Section 2

Contingency
Future imperfect: colonial futures, contingencies and the end of French empire

Andrew W. M. Smith

Books can be objects as well as texts. At times, their material nature can speak of their cultural and political provenance just as much as the ideas contained within them. I found, perhaps, the clearest sense of this chapter tucked in the pages of an old book ordered online from a second-hand shop in Perpignan. It arrived in an envelope festooned with stamps bearing the portrait of Francis I, originally painted by Jean Clouet around 1530. This Renaissance monarch is perhaps remembered best as a ‘great patron of the arts’,¹ yet he was also a significant force in expanding the horizons of France’s early empire.² Aptly, the envelope contained an aged and battered-looking copy of Le destin de l’Union française (The future of the French Union), written by Paul Mus and questioning the fate of that self-same empire some 400 years on.³

If the book’s title was suggestive, its date of publication made it positively tantalizing. Released in 1954, the book poses important questions at an awkward moment of French imperial history. At first glance, its pages were frayed. In fact, they were largely uncut, and actually reading the book became as much a craft project as an act of research. But as I worked through these pages, slicing each with a blade to unlock its contents, a piece of the original marketing material tumbled out. This relic of its original release was a yellow (and yellowed) half-sleeve, with two words written prominently upon it: Indochina, and Africa. The word ‘Indochina’ is roughly crossed out with a stylized printed cross, while ‘Africa’ bears a question mark beside it. In fact, much of this chapter lies in the odd feeling that came of reading those two words. Juxtaposing the simple effacement and the lingering
question highlighted an uncertainty that existed for only six years after the book’s release.

This was a book being sold on its timely nature. With ‘Indochina’ emblazoned across the cover, it knowingly played on popular concerns about the French military defeat at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954, which marked the decolonization of Indochina. Invoking the fate of France’s African colonies only exacerbated the tension. The publisher, Seuil, was using popular anxiety as a means of seizing the attention of readers. Evidently, France would cede her African territories between 1960 and 1962, answering the implied question and confining the future of the French Union to the scrapheap. That shift in perspective makes an obvious point about chronology, but raises more nuanced questions about contingency and perspective. By revisiting the conditional in this context, we get a real sense of its true identity as the future imperfect tense.

This piece of marketing material started a process of thought that drew me increasingly to wonder about divergent visions of the future during the 1950s: how confident projections became negotiated settlements, and imagined futures faded to difficult realities. The idea of ‘what was going to happen’ ineluctably shaped the ability of ordinary people to respond to these challenges and to conceive of their present. To explore this, I set Paul Mus’ book against two other documents that seemed to complement its distinctive historical qualities: extracts from children’s homework, gathered by a late colonial administrator seeking out dissent; and a summative report produced by a colonial governor at the end of his role, reflecting on his experience and political challenges to come. These three documents cut across categories to consider the questioning voices of commentators, children and colonial officials. With each document, we can learn more about the conditional questions posed by recreating the ideational context in which these questions were formulated. By reading along the grain of the archive, the historian accentuates the granular nature of the object of enquiry, and can make some attempt at the ‘articulation of perspectives’. In this vein, we can consider, in the words of Ann Laura Stoler, ‘colonial archives as sites of the expectant and conjured – about dreams of comforting futures and forebodings of future failures’.

To consider the concept of colonial futures and contingencies, this chapter will analyse three specific documents in historical context. All these documents date from 1954 to 1956, all concern French involvement with sub-Saharan Africa in this late colonial period, and all offer some vision of the future untainted by our retrospection. This process of investigation aims to analyse the sources and their expired contingency,
illuminating the possibilities they consider and the processes that constituted them. All three of these sources can be read against the grain of the archive. By considering the provenance of each document, I am also engaging in the process of, as Antoinette Burton terms it, ‘re-materialising the multiple contingencies of history writing’. Each of these documents has its own contingent story, relying on a certain serendipity in the archive. Yet serendipity belies agency. The ability of each to illuminate the concept of contingency in the late colonial state stems, in part, from their own material histories. This seems, at first, an intuitive observation, and reflective of common sense and good historical practice. Nevertheless, in trying to recover this expired sense of contingency from the unknowable, historical heart of the moment, we are drawn into a reflection on the sort of ‘colonial common sense’ described by Stoler. This ‘common sense’ governed things that were often not recorded, not because they formed some great secret or hidden truth but, rather, because they were commonly held and intuitively related to contingent factors that contextualized these impressions. By considering the research story behind each document, I am outlining the context of my own enquiry into the historical constellations that shaped these visions of the future, and the expired contingencies with which they engaged.

