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Colonial Education Goes International: A Micro-History of Knowledge Production and Circulation in an Age of Imperial Crisis

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Abstract

By focusing on the individual trajectory of Albert Charton (1893–1980), a French educationalist and civil servant who was active in West Africa and Indochina during the 1930s and 1940s, this article offers an original approach to the analysis of knowledge production and circulation in relation to the colonial world. More specifically, the study of Charton’s involvement in several imperial, international, and interimperial bodies allows for a new understanding of the evolution of discussions concerning the content and aims of colonial education, including its growing importance within development paradigms. Such a micro-historical perspective also reveals the mechanisms and sometimes contrasting (political) rationales of the process of internationalisation of educational knowledge, thus providing new insights into the interconnections between imperialism and internationalism.

Keywords: Education; Colonialism; Internationalisation; Albert Charton

Introduction

In 1949, in a long report presented at the twenty-fifth meeting of the International Institute of Political and Social Sciences (Comparative Civilisations), formerly known as the International Colonial Institute, French civil servant Albert Charton ran through the educational problems that arose in the overseas territories after the Second World War. He particularly talked about fighting illiteracy, training a skilled workforce, and preparing a local elite to take on new political responsibilities. He welcomed in this regard the many schooling plans launched by the colonial powers after 1945, as well as the intensification of technical cooperation in this field between European government officials, particularly in Africa. Finally, he also noted that international organisations, and in particular the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), played an increasingly important role in defining new educational paradigms meant to help improve living standards in the countries of the South, including “non-self-governing territories.”¹

¹ Archives nationales, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine [hereafter AN], 19770508/54, Extrait du compte rendu de la XXV^e session tenue à Bruxelles, le 28, 29, et 30 novembre 1949. Rapport d’Albert Charton sur la position actuelle de l’enseignement dans les pays faisant l’objet des études de l’Institut, 1950. In this article, the term “countries of the South” is used as a synonym of “Global South” and incorporates spaces that in the 1940s and 1950s were used to be referred to as “Third World”, “developing countries” or “backward countries” (mainly in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia and Oceania). For a critical discussion of the concept of “Global

Charton's analysis provides a particularly illuminating example of what American historian John Kent has called the "internationalisation of colonialism."² In a context of "crisis of empires"³ marked by the rise of anti-colonial movements and the outbreak of social and political unrest in several territories, colonial affairs (in this case education) were no longer circumscribed within a single imperial space but rather, as Albert Charton pointed out, took on an "international character."⁴ Interestingly, such historical processes have been the focus of recent scholarly attention. Several studies have highlighted the vast system of exchanges, circulation, and transfer of knowledge that was set up between colonial experts from the end of the nineteenth century.⁵ The role played by international actors in shaping colonial debates and policies since the 1920s has also been well examined, particularly in relation to labour and health issues.⁶ Quite surprisingly, however, historians exploring the "globalisation of education worlds"⁷ have taken little interest in these topics. Most research examining the process of internationalisation of educational debates and practices rarely includes colonial spaces and focuses mainly on Western countries, Latin America, and, to a lesser extent, Asia and the Pacific.⁸ Therefore, little is known about the ways in which educational actors and knowledge circulated between and beyond empires, or were discussed in international and interimperial forums, especially in the case of Africa.⁹

South", see Sebastian Haug, Jacqueline Braveboy-Wagner, and Günther Maihold, "The 'Global South' in the Study of World Politics: Examining a Meta Category," *Third World Quarterly* 42:9 (2021), 1923–44.

² John Kent, *The Internationalization of Colonialism: Britain, France, and Black Africa 1939–1956* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

³ Martin Thomas, Bob Moore, and Lawrence J. Butler, *Crises of Empire: Decolonization and Europe's Imperial States* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015).

⁴ AN, 19770508/54, Extrait du compte rendu de la XXV^e session tenue à Bruxelles, le 28, 29, et 30 novembre 1949. Rapport d'Albert Charton sur la position actuelle de l'enseignement dans les pays faisant l'objet des études de l'Institut, 1950.

