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Imperialism in *Asterix*

Roman Imperialism

In 1978 an analysis of the *Asterix* stories was made by De Kerckhove who gave the following assessment:

"On the surface, the figures of this essential drama are not very sophisticated. Among the Gauls, nobody, apart from the wise old druid, is exceptionally bright. Astérix himself, for all his cleverness, will resort more often to the magic potion which gives him superhuman strength, than to a real strategy. The Romans, on the contrary, are always subtle, crafty, calculating, well prepared, and they always lose. The Gauls are carefree and totally unpremeditated; their behavior and their social attitudes are depicted so as to present an image of freedom and spontaneity unfettered by the constraints of civilization."¹

De Kerckhove is thus asserting the notion of a cultural divide based on responses to authority. Was his analysis a fair reflection of the facts? I believe that he was right to stress the opposition between authority and anti-authority as a central theme, but in my opinion he fails to acknowledge the multiple complex forms assumed by this theme - for example, military, global, economic, and political. In this paper I aim to explore the varieties of imperial and anti-imperial rhetoric in *Asterix*.

In the *Asterix* books the machinations of the Romans are often the cause of the adventures which take place. The *Asterix* stories reflect the French dislike for authority figures (as evidenced by their willingness to go on strike in the era when the *Asterix* stories first emerged).² Similarly, the Gauls will not take orders from the Romans. The Romans, however, have to obey even against their own will - for example in *Astérix Le Gaulois* the legionnaire Caligula Minus does not want to go to the Gallic village: "Je n'irai pas chez les Gaulois!" He is obliged to change his mind when his commanding officer tells him the alternative - "Je te fais embrocher comme un poulet si tu n'y vas pas chez les Gaulois!!"³

For Romans who have managed to find their way into positions of responsibility there are also constraints imposed by the system in which they operate. Certain obligations have to be met if they wish to advance further, as illustrated by this exchange:

Bégonia: "Je demande grâce de cet homme courageux et galant!"
Général: "Accordé! Je n'ai rien à refuser à la demi-soeur de la cousine par alliance de Jules César."⁴

It is surprising to observe that it is not just the rank and file or individual officers who are constrained by the rigours of imperialism - it even affects its own figurehead, Caesar himself:

"Jules César a des gros ennuis d'argent. Pour équiper ses armées qui doivent partir pour des nouvelles conquêtes, il s'est servi de l'argent des impôts qui était destiné à payer la solde de ses garnisons en Gaule..."⁵

This can be contrasted with the fact that the Gauls tend to rely on a system of bartering and have no need of large sums of money to fulfil their needs.

It is important to note that the world in which the stories take place is not entirely historically accurate, particularly with regard to the Roman State. An example of this can be found in *Astérix Le Gaulois* when the centurion Caius Bonus sees the potential of the magic potion for political advancement: "Il me faut la recette de cette potion! Avec cette recette je pourrai devenir empereur!"⁶ In 50 BC, however, the imperial system had not yet been established. The idea of a Roman Empire (with Julius Caesar as its emperor) is nevertheless key to the stories because it gives the Gauls something to fight against, constructing a political opposition between autocracy and consensual freedom (this cultural dynamic is a long-established feature of French self-representation). In this sense Caesar can be seen as having the same role as contemporary icons of imperialism such as Hitler - who still exerted a significant influence over European thought at the time that the Asterix books first appeared (and still does, to an extent). The prominence of Caesar amongst the Romans is somewhat diminished because he is unable to subdue the Gallic village: "Toute la Gaule vit en pleine paix romaine sauf ce petit village dissident dans votre secteur qui nargue la puissance de César."⁷ In a way this makes Caesar a convenient villain - he is powerful enough to be significant, but not so dominant that he cannot be laughed at.

The Gauls are portrayed as being concerned by the way in which Roman influence permeates Gaul. In *La Serpe d'Or*, on seeing an aqueduct, Asterix remarks to Obelix: "Avec leurs constructions modernes, les Romans gâchent le paysage!"⁸ This theme is expanded in a later book when Caesar himself declares:

"J'ai décidé de les forcer à accepter cette civilisation! La forêt sera détruite pour faire place à un parc naturel! ... le village [sera] condamnée à s'adapter ou à disparaître!"⁹