Common sense held within it an internal logic of colonialism and power, and this is reflected in the archival collections that sprang from it. It is also reflected in the implied selectivity of documents that did and did not survive, whether through ‘conspiracy’ or ‘bungle’. Within this search for expired common sense are examples of how some voices can be excluded and silenced from historical memory. The potential for incompleteness necessitates an acknowledgement of when we are attempting to work with fragments, and to ‘mend the torn fragments of the past’. This is crucial when recreating the intellectual climate of the late colonial state, both among its critics and its defenders. In his piece On the concept of history, Walter Benjamin criticized the temptation for historians to ‘tell the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary’. As observed by Todd Shepard, the end of the 1950s ‘gave birth to the notion that “decolonization” was a causal force with an all but irresistible momentum’. The momentum transformed material produced during that time, and contributed to the way in which historians read the period itself. When Stoler advocates reading ‘along the archival grain’, it reflects this acknowledgement of material that has garnered a retrospective value. It is necessary, therefore, to consider not only the material but the methodology for gaining access to colonial futures and contingencies.
Working against the teleological assumptions of history has opened up important discussions about the material we use to construct histories of the past, and, in particular, how people in the past considered the future. One of the most difficult aspects of recovering these past visions is in reconstructing an ontology of the common sense that surrounded them. We can focus our lens on a broad scope of the period, but much of our understanding of 1954 and the fall of French Indochina, for example, is conditioned by our understanding of its proximity to 1956 and the devolution of political power in the significant legal reforms of that year. Yet further, we can look to the fall of the French Fourth Republic, and de Gaulle’s tenure during the unravelling of empire that followed from 1958 to 1962. In looking at these documents, I am charting a path trodden by moderates, closer to the establishment and far less ambitious in their imagining of the future than diehards on either side of the debate. These documents illustrate fear as much as they do hope, and ideas about the future of empire that focus more on reworking colonial relationships than on recasting the terms of empire. In a sense, this chapter sets up a way of looking at the genealogy of these ideas, not among the top rank of thinkers or theoreticians but among administrators, academics and children. Recreating ideational contexts, alongside the research stories that form my own, allows for a constellation of micro-histories that relate to the broader historiographical discussion around historical contingency.

The inside of pagodas: The Future of the French Union

Back, then, to Paul Mus’ book and my momentary unease at the discovery of its original marketing material. The unanswered question emblazoned on the cover contained within it the force of the expired contingency that inspired this chapter. Yet, in posing this question about the future of the empire, Mus was far from a marginalized voice. Although he had been born in Bourges, he was raised in Vietnam, attending school in Hanoi. Steeped in the fortunes of the French empire, he had taught Asian languages at the École française de l’Extrême-Orient, and served the Free French in Africa and Indochina. After the war he was the director of the prestigious École nationale de la France d’outre-mer (ENFOM) and professor at the Collège du France until 1950, when he resigned his ENFOM post in protest at French policy in Indochina to work at Yale University. The book itself was received well, and continues to be of use to academics. Indeed, contemporary reviews from figures such as Stanley Hoffman praised it over other works as the ‘richest in substance.
and reflection’ on the topic. Importantly, Mus’ experience and personal history in the territory of French Indochina informed his reaction to its loss. He had been an influential figure in shaping the French Union project, and in 1944 had sought to persuade Henri Laurentie, the director of political affairs for the Ministry of Overseas France, to construct an engaged and participatory union: ‘[A] nother possibility for the idea of the French Union.’ The failures to realize this alternative vision formed part of his cumulative disaffection with the viability of the endeavour and the capability of France to realize these possibilities. His book is as pessimistic as it is outraged, and its colonial future is tainted by its proximity to this perceived calamity. Mus ‘foresaw a future haunted by his historical present’.

This book followed his more famous work, Viêt-Nam: sociologie d’une guerre, which had been published two years earlier. It represented an exasperation with the colonial project, following on the heels of the Indochinese War. Inside Le destin de l’Union française, however, there is some hope. Mus reads the conditional nature of France’s imperial future, though it was diminished in the light of Dien Bien Phu. This loss is the event that stains his vision of the future, condemning the way that France had conducted her imperial policy, and confirming a narrative that had begun after France’s own liberation led to the reassertion of colonial mastery in Indochina. As noted by Agathe Larcher-Goscha, ‘The world had changed since the war, France had changed, and Indochina had

Figure 3 The original marketing material found inside Le destin de l’Union française
changed, but the colonial relationship between Indochina and France remained the same, not in its administration but as an Ideal. 23 Too much of the same old thing, from the same old mentality, Mus felt, would condemn France to losing her empire in its entirety. 24 What was needed was flexibility, and a desire to engage with new options. He compared the formal French approach to more adaptive British policies:

> We ought, I would say, to learn to love the exception, and not the one that proves the rule. Rather, the one that spills over the top, that invades, and swallows up every option but action. This attitude and stance is the part of the English naturalist. It is the counterpoint to the classicism on which we obsess, not least administratively but also constitutionally. Contrast the four little words that say it all, in the active social balance of the English language, ‘it is not done’, and that long word of ours, ‘anti-constitutional’. 25

Mus built this call for flexibility on his own cultural engagement with France’s Asian colonies in particular, following a lifetime of academic work and lived experience. 26 Emphasizing the influence of Mus’ background on the writing of his contemporary history is not simply, as Richard Drayton observes, a mere epistemological game. Rather, ‘it urges us to take stock of the foundations of our modes of historical subjectivity, and of the imagined human futures in which they are complicit’. 27 Mus’ pessimistic future reflected both his personal experience of loss and the broader climate of imperial uncertainty that haunted the late imperial state.

Mus’ scepticism captured a growing trend of wary engagement with empire during this period. It was not the only frame through which the relationship could be understood or challenged, though. In 1956 the journalist Raymond Cartier publicly questioned the value of the French empire in the pages of the weekly journal Paris-Match. Cartier’s articles provide an interesting insight into a current of opinion in the metropole. The three pieces, published on 11 and 18 August and 1 September, followed a visit by Cartier to West Africa. They contain three key messages within them: that overseas possessions were costing more than they contributed; that this was holding back France economically; and that this impediment could not be justified politically, as ‘the emancipation of colonial people was unavoidable’. 28 This stance has since been referred to as ‘utilitarian anti-colonialism’, and it spawned a contemporary movement, broadly known as Cartiérisme, that criticized colonial spending and instead advocated domestic
investment. Why, he asked, is France wasting money on empire, when it could support more important causes closer to home? Yet, for those subject to the often cruel impositions of the colonial relationship, development might well be expected alongside the notional ‘civilizing mission’. There is wrapped up in this debate a gap between rights, responsibility and agency.

