

## Tilburg University

### Review of the book *Les frères ennemis*

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of us who disinterred Carothers fifteen years ago (Fernando, Lipsedge, this reviewer) were 'overly generous'. Rereading our comments now suggests rather that we were unduly influenced by Foucault in denouncing some monolithic discourse of psychiatric racism which, as McCulloch himself shows, was rather a collection of administrative prejudices, incompetence and neglect.

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PANOFF, MICHEL. *Les frères ennemis: Roger Caillois et Claude Lévi-Strauss*. 195 pp., bibliogr. Paris: Payot, 1993. FF 110.00 (paper)

Roger Caillois, Georges Bataille and Michael Leiris are exponents of a fascinating blend of ethnography, surrealism, philosophy and obsession with *le sacré* which flourished in the capital of an important colonial empire. Together, in 1938, in the wake of Mauss and Nietzsche, they created that somewhat secret society, the *Collège de Sociologie*, devoted to the study of the sacred as well as to darker practices. In eleven short chapters, Michael Panoff traces the intellectual and artistic development of Roger Caillois (1908-1978), writer, poet, philosopher, one-time nietzschean, one-time novelist, one-time surrealist and consequently critic of the surrealists. Thus he further charts the aforementioned field of study, explored earlier by, among others, Jim Clifford in his rich essay 'On ethnographic surrealism' (in his *The predicament of culture*, Harvard Univ. Press, 1988), and documented by the French scientific periodical *Gradhiva - Revue d'Histoire et d'Archives de l'Anthropologie* since 1986.

Caillois was a high UNESCO official, editor of books and journals, a pivot of intellectual and artistic life in the capital; ultimately, unavoidably perhaps, he became a member of the Académie Française. Among his many books are *L'homme et le sacré* (1939) and *Approches de l'imaginaire* (1973). This Parisian mandarin, reputed for his erudition and his command of language, was engaged in a never-ending quest for the logic of imagination, for 'oblique', 'lateral' connexions between institutionally separated fields and forms of knowledge, for analogies between social facts, poetic imagery and insects and minerals as 'phantasms of nature'. He has been characterized as 'a mystic of matter'.

In spite of the sub-title, Claude Lévi-Strauss, indeed much better known, gets only very scarce attention, although the comparison between him and Caillois is revealing. The former is the systematic scientist who patiently sorts out fundamental structures; the latter was an as brilliant but wild and visionary *touche-à-tout*, a champion of the contingent who jumped from one subject to another. Both loathed existentialism, and both were highly uneasy about a deeply felt inclination towards literary expression.

Caillois criticized Lévi-Strauss's *Race et histoire* (1952) for embracing relativism too easily, for underestimating the significance of Western civilization and its critical, rational attitude (ch. 3), although he had some reservations himself.

Quite regularly Panoff comes down hard on Caillois, and probably justly so (see for instance pp. 72, 78, 79, 84, 113, 127), even while judging with the benefit of hindsight. His readable juxtaposition of Caillois and Lévi-Strauss is revealing, but even more revealing, and contributing towards a more multiple contextualization of Caillois, would be a comparison with some other students of Mauss and 'the sacred', such as, for instance, the empirically oriented field-worker-ethnologist Alfred Métraux and, especially, the writer/philosopher/mystic Georges Bataille - one of his close friends. For it is amazing to what extent similar themes - many of them maussian, others nietzschean - emerge time and again in this particular setting.

When compared to the ethnologist Lévi-Strauss or to the philosopher Bataille, Caillois probably is the more superficial author - ethnologically and philosophically, respectively. Still he has much to offer, not least for all that he was connected to. Everyone reading Panoff's essay, which stresses ethnology, by the way, should also look into Odile Felgine's recent, bulky *Roger Caillois: biographie* (Paris: Stock, 1994).

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RIVIÈRE, PETER. *Absent-minded imperialism: Britain and the expansion of empire in nineteenth-century Brazil*. xiv, 194 pp., col. plates, map, bibliogr. London, New York: Tauris, 1995. £39.50

This splendid volume consistently reflects a balanced and thorough scholarship of the archival sources subtly combined with a deep ethnological experience of the Guianas region. By eschewing literary-historical commentary in favour of a narrative analysis of events Rivière avoids the common failing of rhetorical hermeneutic exercises - that is, by failing to base analyses in detailed archival and ethnographic research they fail to perceive the epistemological gap between modern 'progressive' ideology and the past complexity of colonial relationships. In contrast, Rivière painstakingly shows us that 'absent minded imperialism' was the hallmark of nineteenth-century British colonialism in this region, rather than a fevered lust for domination of the 'Other'.

Such a reading of the nature of the British administration in Guyana certainly runs counter to much of the rhetoric of modern Brazilian historians who are determined to perceive the heavy hand of conspiracy in the 'Pirara incident' with which the volume is chiefly concerned. Essentially, the informal work of