Significantly this book appeared in 1971, suggesting that the development in the Roman policy depicted reflects the way in which the important issues in society had shifted, with attitudes to the environment becoming increasingly influential. This ties into the notion of Idéfix as an ecologist. Though this theme is first established in *Astérix et les Normands* - "Idéfix n'aime pas qu'on fasse du mal aux arbres,"¹⁰ it forms an important part of the narrative of *Le Domaine des Dieux*, with Idéfix biting a Roman for cutting into the bark of a tree and later enjoying the magical replanting of fast-growing trees by the Gauls. In the book the Romans try to assert that the Gauls have no right to the forest where they live:

"Ce n'est pas leur forêt...! C'est le chantier du futur domaine des dieux! Finis, les barbares et les forêts! Place à la civilisation! Nous allons commencer à déboiser!"¹¹

This statement suggests that the Romans do not understand the symbiotic relationship of the Gauls to their environment. Alternatively, they see how

fundamentally important it is and as a result wish to destroy the forest. By creating a place where Romans would like to live they feel sure that the Gauls will leave behind their so-called old-fashioned practices. That this is an abject failure makes it clear that the Gauls value their liberty to choose where they live and will not accept the strictures of an existence dictated by an exterior imperial force. It is significant that when the scheme for the construction project is first proposed a centurion advises the architect of the flaw in his plan: "Faudra dégauloiser d'abord."¹²

In the stories, the Romans try a variety of forms of attack to try to subdue the village. In *La Zizanie* they offer the chief power - as attested by Bonemine's description of her husband: "Le chef, mon mari, à qui Jules César a proposé d'être sénateur - il a refusé..."¹³, and in *Le Tour de Gaule d'Astérix* they attempt to isolate the village from the rest of Gaul - "...si on ne peut pas vaincre ces Gaulois, nous allons les isoler!",¹⁴ but Asterix and Obelix are able to defy this by breaking out of the village and visiting many regions of Gaul. They try to use their military might to bring about their aims in *Obélix et Compagnie*, but this is proved ineffectual when Obelix single-handedly sees off the attacking soldiers. Caesar's reaction shows his displeasure at the continued failure of his troops to defeat the Gauls:

"Un seul! Un seul de ces voyous réussit à vaincre et à démoraliser l'élite de mes légionnaires !... C'en est trop! Ces Gaulois me ridiculisent !"¹⁵

Having established that a military solution will not work, the Romans come up with an economic plan to force civilisation on the Gauls through wealth - buying menhirs from the Gauls so that they become accustomed to having a lot of money. Unlike most of their plans, this one meets with apparent success:

"Tous ces Gaulois utilisent leur force magique à faire des menhirs plutôt qu'à taper sur nos légionnaires... Ils sont vaincus par l'appât du gain. L'or, le luxe vont les affaiblir."¹⁶

However due to the cunning of Asterix the plan backfires, as the supply of menhirs becomes so great that the Roman monetary system collapses. In *L'Odysée d'Astérix* the Romans assess their various attempts to impose imperialism on the Gauls:

"Bien entendu, l'épreuve de force, la corruption, le rapt, tout a échoué contre ces irréductibles Gaulois..."¹⁷

No matter what method the Romans use, it is resisted successfully by the Gauls.

The example just outlined suggests an anti-capitalist ethos - perhaps even anti-U.S., one of a number of themes showing that this is no crude allegory, but a rich and malleable system. Others include opposition to the 3rd Reich. We see therefore the complexity of the anti-imperial allegory. In a further example of social commentary there is the distinct possibility that the portrayal of the Roman Empire in the *Asterix* books is a form of protest against *le service militaire* which was for many years compulsory in France. In many of the books the Roman soldiers lament their lot, particularly just after a beating from the Gauls: "Engagez-vous, rengagez-vous ils disaient..."¹⁸. It is possible that the books make themselves available to be read as criticism of the military in general - in *Le Bouclier Arverne*, for example, the

Romans are portrayed as unable to take any initiative when their commander is disabled by Asterix and Obelix:

Obelix: "Qu'est-ce qu'ils attendent, les autres?"

Asterix: "Toujours ta précipitation! Tu sais bien que quand ils perdent leur chef, ils perdent tous leurs moyens!..."¹⁹

Though there is apparent criticism of the military, there is the suggestion that the Gauls in general are not entirely opposed to living under Roman influence. In *Astérix chez les Helvètes*, a delegate at a conference for tribal chiefs makes the following speech which suggests that it is possible for the conquered peoples to live in harmony with the Romans:

"...et je pense qu'il est possible de vivre en paix avec les Romains. Il faut un peu de bon volonté de part et d'autre et le respect de la liberté individuelle... certes, cela demandera des efforts... mais les Romains ont déjà donné des preuves de leur désir de paix... pax Romana, voilà qui peut être une formule pour des lendemains harmonieux, si nous oublions les rancunes et les susceptibilités... je vois un avenir fait de calme et de tranquillité... et c'est pour cela que je crois... que la paix est possible... et doit être possible. Je vous remercie de votre attention."²⁰