Mus’ book demonstrated that dissent was growing among commentators (even those once engaged in outlining the possibilities of colonial humanism), offering critiques of current policy and exhortations for reform. It denounced the complacency with which French administrators were allowing the empire to spin out of control. This cosy imperial consensus was also the one targeted by Cartier’s articles. His refutation of the central logic behind imperialism, that it was politically and economically beneficial for the colonizer, offered a difficult prospect for contemporary media by challenging an accepted narrative. Cartier’s view was rejected as, variously, ‘the view from the Hexagon’ and ‘metropolism’, stressing the insular nature of its perspective. Interestingly, it was also condemned as ‘economically Maurassian’, invoking the ultra-nationalist Charles Maurras, whose Action française had advocated an essentialist and exclusionary national identity that mingled with the fascistic currents of interwar Europe in an unpalatable way.

Above all else, it callously used economic logic to cut through the social, cultural and political bonds that marked ‘Greater France’ as an overarching imperial entity.

The curmudgeonly reaction from members of the press seems to indicate that they were as emotionally affronted as they were moved by Cartier’s argumentation.

As one prominent British civil servant observed in 1967 after the end of empire: ‘There was something inert about the white man’s burden, and I don’t think he expected it to get up and walk.’ This observation well describes the ‘colonial common sense’ that limited the French administration’s willingness to endorse the agency of the colonized (or, at best, to endorse it with strict limitations) throughout the Fourth Republic. The milieu in which these administrative visions were formed affected the contingent limits governing their visions of the future. In the words of Frantz Fanon, ‘The colonialists are incapable of grasping the motivations of the colonized.’ Paul Mus tapped into a sense of this judgement, citing a ‘vicious circle’ in which dehumanizing the subjects of empire led ineluctably to violence. Drawing on his own experience, Mus relates an illustrative anecdote: ‘Few Europeans are really familiar with the inside of pagodas.’ When they are remarked upon, he says, people focus on the depictions of hell that they see painted on the internal walls. Yet, he
warns, there is more to it. On the walls are traditionally depictions of the ten judges or kings who weigh souls after death, and send them to nirvana or to one of the many purgatories. The Western visitor, he points out, sees only hell, ignoring the tribunal, and the potential reward, as they lack the eyes to see them.\(^{38}\)

Mus’ work builds on his own imperial connections to counsel a more nuanced engagement with the concept of the French Union. This was, above all, an attempt to challenge the ‘disconnect’ of the French imperial mind, and an appeal to consider colonial subjects ‘on the same level of humanity as the French’.\(^{39}\) He saw a future for the Union, but outside the formalism, inflexibility and violence he felt had characterized it to date, despite his attempts to counsel Henri Laurentie towards a reformed Union. Real reform, and not endless debates about the constitution, would offer something more tangible: ‘A less legalistic and cramped definition of the French Union would better allow us to find a solution – or, dare one say it, perhaps to save it?’\(^{40}\) There was a marked difference between the abandonment called for by Cartier and the development advocated by Mus. The experiences of the long past clouded visions of the future, presenting stark moments of disjuncture. This disjuncture, in part, informed Cartier’s jaded rejection of the value of imperial entanglement. His scaling of value is important, however: the value of development and the future, versus the value of self-interest and the present. Mus’ valuation placed development and the future foremost, inspired by his own personal entanglement. At that moment in 1956, we can see the coexistence of multiple epochs during the same turbulent time, of distorted presents and emancipatory futures.\(^{41}\) Against this backdrop, disengagement with empire promised relief, but also abnegation of the future.

Mus continued to campaign for colonial humanism, even as France’s policy continued to rehash the past errors it had committed. By ignoring the present, he felt, France was damning her future. In a letter to \textit{Le Monde} in 1957 he extended this analysis:

Three years ago, when finishing a book on \textit{Le destin de l’Union française}, I warned that we were, to my eyes, in the final moments when we could do something about it. Make no mistake on this point: we have not done it. We are now in the last hours where it is possible, by removing any qualifications, for us to introduce an alliance of equal peoples.\(^{42}\)

He remained resolute in his commitment to a future that involved a peaceable settlement founded on ideas of sympathetic engagement. In
this letter, he reaffirmed his sense of the present and of crisis, with France approaching a juncture. For Mus, this was something new, and particular to the present moment. He set this late colonial moment up as a sort of liminal space between the many wrongs of the colonial past and the uncertainty of an imminent future. In this same letter, Mus wrote: ‘Two wars, a historic upheaval, and a new world outlook separate us from the recent past.’ The fallout of the Second World War and France’s defeat in the Indochinese War increased tension and the sense of crisis. For Mus, this was a moment in which change needed to be actively defined. The French state, he felt, had to live in the present tense.