⁵ Florian Wagner, *Colonial Internationalism and the Governmentality of Empire, 1893–1982* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Volker Barth and Roland Cvetkovski, eds., *Imperial Co-operation and Transfer, 1870–1930: Empires and Encounters* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015); Pierre Singaravélou, "Les stratégies d'internationalisation de la question coloniale et la construction transnationale d'une science de la colonisation à la fin du XIX^e siècle," *Monde(s)* 1:1 (2012), 135–57. For a recent theoretical reflection on the production and circulation of colonial knowledge, see Christoph Kämmerle and Jonas Kreienbaum, "An Imperial Cloud? Conceptualising Interimperial Connections and Transimperial Knowledge," *Journal of Modern European History* 14: 2 (2016), 164–82.

⁶ See, for instance, Philip J. Havik, "Regional Cooperation and Health Diplomacy in Africa: From Intra-colonial Exchanges to Multilateral Health Institutions," *História, Ciências, Saúde—Manguinhos* 27:1 (2020), 123–44; Cyrus Schayegh, "The Expanding Overlap of Imperial, International, and Transnational Political Activities, 1920s–1930s: A Belgian Case Study," *International Politics* 55 (2018), 782–802; Benoît Daviron, "Mobilizing Labour in African Agriculture: The Role of the International Colonial Institute in the Elaboration of a Standard of Colonial Administration, 1895–1930," *Journal of Global History* 5:3 (2010), 479–501. On the role of the League of Nations, Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo, "Developing Civilisation? Imperial Internationalism at the League of Nations (1920s–1930s)," *Histoire@Politique* 41 (2020), <https://histoire-politique.fr/index.php?numero=41&rub=pistes&item=47>. For the post-WWII period, see Jessica Lynne Pearson, *The Colonial Politics of Global Health: France and the United Nations in Postwar Africa* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2018).

⁷ Rita Hofstetter and Joëlle Droux, dir., *Globalisation des mondes de l'éducation. Circulation, connexions, réfractations (XIX^e et XX^e siècles)* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2015).

⁸ Juliette Dumont, "Le panaméricanisme, creuset et carrefour de l'internationalisme éducatif (1917–1945)," *Relations internationales* 3:183 (2020), 113–35; Sara Legrandjacques, "Interconnexions universitaires. Pour une approche transimpériale de l'enseignement supérieur en Asie coloniale, années 1850–1930," *Les Cahiers Srice* 1:20 (2018), 29–48; Julie McLeod and Fiona Paisley, "The Modernization of Colonialism and the Educability of the 'Native': Transpacific Knowledge Networks and Education in the Interwar Years," *History of Education Quarterly* 3:56 (2016), 473–502.

⁹ With some exceptions, however. See Barnita Bagchi, Eckhardt Fuchs, and Kate Rousmaniere, eds., *Connecting Histories of Education: Transnational and Cross-Cultural Exchanges in (Post)Colonial Education* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014); Joyce Goodman, Gary McCulloch, and William Richardson, eds., "'Empires Overseas' and 'Empires

This article aims to help fill this gap. To this end, it focuses on an individual trajectory, that of the French civil servant Albert Charton (1893–1980),¹⁰ which will be taken as a field of observation for investigating the dynamics of knowledge production and circulation in relation to colonial education in Africa before and after the Second World War.¹¹ A former teacher in the secondary schools of Casablanca and Rabat, he was later appointed Inspector-General of Education in French West Africa (1929–1937), as well as Inspector and Director of Public Instruction in Indochina (1939–1946, 1948–1952). Thanks to his key institutional positions and the expertise gained in the field, he was also a primary figure in several important educational debates in which he embodied the official view of French colonial authorities. In the 1930s, for instance, he played a central role in national and international discussions on the “adaptation” of education in the African territories. After 1945 he was one of the experts recruited by UNESCO to define a new educational paradigm specifically designed for the “backward countries” of the world, known as “fundamental education.” Finally, in the late 1940s he helped establish interimperial cooperation in education, which would develop considerably over the following decade (for a full biography, see Annex 1).