The irony of this speech is that it is repeatedly interrupted by rowdy Roman soldiers who are trying to find Asterix and Obelix. In a certain sense this speech could be seen as invidious - it could be seen as outlining the kind of attitude held by the Vichy regime at the time of the Occupation during the Second World War. In the context of the *Asterix* books, however, the fact that the speech is interrupted so often shows that the Gauls could not in fact engage in peaceful coexistence with the Romans. It is interesting to note, however, that the Gauls can manipulate the Roman occupation to their own advantage - when it becomes expedient to send a representative of the village to the Olympic Games (*Astérix aux Jeux Olympiques*), the Gauls are keen to assert the fact that due to the occupation they can consider themselves Roman (the games being restricted to Greek and Roman citizens):

Panoramix: "...Seuls les Grecs et les Romains ont le droit de participer aux jeux sacrés."

Astérix: "Mais, par Toutatis... nous sommes Romains!"

Abraracourcix: "Nous sommes Romains? Depuis quand?"

Astérix: "Depuis la conquête de la Gaule par Jules César; il a fait assez des commentaires à ce sujet."

Obélix: "Je suis Romain, moi?"

Panoramix: "Mais oui! Astérix a raison: nous faisons partie du monde Romain!"²¹

It seems to escape their attention that because they continue to resist the occupation they can not make a legitimate claim of Roman citizenship, but for reasons of narrative this is disregarded - it may be that there is an intended paradox here, with the intention of creating a joke out of the situation.

In *Astérix chez Les Helvètes* a Roman quaestor is sent to investigate the reasons for a lack of revenue from the province in which the village is situated. The reasons

are clearly set out in the depiction of the governor, Garovirus, who explains the reasons for his cupidity in this exchange with a subordinate:

"Rome va finir par s'étonner de recevoir aussi peu d'impôts de ta province." - "Je suis nommé pour un an! J'ai un an pour m'enrichir!"²²

When the quaestor arrives he is poisoned by the corrupt governor and requests the aid of Panoramix in the hope of finding a cure. He is taken to the village to convalesce and when the druid is enabled to prepare the necessary potion he makes a full recovery. He confronts the governor and promises that: "Je vérifierai tes comptes, et ta prochaine orgie tu la feras à Rome, dans le cirque..."²³ The Gauls are so impressed that they invite the quaestor to take part in their banquet. This is significant since it implies that if the Romans were prepared to act with impunity in their dealings with the Gauls, the Gauls would be prepared to accept life with them.

Roman imperialism does not just affect the Gauls - it is shown to have an affect on all the cultures with which it comes into contact. The Romans are so intent on spreading their way of thinking in the countries they conquer that in *Astérix en Hispanie* they are even willing to kidnap a chieftain's son in order to further this aim:

"Quand nous te rendrons ton fils, il sera imprégné de culture latine..."²⁴

There is a precedent for this in the fact that the historical Romans did educate the sons of conquered peoples in Roman customs, but in the story it is prevented by the actions of Asterix and Obelix in returning the boy to his family. In this and other stories it is made clear that the struggle against imperialism is inclusive - the Spaniards featured are the third group shown to have a village where they continue to resist the Romans, and who receive assistance from the Gauls. It is important to point out the relevance of the fascist regime under Franco which had existed in Spain - perhaps a reason for the presence of a village there. In *Astérix en Corse* there is a party to celebrate the shared aims of all those who stand against imperialism:

"Nous avons invité des amis qui sont illustrés dans la lutte contre les Romains!"²⁵

This group can be seen as reminiscent of the Second World War Allies - they join together to oppose the tyranny of Roman rule and have a common bond through their shared struggle. In the adventure which ensues there is a threat to the opposition to Rome - the Corsicans fail to engage in battle with the Romans due to internal quarrels among tribes and it is left to Asterix and Obelix to show them where their true enemy lies. It is made clear that the only way that resistance will succeed is if they put aside their differences and unite together to oppose their common enemy:

"Vous vous êtes battus ensemble contre votre oppresseur, et vous aurez encore à vous battre pour rester libres ; alors ; serrez-vous la main."²⁶

