for a time decided in narrative' (Said 1993: xiii).

To what extent these matters of control over the land were ever actually decided in narratives, even when these were constituted as the political ideologies of nationhood, is certainly open to question. Yet there is no denying the importance of historical, fictional and other narratives in mapping, in the cultural consciousness, the differential positions of territorial entities in a hierarchy of controlled spaces that existed for the benefit of the metropolitan homeland:

the *geographical* notation, the theoretical mapping and charting of territory that underlies Western fiction, historical writing, and philosophical discourse of the time. There is first the authority of the European observer – traveller, merchant, scholar, historian, novelist. Then there is the hierarchy of spaces by which the metropolitan centre and, gradually, the metropolitan economy are seen as dependent upon an overseas system of territorial control, economic exploitation, and a socio-cultural vision; without these stability and prosperity at home – 'home' being a word with extremely potent resonances – would not be possible. (Said 1993: 69)

Said has eloquently described the different social spaces of imperialism as they are articulated through the colonial literature of writers such as Kipling, Conrad, Haggard, Loti, Gide, Malraux and Camus, though, surprisingly, he leaves Hugo out of the frame. He has also described what he calls 'the actual geographical underpinnings' of the imperial relation, concluding that 'the actual geographical possession of land is what empire in the final analysis is all about' (Said 1993: 93). Indeed, for him, the geographical element is primary; he considers imperialism as 'an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control' (Said 1993: 271): 'At the moment when a coincidence occurs between real control and power, the idea of what a given place was (could be, might become), and an actual place – at that moment the struggle for empire is launched. This coincidence is the logic both for Westerners taking possession of land and, during decolonization, for resisting natives reclaiming it' (Said 1993: 93).

It is no surprise that the anticolonial struggles seized on the land issue as a primary concern. The recovery of the land of the nation was to be a key objective, whether this was expressed through the struggle to drive the coloniser from the territory or through movements to return to the land of exile. The reality, however, was that the relationship to the land had been permanently altered and there was to be no going back. In the final analysis, imperialism was not primarily about land, but about a global economic dynamic, which is still evolving in the present day.

The Reconfiguration of Global Geographical Space

In the same way as the expansion of global capitalism had brought in its train a characteristic view of world history, in which Europe dominated as the motor of human history, there had also been an effect on the way in which the geographical space in which imperialist relations were set was reconfigured. The world had been recentred with its focus now situated in Western Europe. In a quite literal way, the centre of the post-imperial world was shifted to Greenwich, where it was fixed and marked by the meridian dividing the east from the west.

In one sense, this was in line with previous civilisations, which had perceived their own sites to be at the hub of the universe, or at least that part which was known to them. For the ancient Greeks, it was at Delphi, marked by the omphalos, or navel

stone, to record the spot where the two eagles released by Zeus to find the centre of the world were reputed to have met with their beaks touching. In Roman times, all parts of the known world were conceived in relation to Rome, their distances marked on a pillar near the Arch of Severus, described as the navel of the world. Cuzco, the last capital of the Incas, has also been described as the navel of the world, as, indeed, have Easter Island and other places, including Iraq.[2] The thirteenth-century *mappa mundi* places Jerusalem at the centre of the world of Christendom and the very name of the Mediterranean Sea evokes the belief of those living on its shores that they were indeed at the centre of the earth.

Similarly, attempts to trace lines of reference across the world's surface to assist navigation go back to the world of antiquity. Eratosthenes, based in Alexandria, is credited with having made a surprisingly accurate measurement of the earth's circumference in approximately 240 BCE. In time, many countries drew up a line in reference to which they were able to pinpoint locations and prepare maps of their countries, such as those known as the Rome or the Washington meridians. The meridians mapped by France and Britain were, however, of another order. Both countries had aspirations for the universal status of their meridians and both were subsequently to engage in a battle to establish which of these meridians was to be the 'prime' meridian, not just for their own countries, but for the entire globe. This mapping of the globe in a uniform fashion marked a significant new departure and was closely connected to the development of universal systems governing both time and space. It was, of course, not just a matter that concerned national pride. The increasingly national and international dimensions of both the French and the British economies made it an eminently practical concern.

It was the French astronomer Abbé Jean Picard (1620–82) who had first measured the length of a degree of longitude, using this to develop work on the measurement of the Earth. Building on this work, the Paris Observatory, constructed in 1667 by the architect Claude Perrault, acting for Colbert, was sited so that the Paris meridian ran exactly through the centre of the site.[3] The building was designed in such a way that each of its four sides faces directly north, south, east and west. The latitude upon which the south façade was set (48°50'11") marks the official latitude of Paris. The building can thus be said to mark the precise location of the centre of Paris.