As recent studies on “global micro-history” have pointed out,¹² studying this kind of individual trajectory is of interest for at least two reasons. On the one hand, it sheds new light on the evolution of discussions concerning the content and aims of education in colonial Africa, and more particularly on the link between raising educational standards and the economic and social modernisation of “backward” territories.¹³ Not a lot of historical research has been done so far on this issue, which nevertheless occupied a central place in the development programmes set up by many imperial and international actors immediately before and after the Second World War.¹⁴ On the other hand, Albert Charton’s multiple commitments—he was active in several imperial, international, and interimperial bodies—help highlight the mechanisms and sometimes contrasting rationales of the process of internationalisation of educational knowledge, which also included the rise of competing forms of internationalism and cross-border cooperation.¹⁵ In

at Home’: Postcolonial and Transnational Perspectives on Social Change in the History of Education,” *Paedagogica Historica* 45:6 (2009).

¹⁰ For a short biography of Charton, see “Albert Charton,” in *L’inspection générale de l’instruction publique au XXe siècle: dictionnaire biographique des inspecteurs généraux et des inspecteurs de l’Académie de Paris, 1914–1939*, ed. Guy Caplat (Paris: INRP, 1997), 203–7.

¹¹ For an overview on the history of education in the French Empire and (post)colonial Africa, see Carole Reynaud-Paligot, *L’École aux colonies. Entre mission civilisatrice et racialisation, 1816–1940* (Ceyzérieu: Champ Vallon, 2020); Pascale Barthélémy, Emmanuelle Picard, and Rebecca Rogers, dir., “L’enseignement dans l’empire colonial français (XIXe–XXe siècles),” *Histoire de l’éducation* 128 (2010); Céline Labruene-Badiane, Marie-Albane de Suremain, and Pascal Bianchini, dir., *L’école en situation postcoloniale* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2012). For a comparative perspective, see Peter Kallaway and Rebecca Swartz, eds., *Empire and Education in Africa: The Shaping of a Comparative Perspective* (New York: Peter Lang, 2016); Héléne Charton and Marc Michel, dir., “Enseignement supérieur et Universités dans les espaces coloniaux: histoire, comparaisons (du XIX^e siècle aux indépendances),” *Outre-Mers, Revue d’histoire* 394–95 (2017).

¹² Romain Bertrand and Guillaume Calafat, dir., “Micro-analyse et histoire globale,” *Annales* 73:1 (2019).

¹³ Damiano Matasci, Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo, and Hugo Gonçalves Soares, eds., *Education and Development in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa: Policies, Paradigms, Entanglements* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

¹⁴ Joseph M. Hodge, Gerald Hödl, and Martina Kopf, eds., *Developing Africa: Concepts and Practices in Twentieth-Century Colonialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014); Ed Naylor, ed., *France’s Modernising Mission: Citizenship, Welfare and the Ends of Empire* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). See also Corinna R. Unger, *International Development: A Postwar History* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

¹⁵ The notions of “internationalisation” and “internationalism” are used here as umbrella terms for describing a wide range of connections between individuals and institutions from different states, regions, and locales, as well as forms and sometimes diverging visions and practices of international cooperation. On “internationalism,” see Jessica Reinisch, “Introduction: Agents of Internationalism,” *Contemporary European History* 25:2 (2016),

particular, they show the scope and limits of the first “intercolonial” meetings in the early 1930s, as well as the complex relations between colonial circles and UN organisations after 1945. Although the exchange and circulation of knowledge between these spheres was very intense, as attested by Albert Charton’s collaboration with UNESCO, this did not prevent the emergence of conflicts and rivalries that could fuel forms of “co-imperialism”¹⁶ and technical cooperation which sometimes competed with the activities and internationalist visions of the UN bodies, especially in Africa.¹⁷

In order to illuminate these complex entanglements, this article will focus on three singular, though significant, episodes in the life of Albert Charton. The first part will analyse his participation in the debates held during two “intercolonial” conferences on education organised in Paris in 1931. The second part will examine his role in shaping UNESCO’s fundamental-education programme after the Second World War. Finally, the third part will discuss Charton’s contribution to the emergence of interimperial cooperation in the field of education in the late 1940s.