French Imperialism

There is a sense in which the Asterix books could be seen as an indictment of imperialism, not only at the time of the Romans, but also during the years in which France itself had an empire. In *Le Combat des Chefs* there is a Gaul who is waiting to see a druid.²⁷ This Gaul is a caricature of Napoleon and it is possible to see this figure as mocking the emperor, especially since the character is meant to be mad (he is one of the patients waiting to be cured of his affliction by the druid Amnésix).²⁸ This may be the reason for the introduction to a later book: in *Astérix en Corse* the authors consider it necessary to provide a preamble in order to avoid upsetting Corsican sensibilities to criticism of their most famous son:

"Pour la plupart des gens, la Corse est la terre natale d'un empereur qui a laissé dans l'Histoire des pages aussi indélébiles que celles inspirées par notre vieux complice Jules César."²⁹

Towards the end of this particular story the tone changes (with the depiction of Caesar increasingly resembling Napoleon) and it is possible to consider that the intention is to provide a dialogue with the past. Whether this represents a change in attitude of the authors between writing the books in question or a need to consider the feelings of the target audience is unclear, but the following quote shows how the Corsicans, like the Gauls, are resistant to rule by an exterior force:

"Dis à César que, quelles que soient ses ambitions, il ne sera jamais empereur... Pour que les Corses acceptent un empereur, il faudrait qu'il soit Corse lui-même !"³⁰

When both quotes are considered at the same time it is possible to see that there is a desire to put the achievements of Napoleon on a par with those of Caesar, revealing that while there is opposition to Caesar there is also admiration for his military exploits. This is reinforced in *Astérix chez les Belges* where a picture of Caesar leading his army resembles a famous portrait of Napoleon.³¹ This particular book has an interesting attitude towards the events which led to Napoleon's most famous defeat - the Battle of Waterloo. On his website, Rivière summarises the episode:

"Ici on assiste à une défaite de César et les caractéristiques des armées napoléoniennes ont donc été transposées en caractéristiques des armées romaines de César."³²

This is highly significant for the issue of imperialism in *Asterix* - instead of siding with the French leader, the authors portray the Roman leader in his role and the forces he opposes are shown to triumph over him. This shows that the Asterix adventures are written to reject imperialism in any form - even that of France itself. It must be remembered that imperialist policies in French thinking did not end with the defeat of Napoleon - as late as the 1950s France was still striving to retain the vestiges of empire it had kept possession of:

"In common with other European colonial powers... France lost its possessions, as in the case of Indochina (Vietnam) and Algeria, in the decades after the Second World War."³³

This has implications for the *Asterix* books, and it is interesting to note that there

seems to be no attempt to address this theme in the texts until 1971 with the publication of *Le Domaine Des Dieux*, in which the slaves are led by a Numidian (Numidia being the Roman name for the area roughly covering Algeria). At the suggestion of Asterix, the Numidian slave instigates a strike in which the slaves refuse to work until their demands are met. This is likely to have been inspired by the famous strikes which took place in 1968 in which students and workers protested en masse against conditions of employment (among other factors).³⁴ When the strike succeeds it causes resentment among the legionaries who receive lower pay than has been awarded to the slaves.³⁵ It is possible that this is a reflection of the treatment of migrant workers in France - many come from former colonies in countries such as Algeria and can be subjected to ill-treatment, especially by those who claim that they are taking jobs and money away from the indigenous population.³⁶

Later the Numidian comes to protest against the actions of the Gauls in replanting the forest. He outlines his grievances:

"Vous nous empêchez de devenir des hommes libres, en nous empêchant d'achever le travail."³⁷

After discussing the issues at stake, Panoramix agrees to aid the slaves:

"Tu as raison, Numide... Non seulement nous ne vous empêcherons plus de terminer votre travail, mais je vous donnerai de la potion magique pour qu'il soit fini plus vite."³⁸

It seems doubtful that such rhetoric would have been admissible in the immediate aftermath of the Algerian war, but nevertheless it shows that the *Asterix* books are themselves unconstrained by the policies of the French government - lending further support to the notion of the inclusive nature of the struggle against imperialism, and also tying into the theme of liberty (which will be examined in detail in the following chapter).