However, the impetus for determining the precise location and measurement of the Paris meridian, from pole to pole, was provided by the quest for a more rational system of measurement, inspired by the French Revolution, which, in this area, as in others dominated by the vagaries of traditional ways of perceiving and doing things, wished to make a clean sweep. It was thus that the process to introduce the decimal metric system was initiated (Decree of 1 August 1793). It was intended as a universally applicable system, providing uniform, standard weights and measures, designed in accordance with more rational criteria than the mishmash of different units used under the *Ancien Régime*. In the Decree of 18 Germinal Year III – 7 April 1795 – (Article V), it was explicitly stated that the new units of measurement, e.g. metre, litre, franc, were to be described as 'Republican'. At the same time, it was hoped that other countries would be persuaded to join in and adopt the new

measures, which could serve as a universal system. The Provisional Agency for Weights and Measures made this clear, in an *'Adresse aux artistes'*, published on 11 Floréal, Year III, when it spoke of the uniformity, as a demand of the people 'in all times and in all places'.[4] In 1790, envoys had been sent to Spain, Britain and America to argue the merits of the system, and Thomas Jefferson showed interest in the new scheme (*Quid* 2000).

In keeping with the favoured decimal system, the metre was defined as one ten-millionth of the distance from the North Pole to the Equator.[5] So, in order to be able to determine and produce the standard metre, it was necessary to calculate the accurate measurement of the length of the Paris meridian. Surveys were undertaken from 1792 to 1799 by two astronomers, Jean-Baptiste Delambre and Pierre Méchain, whose adventures are documented in Denis Guedj's *La Méridienne* and *Le Mètre du monde* (Guedj 1987, 2000),[6] and then from 1806 to 1808, during the Napoleonic era, by the astronomer and politician François Arago, who was later to play a role in the abolition of slavery, and fellow scientist Jean-Baptiste Biot. The line extended across France, from Dunkirk in the north to Prats de Mollo in the south, just west of Perpignan, before crossing into Spain, via Barcelona, and across the Mediterranean via the Ballearics, into Africa, where it bisected Algeria into two roughly equal halves. The Paris meridian ran along a line that was 2°20'14" east of Greenwich, where the Royal Observatory had been created by Charles II in 1675, a few years after the Paris Observatory, and where the prime meridian was ultimately to be established.[7]

However, until the end of the nineteenth century, each country continued to choose for itself the system it would use for determining the zero reference point for longitude. Thus France used the Paris meridian for both maritime navigational purposes and land-based map making. Portugal used the Lisbon meridian. Some countries used different reference systems for land and sea, such as the United States, which adopted Greenwich for its sea charts and Washington for its land maps.

The need for a common standard at sea was pushed strongly at the first International Geographical Congress in Antwerp in 1871. However, there was no agreement. France was not prepared to give up without a fight its aspirations to have the Paris meridian recognised as the prime meridian, especially given its pioneering work in this field. If this could not be achieved, it hoped to persuade Britain to adopt the metric system as a quid pro quo for recognition of Greenwich. The bargaining continued until 1884, when, at the International Meridian Conference held in Washington, the Greenwich meridian was chosen as the compulsory reference for zero degree longitude, with only Brazil and San Domingo backing Paris's claim (San Domingo voted against, France and Brazil abstained).

The implications of a move to a universal standard were not limited to navigational questions and space; it also involved the growing need for the adoption of universal standards in time. Previously, there had been no agreement on how time should be measured. The de facto reference to the sun's position in the sky meant that there were great local and seasonal variations, both internationally and within individual nations, affecting such matters as the length of an hour and the length of

the day and night. In Britain, the standardisation of time nationally in the 1840s was directly related to the development of the railways and the need to be able to draw up a consistent timetable across the nation. This need was not restricted to Britain. The development of an increasingly internationalised economy, involving transnational transport and communications, made a universal time system essential, based on the recognition of a prime meridian at zero longitude. The Greenwich meridian was the favourite, since it was already used as the basis for the bulk of the navigational sea charts, used in maritime commerce, and also because the US railway system had already anticipated the agreement by opting for Greenwich as the basis of its own time-zone system in 1883, although the USA was not officially to bring in standard time until 1918.[8]

However, although Greenwich Mean Time was adopted as the universal basis for the world's time-zone system in Washington in 1884, the Paris meridian was not abandoned by France until 1911 for timekeeping and 1914 for navigational purposes. Even after 1911, this standard time was referred to as 'Paris Mean Time minus 9 minutes 21 seconds', rather than Greenwich Mean Time. The Paris meridian was also not abandoned altogether. French land maps, for instance, continue to use the Paris meridian as their reference point.