Paris, 1931: Internationalising Colonial Education

During the 1931 Paris International Colonial Exhibition, two “intercolonial” conferences were held: one on “adapting education” (25–27 September) and the other on vocational and technical education (29–30 September). Around one hundred representatives from all parts of the French Empire attended, including Albert Charton, as well as a small number of foreign delegates from the United Kingdom, Portugal, the United States, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Belgium.¹⁸

The big issue on the agenda was “adapted education.” Since the beginning of the twentieth century, several personalities and theorists of colonisation, including Georges Hardy, director of the *École coloniale* between 1926 and 1932 and mentor of Albert Charton, had criticised the overly literary, bookish, and theoretical nature of the education provided to the colonised populations, especially in Africa.¹⁹ This, they argued, should be adapted to local needs in order to root the masses in their original context and avoid producing politically dangerous *déclassés* and “intellectual proletariat.” From a pedagogical point of view, teaching should be practical and convey concrete, simple, utilitarian knowledge. As emphasised by Minister Albert Sarraut in 1923, schools were supposed to train “useful producers” with a “taste for manual work and agricultural life,”²⁰ able to take part in the *mise en valeur* of the colonies. These precepts accompanied the gradual establishment of

195–205; Glenda Sluga and Patricia Clavin, eds., *Internationalisms: A Twentieth-Century History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). For the specific case of education, see Joëlle Droux and Rita Hofstetter eds., *Internationalismes éducatifs entre débats et combats (fin du 19e-premier 20e siècle)* (Berne: Peter Lang, 2020). On the history of internationalisation processes in the field of education, see Joëlle Droux and Rita Hofstetter, eds., “Internationalisation in Education: Issues, Challenges, Outcomes,” *Paedagogica Historica* 50:1–2 (2014); Marcelo Caruso, Thomas Koinzer, Christine Mayer, et al., *Zirkulation und Transformation: Pädagogische Grenzüberschreitungen in Historischer Perspektive* (Köln: Böhlau, 2013).

¹⁶ See James R. Fichter, ed., *British and French Colonialism in Africa, Asia and the Middle East: Connected Empires across the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Centuries* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

¹⁷ See, for instance, Jessica Pearson-Patel, “Promoting Health, Protecting Empire: Inter-Colonial Medical Cooperation in Postwar Africa,” *Monde(s)* 7:1 (2015), 213–30.

¹⁸ These are: Lourenço Cayola, Professor at the Higher Colonial School of Lisbon; W. J. Cooper, Commissioner of Education to the Interior Department (Washington, D.C., United States); Mr. Koeiman, Belgian Deputy; Sir George Maxwell, former Secretary-General of the government of the Federated Malay State; J. M. M. Monteiro, second-year student at the Colonial School of Lisbon (Colony of Cape-Verte); B.-G. Moulia, former member of the National Council of the Dutch East Indies; Georg Norregaard, representative of the Danish Embassy (Greenland).

¹⁹ Georges Hardy, *Une conquête morale, l’enseignement en AOF* (Paris, Armand Colin, 1917).