Global Imperialism

There are several forms of imperialism at work in the *Asterix* books. The interview with Uderzo cited above contains a significant quote - "ça montrait que Disney n'avait pas inventé les animaux à histoire drôle..."³⁹ Modern French society is characterised by a desire to resist what is seen as an imposition of American culture, seen as a form of imperialism which will prove detrimental to French society. The activist José Bové, responsible for masterminding the destruction of a branch of McDonald's, has been dubbed a modern-day Asterix⁴⁰ - the small guy standing up to the imperialist corporation and rejecting its attempts to use globalisation to submit the French nation. It should be noted that McDonald's has reacted to this by agreeing to a deal to use Asterix to promote their products in France.⁴¹ This has caused some controversy, with some commentators stating that they feel this is a victory for the imperialistic aims of global corporations:



















"French magazine *Télérama* is quoted as saying: 'The bad food giant has taken over the indomitable Gaul.'"⁴²

In the books, however, there is no such victory for imperialism. The failure of the decadent regime of Rome is detailed in *Les Lauriers de César* to show a contrast with the village, demonstrating how the imperialism that was intended to be imposed was ultimately inadequate:





















"Les Romains... se mettront à boire sans retenue, ce qui les amènera à la décadence ; et à la chute de leur empire."⁴³






Clearly the Roman attempts to impose their culture on the Gauls are doomed.

Notes

- 1  De Kerckhove 1978:
<http://www.cyborganic.com/People/gizard/Lit/Asterix.html>
- 2  See Ardagh, John *France Today* (Penguin Books, 1995, UK), 100.
- 3  *Astérix le Gaulois* p. 10.
- 4  *Astérix en Hispanie* p. 47.
- 5  *Astérix et le Chaudron* p. 6.
- 6  *Astérix le Gaulois* p. 22.
- 7  *Le Tour de Gaule d'Astérix* p. 5.
- 8  *La Serpe d'Or* p. 10.
- 9  *Le Domaine des Dieux* p. 5.
- 10  *Astérix et les Normands* p. 23.
- 11  *Le Domaine des Dieux* p. 9.
- 12  Ibid.
- 13  *La Zizanie* p. 17.
- 14  *Le Tour de Gaule d'Astérix* p. 7.
- 15  *Obélix et Compagnie* p. 12.
- 16  Op. cit. p. 33.
- 17  *L'Odysée d'Astérix* p. 7.
- 18 

e.g. *Astérix et le Chaudron* p. 14.

- 19  *Le Bouclier Arverne* p. 14.
- 20  *Astérix chez les Helvètes* p. 35.
- 21  *Astérix aux Jeux Olympiques* ps. 13-14.
- 22  *Astérix chez les Helvètes* p. 8.
- 23  Op. cit. p. 48.
- 24  *Astérix en Hispanie* p. 8.
- 25  *Astérix en Corse* p. 6.
- 26  Op. cit., p. 46.
- 27  *Le Combat des Chefs* p. 30.
- 28  "Cette personne se prend pour Napoléon... C'est une allusion à l'archétype du fou : un fou qui se prend pour Napoléon." Rivière, <http://www.mage.univ-mulhouse.fr/riviere/bd/Asterix/combat/etude.html>
- 29  *Astérix en Corse* p. 4.
- 30  Op. cit., 45. Quoted in Rivière: <http://www.mage.univ-mulhouse.fr/riviere/bd/Asterix/>
- 31  *Astérix chez les Belges* p. 39, panel 9. Quoted in Rivière (gives different page #): <http://www.mage.univ-mulhouse.fr/riviere/bd/Asterix/belges/belges.html#etude>
- 32  Op. cit.
- 33  Fitzpatrick: "Immigrants" in Flower, J.E. (editor) *France Today* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1993, UK), 101.
- 34  For a detailed examination of the reasons for these strikes see Ardagh, John *France Today* (Penguin Books, 1995, UK), 100-1, 472-4, 595-6.
- 35  *Le Domaine Des Dieux* p. 22.
- 36  For more on immigrants see Ardagh, John *France Today* (Penguin Books, 1995, UK), 446-51.
- 37  *Le Domaine des Dieux* p. 25.
- 38  Ibid.

- 39  <http://www.Asterix.tm.fr/france/index.asp?f=1>
- 40  France's farm crusader: "Other commentators have drawn the comparison with Asterix: the French comic strip hero who sports a moustache remarkably similar to that worn by Mr Bové."
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/812995.stm>
- 41  "Fast-food giant McDonald's has signed up cartoon star Asterix the Gaul in its latest marketing campaign in France. The tiny warrior will replace Ronald McDonald in its adverts at the end of January [2002], reports *The Times* newspaper in London. The move ties in with the release of the movie *Asterix and Cleopatra* and the company will be hoping to appease anti-American feeling which has dogged McDonald's in France."
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/showbiz/1721029.stm>
- 42  Op. cit.
- 43  *Les Lauriers de César* p. 48.

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Les Lauriers de César (1972, Dargaud, France)