In fact, the pill was sugared by the establishment of the International Time Bureau (Bureau International de l'Heure – BIH) in Paris in 1912, which had the task of determining Universal Time in the basement of the Paris Observatory. With the replacement of Universal Time in the 1980s by Universal Coordinated Time, now more accurately determined by atomic clocks, it is now the International Bureau of Weights and Measures (Bureau International des Poids et Mesures) in Sèvres that establishes what this should be. Indeed, France remains today the overseer of the measuring systems, based on the international metric system of weights and measures, which has been widely adopted throughout the world, partly as a legacy of the Napoleonic influence throughout Europe as a result of conquest, but also because of its inherent rational practicality.

It had less success with the decimal time proposal, also thrown up by the Revolution. This was part of the move to introduce a new Revolutionary calendar to mark the beginning of a new era for the French people, *l'ère républicaine*. A decree of the Convention, dated 5 October 1793 (old-style), marks the establishment of this new era thus: 'L'ère des Français compte de la fondation de la république, qui a eu lieu le 22 septembre 1792 de l'ère vulgaire' (Article I).[9]

The institution of the Revolutionary calendar was a political move and had more to do with establishing a new Republican tradition, rather than a strictly rational approach. The decree stated that, since it had taken four years from the beginning of the Revolution to establish Republican government in France, each four-year period was henceforth to be known as a *Franciade*, the end of which was to be marked by a special *jour de la Révolution* (Article X), which would be celebrated with 'Republican games' (Article XVI). While the Revolutionary calendar based the new year on the solar cycle, divided into twelve months of thirty days each, with five extra days to complete the year, called 'jours complémentaires', there was an attempt to introduce

an element of decimalisation, through the division of each month into three ten-day 'décades', which had previously been used in ancient times in Egypt. There was also a clause (Article XI) that aimed to standardise the measurement of time in decimal style, with the division of each day into ten hours, in their turn divided into ten and so on down to the lowest measurable unit, although this measure was not intended for immediate implementation.[10] This was subsequently revised, in a later decree of 4 Frimaire, Year II of the Republic, to ten hours, divided into 100 decimal minutes, divided into 100 decimal seconds.[11]

The proposed decimalisation of time not only attempted to do away with local variations in the calculation of the time of day, which had hitherto been mainly based on the observation of the noonday sun, the 'meridian' in its other sense; it also attempted to standardise the length of a single hour, which previously had been variable depending on the solar cycle and the seasons. The standardisation of the length of the hour was not in fact properly put into practice in France until the approval of Paris Mean Time in 1816.[12] It was not until 1891 that Paris Mean Time applied to the whole of France, before being replaced by Universal Time in 1911.

Interest in the Paris meridian has been revived in recent years. Since 1995, the line of the meridian across Paris has been marked by 135 bronze plaques set in the ground along its route, created by the Dutch artist Jean Dibbets and known as the Arago markers. The rivalry between France and Britain was also reignited at the time of the second millennium celebrations, when the significance of Greenwich, as the zero point of the new millennium, was highlighted, especially with the creation of the Millennium Dome. Paris responded with plans to revitalise the Paris meridian by planting trees along its route in order to create a permanent rambling path and then organising a gigantic, fraternal picnic, with the table, decked with a bistro check tablecloth, stretching 700km from north to south, on 14 July 2000 (*Guardian*, 28 June 1999).

Interestingly, for something that had its origins in the development of modern science and the need for more accurate mapping of both France and the wider world, the celebrations surrounding the millennium in France based on the meridian, have aroused a whole new interest in the occult, based on the symbolism of this so-called 'Red Line', also known as the 'Axis Mundi'. Much has been made of the links to Christianity: the Paris Observatory was situated on the land of the Abbey of Port-Royal; a black Virgin was placed in the underground Oratory of the Observatory; the meridian passes through the Church of Saint Sulpice. The links to astrology and the occult have also been stressed. Claude Perrault, the Observatory's architect, was, with his brother Charles Perrault, author of fairy tales, credited with membership of a secret society; the basement was linked to the catacombs, supposedly used for various occult activities. At its southern end, the meridian is also associated with various myths, linking Mary Magdalene, the Holy Grail, the Cathars, the Templars, the Prieuré de Sion and the lost Merovingian dynasty, as well as to the mystery surrounding events at Rennes-le-Château and the artistic and literary output of figures such as Nicolas Poussin and Jules Verne. All of this has been given a new lease of life by the amazing popularity of Dan Brown's novel, *The Da Vinci Code* (Brown

2003). Moreover, linked to this esoteric hotchpotch of fact and, mainly, fiction are various scientific theories, including that of geophysicist Alphonse Berger, who in 1912 pinpointed the centre of the continental surface of the planet on the Ile Dumet, off the Breton coast, leading to claims that this was indeed the 'navel' of the world and the lost Atlantis.