²⁰ Albert Sarraut, *La mise en valeur des colonies françaises* (Paris: Payot, 1923), 420.

native education systems in Indochina and French colonial Africa.²¹ Achievements varied greatly according to territory as well as metropolitan involvement, which was often financially inadequate. Nevertheless, by the turn of the 1930s French colonial authorities were keen to show the progress made in this area on the national and international stage. Thus, the aim of the two conferences held in Paris in 1931 was to present and promote the educational policies implemented in the colonised territories but also, as one of the organisers, Paul Crouzet, pointed out, to enable participants to compare “all the educational work done by the various world powers.”²²

Indeed, it is important to underline that the issue of adapting education was not confined to the territories of the French Empire. Since the early 1920s it had emerged as a real international problem that was widely discussed within all colonial administrations as well as in missionary and philanthropic circles. Debates were particularly fuelled by the publication of two surveys by the American Phelps-Stokes Fund (PSF). In 1919 its educational director, Thomas Jesse Jones, was tasked by American and British missionary societies, in collaboration with the Colonial Office in London, with conducting a study on education in the African colonies. Between 1920 and 1921 a first mission visited several territories in Central and West Africa as well as South Africa. A second PSF commission, also headed by Thomas Jesse Jones, went to East Africa in 1924. The subsequent reports, published in 1922 and 1925, provided a detailed description of the educational organisation of those countries and specified the type of education that should be provided to populations that were deemed “backward.” This was intended to meet the “educational needs of Africa”²³ and was directly inspired by the model implemented in the American South to educate African Americans since the mid-nineteenth century.²⁴ Its pedagogical content was summed up in a simple formula—the so-called “four essentials of education”—which included health and hygiene, home economics, technical training (especially agricultural), and recreation. The reports had a resounding impact. In 1924 Thomas Jesse Jones was received with full honours in London, where he presented the results of his survey.²⁵ The British government further set up an Advisory Committee on Native Education in Tropical Africa which in 1925 produced an important memorandum reflecting his precepts. It stated that education “should be adapted to the mentality, aptitudes, occupations and traditions of the various peoples” and that its aim was to promote “the advancement of the community as a whole through the improvement of agriculture, the development of native industries, the improvement of health, the training of

²¹ For Africa, see Silvester Trnovec, *The Conquest of the African Mind: History, Colonial Racism, and Education in Senegal and French West Africa, 1910–1945* (Bratislava: Slovak Academic Press, 2019); Harry Gamble, *Contesting French West Africa: Battles over Schools and the Colonial Order, 1900–1950* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017); Céline Labrune-Badiane and Étienne Smith, *Les Hussards noirs de la colonie. Instituteurs africains et ‘petites patries’ en AOF (1913–1960)* (Paris: Karthala, 2018); Tony Chafer, “Teaching Africans to Be French? France’s ‘Civilising Mission’ and the Establishment of a Public Education System in French West Africa, 1903–1930,” *Africa* 56:2 (2001), 190–209. On Indochina, see Thúy Phượng Nguyễn, *L’école française au Vietnam de 1945 à 1975: de la mission civilisatrice à la diplomatie culturelle* (Amiens: Encrage, 2017).

²² Exposition coloniale internationale, *L’adaptation de l’enseignement dans les colonies. Rapports et compte-rendu du congrès intercolonial de l’enseignement dans les colonies et les pays d’outre-mer, 25–27 septembre 1931* (Paris: Henri Didier, 1932), v.

²³ Thomas Jesse Jones, *Education in Africa: A Study of West, South, and Equatorial Africa by the African Education Commission* (New York: Phelps-Stokes Fund, 1922), xvi.

²⁴ For two detailed case studies, see Sybille Küster, “‘Book Learning’ versus ‘Adapted Education’: The Impact of Phelps-Stokesism on Colonial Education Systems in Central Africa in the Interwar Period,” *Paedagogica Historica* 43:1 (2007), 79–97; Gita Steiner-Khamsi and Hubert Quist, “The Politics of Educational Borrowing: Reopening the Case of Achimota in British Ghana,” *Comparative Education Review* 44:3 (2000), 272–99.