In Mus’ flexible and empathic desire to recognize the agency of the colonized, we can see a very distinctive engagement with the future of the French Union. This gives us insight into the bonds formed in what Gary Wilder has termed the ‘French imperial nation state’, recognizing that the national republic could not be ‘considered apart from the imperial nation’. Mus’ personal loss is reflected in the broader loss of colonial society, and the severing of ties beneath the level of state (while acknowledging the inequality of these relationships). Through his work, we can access a personal sense of what would have happened, but for the inflexibility and unresponsiveness of the colonial administration. It seems apt that this was revealed through a very personal and contingent enquiry: cutting pages in a book and revealing old marketing material. These were tokens of a world in transition, and the question on the yellow half-sleeve was as much a marketing trick as it was a lament to the severing of Mus’ own imperial bonds.

A master and his dog: extracts from school homework

I came across the second document in the Archives nationales d’outre-mer (ANOM), in Aix-en-Provence, during a course of research dedicated to the writing of an article on the loi cadre of 1956. The visit to ANOM was marked most memorably by meeting a group of elderly pieds noirs, the former settlers who had left Algeria following independence. I helped one of these men conduct some genealogical research, by helping him to use a computer in the catalogue room. He was looking for the birth certificate of his sister, who had been born in Constantine. He was, he claimed, too old to use computers. Delighted to be of assistance, I fell down a rabbit hole of research that was not my own, helping find relatives...
and reconstructing the legacy of a family who had been in Algeria since the nineteenth century. It went well and, as a result, I earned myself an invitation to lunch that day. This was an impressive affair, and much more than a meal for two. I had actually been invited to a friendly meet-up of around eight pieds noirs, a veritable old boys’ club. Presiding over festivities was a larger-than-life personality by the name of Guy – or, as his friends suggested I call him ‘the Impresario of Aix’. These self-described ‘Algerian Europeans’ formed part of the unanticipated exodus that surprised French authorities in the early 1960s. This tide of people was triggered by the end of French rule, provoking disbelief and denial ‘long after the movement had become a veritable ground-swell’. For these men, in their lugubrious lunchtime reflections, Algeria had been lost, and its loss was definitive. That unexpected loss evoked a refusal to play any part in the future, or at least any future designed to develop an independent Algeria. As Shepard describes, the process of decolonization itself had led ‘the unthinkable for most French intellectuals and politicians until the late 1950s, to become obvious to almost all in the early 1960s’. Unearthing the roots of this pied noir family involved helping someone use archival technology to access documents produced in France relating to a historical narrative suffused with notes of loss and finality. These families, whatever their status or values, had been washed over by the tide of history.

The next day I returned to the archives to pursue my own research. I ordered a box with the reference ‘112 APOM.27’, as it contained a ministerial report on ‘Internal autonomy in the French Community’ from 1958. This promised to give an official reflection on the late colonial state at the dawn of the Fifth Republic. The document that proved most interesting, however, was far less official, and, indeed, less circumspect. It was in its own sleeve, among a variety of documents that looked at the implementation of legal reform from the private archives of Louis Berthier, a long-serving inspecteur des colonies (he had been appointed in 1942). The green folder bore no date, but simply the intriguing title ‘EXTRAITS DE DEVOIRS SCOLAIRES’ (extracts from school homework). It contained three typewritten pages, containing eight short extracts, from students ranging from fifteen to twenty-six. The responses are rich and interesting insights into the everyday understanding of colonial relationships. They also show how perspective altered visions of the future, and how unequal power relationships can be read from unusual sources. I photographed these documents in July 2008, though they were largely irrelevant to the project I was working on. They seemed important, however. For a long time the memory of these responses percolated, seeming to suggest some
comparison with the lunch I had enjoyed with the ‘Impresario of Aix’ and his coterie of pieds noirs. Their memories, which were openly and joyfully shared, reflected a story of which I had been aware, of the lingering resentment of those forced to leave, their position on the political right and their hankering for a bygone era. Between the privileged voices of these men, and the subsumed voices of these school pupils, there was an important distance.

Figure 4  The first page of extracts in front of the green folder in the archives at Aix
This homework was, in reality, submissions to the journée scolaire de l’Union française, a study day that sought to familiarize children in France and the colonies with the French Union, and France’s ongoing development work. This was the brainchild of Albert Sarraut, an experienced politician (who had twice been prime minister in the Third Republic) and colonial reformer who had sought to ensure that France retained an interest in the colonies and remained committed to development. That he maintained a ‘dream of colonial development’ was evident in the interwar period, when he fought to ‘sustain limited governmental, parliamentary, and public interest in colonial development’.

He published La mise en valeur des colonies françaises in 1923, calling for continued economic engagement with the colonies (a sort of opposite to Cartier’s assessment). He viewed development as intrinsically bound to stable societies and the assumed goal of any civilizing mission. This task, he advised, involved the creation of the ‘material well-being required for Western values to flourish’. Development could clash with the maintenance of peace in the minds of administrators, however, as can be seen in the French empire’s schools, which maintained limiting curricula throughout the interwar period. After the Liberation, however, these schools became more open, and the values Sarraut promoted became central to their mission: ‘The era of deliberate limits was over, but its educated products would be the major component of the first generation of African nationalists and government leaders.’

An interesting illustration of this importance can be seen in the fact that Paul Mus, the author of the first piece in this chapter, attended the Lycée Albert Sarraut in Hanoi, where he fostered his own imperial bonds. In this second document there is a sense of potential, of the importance of ‘youth’ to a durable colonial future. The belief was central to the orchestration of the journée scolaire in the first place. Yet, in these submerged voices, we also gain a sense of the blocked mobility of colonial youth, one of the precipitate conditions that imperilled the imperial status quo.