Whatever the merits of these different, more or less far-fetched theories, the fact remains that the development of global capitalism was accompanied by a significant reconfiguration of global space in a number of ways. The European colonial powers were placed firmly at the centre of the globe, as far as the peoples of their respective empires were concerned. Relations were henceforth concentrated along the single dominant axis tying the periphery to the centre (Amin 1989: 8–9). The only relation that now mattered was the one that tied the dominated colonised peoples to the dominant metropolitan power. Just as previous strengths in the colonised lands were no longer acknowledged, so too were blotted out of the memory external links that had previously existed in the form of trading relations, cultural exchanges and political alliances. The real cooperation, collaboration and partnerships of the past were written out of history, as in the case of the obscuring of trading and other links that existed between the Mediterranean countries and the East.[13] The achievements of indigenous peoples, their cultures and rights to the land were most often ignored or denied, as was, in some cases, the very existence of the indigenous peoples.

France's position at the centre was crystallised even more intensely in the dominant role allotted to its capital. The figure of Paris as a beacon, radiating light to the far-flung ends of the earth, was reinforced with the building of the Eiffel Tower, which, along with the Paris meridian, was the focus of the millennium celebrations. Yet again, the enduring strength of this figure, of the centre towering over its periphery, was demonstrated, as the symbol of the relationship that France still entertained with its colonies and former colonies elsewhere in the world.

There is another figure that was used to characterise the very particular character of the spatial relations operating between France and its key North African colony, Algeria, and the challenge to them through the anticolonial struggle. As far as the delineation of space is concerned, it is notable that the relationship between France and Algeria was defined both in terms of the clear binary divide characteristic of imperial relations, and through the denial of this differentiation. Algeria was not just a French territory, like other colonies. It had actually been incorporated into the territory of metropolitan France itself in 1881, thus reducing the Mediterranean Sea to nothing more than an internal waterway in the ideological discourse of supporters of *Algérie française*, who claimed that 'the Mediterranean flowed through France, just like the Seine flowed through Paris'. The division of Paris into left and right banks was thus paralleled by the division of France into the two banks or shores of the Mediterranean – the north bank and the south bank.

The incorporation of Algerian territory into metropolitan France was, in fact, the clearest concrete instance of assimilation in the history of French imperialism, which, as we shall see, whilst it was held out as an ever-receding goal for the colonised people themselves, in reality was only ever applied to territory. As Nicolas Bancel and

Pascal Blanchard have pointed out, 'assimilation applied to land, not to people' (Bancel and Blanchard 1997: 18).

The articulation of the spatial relation between France and Algeria contributes not a little to the specificity of Algeria amongst the French colonies, where the only parallel that comes anywhere close in British terms is the relation with Ireland, not only through its incorporation into the territorial realm of the United Kingdom, but also through the importance of the ownership of the land by the colonising power via extensive English landlordism. When Said criticised Conor Cruise O'Brien for his notion of Camus as someone who 'belonged to the frontier of Europe' (Said 1993: 209), he was right, given that there was, in reality, a clear divide between the colonised land of Algeria and the land of the colonising power. Nonetheless, in terms of what remained the dominant French discourse in Camus's time, the land of Algeria was perceived in a very real way as the frontier, the outpost of Europe on the southern shores of the Mediterranean.

Notes

1. Girardet also gives figures pointing to an increase of approximately one million hectares between 1871 and 1898 (Girardet 1993).
2. See the exhibition, 'Iraq, Navel of the World', Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, April 2003–March 2004.
3. See http://www.obspm.fr.
4. 'L'uniformité des poids et des mesures, demandée par le peuple dans tous les temps et tous les lieux, va enfin être établie dans toute l'étendue de la République française.' Agence temporaire des poids et mesures, 'Adresse aux artistes', 11 Floréal An III, published at http://smdsi.quartier-rural.org/histoire/11flor-3.htm.
5. The kilogram was originally defined as the mass of a cubic decimetre of water at maximum density.
6. It has been claimed that Méchain in fact made an error, which was subsequently covered up by both him and Delambre, leaving the metre actually 0.2 mm short (Alder 2002; *Guardian*, 27 August 2002), though this was hardly surprising given the variations that arose naturally.
7. See http://www.nmm.ac.uk.
8. See http://www.astrodatabank.com/DCH/70timechanges.htm.
9. Text published at http://webexhibits.org/calendars/calendar-french.html.
10. 'Le jour, de minuit à minuit, est divisé en dix parties; chaque partie en dix autres, ainsi de suite jusqu'à la plus petite portion commensurable de la durée' (Article XI).
11. Text also published at http://webexhibits.org/calendars/calendar-french.html.
12. The transition from sun time to mean time had already taken place in Geneva in 1780, Britain in 1792 and Berlin in 1810 – see http://www.astrodatabank.com/DCH/70timechanges.htm.
13. These links are vividly portrayed not only in the European Marco Polo's account of his travels, but also in the earlier writings of the Moroccan traveller Ibn Battutah, who arrived in India in 1333 (Dalrymple 1993: 253; Ibn Battutah 2002).