

# 1931: At the Height of the Colonial Good Conscience

Saturday 18 August 2007, by [RUSCIO Alain](#) (Date first published: 14 April 2005).

**For the historian Alain Ruscio, “a paternalistic racism” was manifested in 1931. Interview with Alain Ruscio, author of 1931: L’apogée de la bonne conscience morale” (La Dispute editions, 2005).**

**L’HUMANITE: What was the social political context of the era?**

ALAIN RUSCIO: In 1931 there was a major international colonial exhibition. It was the third largest colonial exhibition after those in Marseilles in 1906 and 1922. We can consider 1931 as the height of the colonial good conscience. There was quasi-unanimity and a consensus surrounding colonial values among the majority of French society.

**HUMA: What were the goals of this exhibition?**

ALAIN RUSCIO: It sought to demonstrate the different facets of the colonies to the French in France. It provided a space for spectacular African, Asian, or Oceanic monuments, placing the local inhabitants in their colonial settings. With this public manifestation of propaganda, the colonial administration wanted to share its values, imagery, and sense of certainty with French society. The goal was to also show those who had been colonized that they had entered an era of permanent French domination. At the time, most of the French considered that this domination showed its “trustees” the path to civilization.

**HUMA: Was it also a way of softening up racial terms?**

ALAIN RUSCIO: What was being demonstrated in 1931 was in one way more general than colonial exhibitions, it was not racist, but but it was aggressive. There was no colonial violence because there was no exaltation of war and of conquering. It was rather “a paternalistic racism”. France civilized its colonies, she was proud of it and it showed.

**HUMA: Were there anti-colonial manifestations?**

ALAIN RUSCIO: Three movements existed. The one made up of those who had themselves been colonized because there were leaflets made by the Vietnamese who were vehemently opposed to the exhibition. Then, on the day of the exhibit, on the 6<sup>th</sup> of May 1931, in Vicennes, the surrealists (Breton, Eluard, Tzara, Aragon) distributed a leaflet entitled “Do not visit the colonial exhibition.” Finally, at the communist and surrealist initiative, a counter-colonial exhibition was organized at Place du Combat, today called Colonel-Fabien. There were some 5,000 entries, having very little to do with the 8 million French who visited Vicennes. The protest was feeble. Today, however, such a protest is considered symbolic and so important.

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