This post-war initiative was intended to continue that work, and Sarraut’s position as president of l’Assemblée de l’Union française, until 1951, allowed him to establish a ‘Prix de l’Union française’, and later enabled the Assembly to develop the work by creating the study day. Established in 1955, the study day was held on the same day in both France and the colonies, usually in April, and promoted ‘fraternal perspectives’ between students. It promised a tempting reward that went beyond prestige: first prize took F50,000, second took F30,000 and third took F20,000. More than this, the winners (and those who were commended) could enjoy a ‘colonie
These opportunities for leisurely pursuit and scholastic recognition were valuable persuasive tools. Drawing young people into a system of reward engaged and encouraged them to become young foot soldiers of the concept of union. A trip to the Basque coast with a cohort of your peers, followed by a visit to Paris, offered an attractive lure for eager young minds. As such, the journée scolaire seemed an important and well-supported competition.

The prize was won in 1956 by Stelio Farandijs, a nineteen-year-old metropolitan student (of Greek parentage), who went on to have a glittering career as a champion of the concept of francophonie. In the 1980s Farandijs became secretary general of the Haut conseil de la francophonie, attached to the office of the French president. He became the perfect example of the competition’s aims. Yet, clearly, not all respondents were young foot soldiers of the civilizing mission or francophile agenda. In the jaded climate of the late colonial state, the competition faced ridicule from both participants and observers. The Marxist journal La Pensée mocked the prompts with which schoolchildren were provided, under the headline ‘No sign of the critical spirit!’:

Each year, organised in France’s educational institutes, there is a study day for the French Union. Here is the text from Marshal Lyautey which has been offered up for consideration by pupils of philosophy and elementary maths, just before the Easter holiday:

*The successful man is always the one who holds an ideal, who loves action for the sake of action, who strives without cease, aims for the best, and puts in the effort, who doesn’t spare the horses, and doesn’t over-complicate things… Perhaps he’ll die, but he will have lived!*

To hell with reason! By inviting our school pupils to conflate a man of action and a dare-devil, university administrators are no doubt hoping to recruit the next generation of ‘paras’ to ‘pacify’ Algeria... Juxtaposing colonial violence with a fairly transparent attempt to avoid it showed up how little the competition could hope to achieve. This critical spirit was, perhaps, a cynical one, though the script provided by the competition organizers certainly seems a worrying way to live your life. This sort of prompt gives a useful indication of the sort of thing students were asked to engage with, though it also gives a good insight into the ways they could react against it.
The responses included in the green folder can be dated contextually from neighbouring documents as having been for the competition in 1955 or 1956. The prompt provided by the prize committee that year had asked students to consider the following:

The French Union is a constant creation that has its legal framework but depends more meaningfully on human connections. One can only speak of the French Union in the terms Michelet used to describe the Motherland: ‘It is a grand friendship.’

The phrase ‘constant creation’ projects the colonial project into the future, casting it as an ongoing process that requires the active participation of its subjects. From the sampled extracts, the response of a fifteen-year-old pupil contains one of the most striking phrases. His name is given as Njok Hiol Hiol, and no other information is listed. We can discern from the distinctive name that the student was male and most probably from French Equatorial Africa (AEF). The only thing reported is an extract from his essay, which reads: ‘The French Union is a union between a master and his dog, yet there can never be unity between a free man and a collared, ill-fed dog.’

Another response, from Nganso (nineteen years old), questions the sustainability of the French Union, offering insight into how the French defence of empire percolated into those territories perceived as peaceable:

The French Union has long been a constant creation, but since 1954, this French Union ceased to grow and has only shrunk. To tell the truth, there is a strong chance it will one day disappear altogether. It has not been long since Indochina went to war with France. One could ask why. The Algerians have risen and are also looking for their liberty. Monsieur Soustelle has seen the outcome of this rising and declared: ‘If we leave Algeria, all of Africa is lost and France will cease to be a great power.’ And can one really talk about the French Union in this day and age without talking about black Africa? If France loses Algeria, will the Paris–Brazzaville line be replaced by a Casablanca–Tunis line? And we should not forget that all the people of the French Union are waiting for their time to rise. In those circumstances, France may well shrink and cease to be a great power. It is an objective solution, my country need play no part in the French Union, nor in its particular problems, which seem to be in the process of being resolved anyway.
Nganso’s response echoes the historical writing of later years, offering a strikingly perspicacious account of the empire’s ills. In particular, it sits well alongside this summary from Gary Wilder:

But by the 1950s, the French Union appeared to be an anachronistic and unrealistic attempt to retain an empire from which the Indochinese people had already separated and the Algerians were rejecting, Americans were undermining, and French capitalists were abandoning.64

These negative visions of the French Union seem to somewhat counter Sarraut’s paternalistic vision of continued development as it was framed at the start of the 1950s. Here, we see more of the ‘era of limits’ that Peggy Sabatier ascribes to the interwar period.65 We also see a sense of frustration at work, a suggestion of the thesis that ‘blocked mobility’ promotes the emergence of nationalism.66 In the colonial sense, unequal relationships defined the French Union, despite the rhetoric, and this both characterized these responses and coloured their conditional view of the future. This, in turn, gave a sense of the Union as a ‘frozen mosaic’, which would limit the ambitions of Africans.67 Koul, a twenty-year-old student, wrote:

It seems less about friendship between countries, than about friendship between men. There are many examples that have shown the friendship of the French Union to be utopian. If it were a reality, what do we say to the movements of Indochina and Morocco, and to Algeria who follows the first two countries if not to independence then at least to their autonomy? It must be said that almost all the territories of the French Union want to follow this example [This last phrase is finely crossed out, but is perfectly legible]. 68

Dismissing the promise of a utopian ideal, and predicting further instability, the elision at the end of this article is interesting. It would seem either that the courage to offer this criticism faltered, or that the half-hearted elision was itself a sort of challenge. There is a certain confidence both in the projections of these young men, who presaged colonialism’s end, and in the aims of the competition’s organizers, who hoped to inspire entrants to love the French Union. There is hope in the vision of the future described in Michelet’s quote, and a disjuncture in the response of these few students. In the dwindling light of the late colonial state, it could be difficult to distinguish sparks from embers.
For Elikia M’Bokolo, one of the key facets in the stability of AEF was the existence of an elite of petit-bourgeois African partners who had internalized the assimilationist ideology of French imperialism. Across the Federation, this class seemed neither capable nor desirous of formulating a coherent anti-colonial ideology. In AEF, there was a tiny minority of people who had experienced formal education, and this small elite tended to be close to the administration. As recently as 1955 the governor general of AEF, Paul Chauvet, had expanded the number of African teachers in the education sector in a programme designed to reintegrate returning graduates of metropolitan education back into the working life of the Federation. This sort of programme was intended, like the study day, to strengthen the connections between colony and metropole. Seeing this sort of criticism in the voices of these students is thus interesting for our understanding of the decolonization of AEF. These responses are a middle ground between anti-colonial nationalism and loyal collaboration. They were, after all, students being educated to a fairly high level, and atypical of many in francophone Africa, who lacked access to these resources. Likewise, they were participating in an international competition with a good degree of literacy and interesting critical ideas. Yet, in their rejection of the terms of the competition, they passed up the opportunity for a shot at its rewards.

In some ways, these respondents offered active resistance to the civilizing mission, rejecting its terms and refusing to be cowed. In others, though, they were simply cultural réfractaires, like those who evaded the Vichy government’s forced work orders yet stopped short of armed resistance. The phrase crossed out in Koul’s answer gives us some clue to this small act of rebellion, and the tenor of these young men gives us some insight into a quiet, growing frustration with imperialism. Differing perspectives inflected visions of the future. For French colonial officials committed to maintaining the bonds of this relationship, their imagined future entailed a new type of colonial attachment: more diffuse, perhaps, but bound by cultural entanglement. For those who felt that attachment like the leash on a ‘starving dog’, a little loosening of the collar was scant solace.

These responses give a real insight into the development of anti-colonial ideas throughout the 1950s. In particular, the condemnation of these students helps to illuminate the way that popular opinion had moved beyond the control of colonial authorities, and the extent to which hopeful visions of the future were forced to confront increasingly negative realities. The potential of these young voices was frustrated, and chafed against optimistic imperial programmes designed to foster a sense of solidarity. These voices evoke a sense of future conflict due to lost opportunities. The loss described by the pieds noirs in Aix was
definitive and retrospective. It noisily echoed tales about the fading of privilege, unlike the dissenting grumbles overheard in these snippets. The loss described in these extracts was one that did not fully envisage a future in which empire was categorically gone, yet they prefaced a turbulent future for the imperial status quo.

On the spot: ‘The political problems of French West Africa’

The last document to be considered is a report written on ‘The political problems of French West Africa’ by the haut commissaire of French West Africa, Bernard Cornut-Gentille. The document itself was recommended during an anonymous review of the article that had sparked the archival trip to Aix en Provence mentioned in the last section. Yet it was accessed not through another archival search but through discussions and personal links. When looking for a copy, the only other reference that was obviously available was in the footnote of a piece by a prominent scholar on the subject. With a little trepidation, I contacted Professor Tony Chafer to ask if he knew where I could access a copy. As it turns out, he was the reviewer in question, and was happy to pass on a photocopy of the document that he himself had received from Joseph-Roger de Benoist, another prominent historian of West Africa.

The method by which the document arrived was fairly unusual, and, further, there is some ambiguity in the exact dating of this source. It can be deduced as arriving sometime between 1954 and 1955, before the announcement of the loi cadre, but after the battle of Dien Bien Phu. It is, then, strongly resonant of the difficulties described in the previous documents. Likewise, the method of its arrival charted connections in contemporary research, plotting out a logistical sense of an intellectual network. In this survey by a colonial official reporting to the civil servants of the Overseas Ministry, however, we can see another form of network at play, feeding back the analytical outcomes of colonial experience to the mechanisms of colonial control. The nature of this document’s discovery reflects the para-political, often personalized nature of postcolonial Franco-African relations, and the system of administration that created it.

The document itself opens a vista on an older style of colonial administration as it came to an end. In its place, the development of new modes of imperial interaction threatened the basis of the colonial relationship. Between 1946 and 1954, according to Cornut-Gentille, West Africa had become the ‘continent of fidelity’. Recognizing emergent
threats was a prudent attempt to manage that status and not a sudden inversion of old assumptions. Cornut-Gentille’s report summed up well the task of reformers relying on an intricate knowledge of power structures and economic controls:

It is a fact that the French West Africa of 1954 appears to the casual observer as if it is an oasis in a world where many countries face a
frenzy, and it is a fact that some 95% of the Federation’s elements are deeply committed to France.

However, it is a fact, too, that after seven years of living in Black Africa, I see, on the spot more than anyone else, the elements of concern that may trigger a more accelerated evolution than currently under way in French West Africa.76

The perspective of reformers who had experience of the territories clashed with an accepted narrative of colonial development being pursued in Paris. Just as the economic and cultural logic behind imperialism experienced challenges in the mid-1950s, so too did the political project of graduated autonomy that had been outlined at the Brazzaville Conference in 1944.

In France, the Fourth Republic offered a chance to renew engagement with the colonies, building upon a positive ‘Brazzaville spirit’77 that followed the promises made by de Gaulle to France’s African territories in 1944. These were promises made before France was itself liberated, offering an insight into the Republic that de Gaulle hoped to build. Yet there were important limits placed on the imagined future of colonial development:

The ends of the civilising mission accomplished in the colonies exclude any idea of autonomy, all possibility of evolution outside the French bloc; also excluded is the eventual establishment of self governments [sic] in the colonies, even in a distant future.78

This conditional view of the future established a firm contingent limit. Those limits were not simply practical, however, and they suffused the entire period of reform in the late colonial state. As Martin Thomas observes, ‘Black Africans fixed on the hypocrisy of egalitarian promises that came hedged with colonialist presumptions about their limited capacity to run things themselves.’79 Contingent limitations bred discontent and resentment, as expressed by the students mentioned earlier, and this eclipsed the reforming spirit of colonial administrators and post-war governments. Writing in 1956, the Marxist historian and renowned Africanist Thomas Hodgkin summarized the changing nature of colonial relationships for the European empires:

In our generation ‘the colonial problem’ means, principally, the problem of the relationship between Europe and its outpost communities in Africa, on the one hand, and the indigenous African
societies on the other. Put crudely, it means: what adjustments, compromises, surrenders, must the European colonial powers – and their settlers – make in face of claims of ‘African nationalism’? Hodgkin noted that African political institutions had to be understood and engaged with on their own terms, offering a sense that previous attempts to co-opt and countermand these institutions by the colonizer had failed to produce results. One feels Paul Mus would have applauded his willingness to learn.

Such an engagement can be seen in French colonial reform, notably the *loi cadre* of 1956, which sought to devolve power towards local assemblies, frustrating demands for equivalence. This built, in part, on the recommendations of the men on the spot who had witnessed the strains of existing colonial bonds. As Cornut-Gentille observed, the target was ‘the new social strata that were developing, whose place was dependent on the future of the AOF [Afrique occidentale française] and the relationship between France and Africa’. As Frederick Cooper outlines, the *loi cadre* rejected the policy of assimilation, dropping the emphasis on equality that had come from Brazzaville promises. No more was the colonial state looking to build a separate but equal French Union; now the hope was to complicate and nuance those relationships in the hope of continuing entanglement. In this moment, Cornut-Gentille’s report seems to enter into dialogue with the other documents, offering a connection built on differing perspectives. The dissenting students represented the figures most likely to be co-opted, and the clunkiness of the political measures designed to do this seemed to refer to the warnings of Paul Mus. Cornut-Gentille saw that future in the political institutions the French could create or foster, however, stating that ‘the French are no longer an ethnic concept, they are a political concept’. This recognized a much more practical engagement, shorn of the idealism that had tended to mark visions of the future in the post-war world. As such, we can see this language prominently in the structures of colonial administration. In February 1957 a note prepared for the minister of overseas France, Gaston Defferre, by his ministry stated:

> Whilst African and Malagasy deputies are largely men accustomed to the realities of power and prepared to accept the necessary compromises, African and Malagasy [popular] opinion is more sensitive than its elected representatives to absolutist ideologies and issues of passion.
This report echoed Cornut-Gentille’s thinking, especially on his return as minister of overseas France in June 1958. These echoes demonstrate a thread of institutional continuity, building on the accumulated knowledge of a ministry that relied on the first-hand experience of its administrators. The 1957 report proposed two solutions to this problem of public opinion: maintaining a strong line in debates, and attempting to support candidates for election in the territorial assemblies who accepted cooperation with France in order to give them the best chance possible. This mandated a strong information policy campaign of explaining the reforms, avoiding the ‘real and serious threats’ to the ‘most reasonable parties and party leaders’. Problematically, this seemed to echo Mus’ political diagnosis, with instrumental engagement trumping any open offer of meaningful reform.

All this was undertaken with the intention of perpetuating a new vision of a colonial future, with a different, developed but durable relationship between the metropolitan centre and the colonial periphery. Far more than in any other economic or cultural arena, the management of political loyalties was undertaken with an eye on the possibility for contingent change. If the French Union was to be a ‘constant creation’, as proposed in the second document, then it fell to its administrators to guide that process. The worries expressed in the first document were that this guidance was lacking. Indeed, it does seem within Cornut-Gentille’s report that there exists a certain anxiety founded on his perception of the colonial future. His nervous anticipation of contingent shocks moves his pen in the conclusion of the report, recognizing the cultural and political possibilities suffusing the senescent French empire:

This report, which is by necessity a synthesis, is therefore incomplete and inaccurate.

Incomplete because it insufficiently explores some questions and fails to mention certain others, whether through forgetfulness, or because they are secondary, or even because they do not need any new action.

Inexact because this depiction of the people and issues of the AOF tries to address change and not the problem of the present moment, never mind that of the future...

These qualifications acknowledge the limits of Cornut-Gentille’s ability to anticipate all potential outcomes. He was not an omniscient observer, and so this seems intuitive, yet, again, the need to articulate this in his report stresses a certain unease about the sense of what is to come.
His report addresses the problems of the present moment, specifically indicating where they might impinge on future stability. His recommendations focus on ways to ameliorate the problems of today in service of a better imagined colonial future.

Cornut-Gentille’s report gives us his own insight based on his experience. His reading of French West Africa’s political problems is intricate, yet his willingness to endorse that vision is limited by his sense that events were accelerating. This was not just true for metropolitan colonial elites, however. Wilder quotes Léopold Senghor in a similar sense: ‘[T]o govern is to anticipate [prévoir]…, to govern is to choose. In reality, choice is a function of anticipation [la prévision].’ Senghor’s pleas for a federal solution to the tensions that faced the unravelling of the French Union supposed that France’s ‘anticipation’ was fundamentally based on a trust in the capacity of the French Republican system to weather these shocks. Yet, in Cornut-Gentille’s report, there is a specific rejection of that ability to anticipate.

This document, received through an informal network in the contemporary context, illustrates the challenges facing the informal networks of empire. Cornut-Gentille was a ‘man on the spot’, making the choices that Senghor described. Yet his fear over his ability to inform these choices illustrates a changing appreciation of the agency of the colonized. Importantly, however, his recommendations do not settle on disengagement. He retained a belief in the lingering influence of the French colonial administration, and seems, in this, to foreshadow the lingering influence of informal networks typified by Jacques Foccart’s African cell. His conditional view of the colonial future outlines what he believed should occur, in the face of turbulence and reform, to best serve France’s interests.

Conclusions

This chapter has explored contingencies and entanglements in the late colonial state, yet it has also offered some comment on contingencies and entanglements in the archive, interrogating our understanding of material and also our means of processing it. These colonial futures were anticipations of the journey ahead, and often saw adaptation and accommodation in the face of swirling possibility. Our ability to read this latent possibility with the same historical common sense is a difficult task of reconstruction. It cuts across archival collections, as it cuts across actors in the last days of empire. This point is reinforced by the flux of archival
collections revealed at sites such as Hanslope Park and around issues such as torture in Algeria, and suggested by the ephemeral quality of contemporary digital archiving. The provenance of these documents, as highlighted in each of their research stories, itself raises questions about discovery and context. These challenging archival issues demonstrate that source bases in motion influence our point of observation.

Capturing the conditional in the late colonial state allows us to explore the assumptions and inferences that mapped out historical visions of the future. There was no static vision of what came after empire for France. Visions of the future were contextual and contingent, reflecting beliefs and assumptions about the agency and abilities of Africans and colonizers. Throughout the 1950s French officials planned for changes in the ways that they ran their colonial empires. The strains of the Second World War, increasingly assertive national movements and a changing international diplomatic climate all mandated a need to alter existing practices. Visions of the future could motivate nationalists to intensify their struggle when they saw their future at its most precarious. Worries about disorder could push the hand of colonial officials who sought to pacify dissent. From ordinary people to those statesmen and spokesmen at the very top, thoughts on how things would pan out could steer their minds and write their words.

These documents combine three personal perspectives on the future in the late colonial state, helping us to nuance an anti-teleological reading of the end of empire. They illuminate the ideational context in which questions about empire were framed, and help plot the historical constellations under which these actors laboured. They re-emphasize that behind every document is another person (or people), and that by sifting through a mountain of documents one is retreading the paths of the archive, and building on established narratives of the past. The first shows one man’s personal connection to the empire and the loss of belief in the project that the changing relationship of the 1950s created. He offers visions of what would have happened, if only after the abandonment of the inflexible and unfeeling policies that led to the collapse of the colonial state in Indochina. The second shows the way in which submerged voices prefaced a sense of lost opportunity, especially when juxtaposed with loud voices mourning the losses of the past. This potential gives a sense of how empire could have developed, but for the unequal relationships that marred colonial education. The third lends insight into the ‘man on the spot’, his belief that the French could continue to control the situation, but his fears for the political problems that imperilled that influence. This,
in turn, looks to what should have happened, offering its own excuses alongside the analysis. All three offer pessimistic views of the future, yet show variance in their rationale. None of these sources challenge our reading of the future of these colonies as independent nation states, yet all nuance our understanding of the context in which these debates took place. We gain a sense of how contingency governed and shaped visions of the future in the late colonial state, and how a sense of crisis crossed categories.

By combining these different aspects of the conditional, we can ourselves gain an insight into what might have happened, not in a counterfactual sense, but in the reconstruction of expired contingency. These points in the historical constellation of that moment were not fixed, nor permanent. Their visions were not simply carried along on the ‘tide of history’, nor buffeted loose by a ‘wind of change’, but were, rather, personal and insightful considerations of colonial futures based on personal situations and histories. The political and social climate that created the ‘irresistible momentum’ of decolonization was built on a dense network of contingent factors that promised an imperfect future. Reconstructing those conditional views and expired predictions is, in part, a work of reading along the archival grain and recognizing the contingency of our own enquiry that shapes our imperfect views of the past. Recognizing shapes in these historical constellations is not simply a work of confirmation but also one of discovery.