²⁵ Phelps-Stokes Fund Archives, New York Public Library, Schomburg Center for Research, MG 162, Box 44 (127), Dr. Jones Honoured, 26 March 1925.

the people in the management of their own affairs, and the inculcation of true ideals of citizenship and service.”²⁶ The debates also spread to other territories, including the Belgian Congo and the Portuguese possessions.²⁷ Not surprisingly, they echoed the thinking of French colonial educationalists which had been taking shape since the 1910s.

In this context the two “intercolonial” conferences in Paris enabled, for the first time, a broad discussion around these educational principles. At this point Albert Charton was at the beginning of his African career. He had been based in Dakar since 1929, where he worked as Inspector-General of Education. In Paris he only actively took part in the conference on vocational and technical education where he presented a report on the situation in French West Africa. In his address he strongly defended the reforms implemented by the French authorities in recent years. He noted that the development of technical and vocational education was an “urgent issue” and a key factor in the *mise en valeur* of West Africa. He further pointed out that “one of the main objectives of French colonisation [. . .] is improving native life and transforming agricultural life.”²⁸ In this respect he stressed the need for greater efforts in teaching agricultural and craft techniques, teacher training, and home economics for women. On this occasion he also set out the guidelines for turning “village schools” into “rural schools,” the new type of institutions he had just set up with the governor of French West Africa, Jules Brévié.²⁹ Agricultural education was at the heart of the programme as these institutions equipped themselves with farms and gardens. As pointed out by the historian Harry Gamble, these establishments were conceived as a means of addressing the challenges posed by the modernisation of the colonies, which was becoming increasingly necessary in the context of the Great Depression and *retrait impérial*.³⁰

Despite these innovations and initial reforms, however, Albert Charton acknowledged that “much [remained] to be done in AOF [French West Africa].”³¹ Indeed, the comparative approach underpinning the conference highlights the shortcomings and delays in implementing policies to adapt education in this territory. This was confirmed by his colleague André Davesne, an Inspector of Primary Education and author of several textbooks for teaching French in West African schools.³² In his lecture he pointed out that the education provided in this territory was still too “literary.” He noted that, despite official recommendations and reforms undertaken in the 1920s, teaching in primary schools remained “theoretical, bookish [and] rather ill-adapted to present-day needs.”³³ He particularly

²⁶ Colonial Office Advisory Committee on Native Education in the British Tropical African Dependencies, *Educational Policy in British Tropical Africa: Memorandum Submitted to the Secretary of State for the Colonies* (London: H. M. Stationery Office, 1925), 4.

²⁷ See Maud Seghers, “Phelps-Stokes in Congo: Transferring Educational Policy Discourse to Govern Metropole and Colony,” *Paedagogica Historica* 40:4 (2004), 455–77; Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo, *The “Civilizing Mission” of Portuguese Colonialism, 1870–1930* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 109–33.

²⁸ Exposition coloniale internationale, *Congrès intercolonial de l’enseignement technique d’outre-mer, 29–30 septembre 1931* (Le Mans: Imprimerie Monnoyer, 1931), 9.

²⁹ On the history of *écoles rurales* in French West Africa, see Harry Gamble, “Peasants of the Empire: Rural Schools and the Colonial Imaginary in 1930s French West Africa,” *Cahiers d’études africaines* 3:195 (2009), 775–804. About “adaptation” in Madagascar, see Marie-Christine Deleigne, “Les jardins scolaires des écoles du premier degré à Madagascar (1916–1951),” *Histoire de l’éducation* 128 (2010), 103–28.

³⁰ Gamble, “Peasants of the Empire,” 786.

³¹ Exposition coloniale internationale, *L’adaptation de l’enseignement dans les colonies*, 301.

³² See Gérard Vigner, “Une grammaire scolaire dans l’Afrique coloniale. La grammaire dans la série ‘Mamadou et Bineta’: grammaire réduite ou grammaire adaptée?,” *Documents pour l’histoire du français langue étrangère ou seconde* 52 (2014), <https://journals.openedition.org/dhfiles/3616>.

³³ Exposition coloniale internationale, *L’adaptation de l’enseignement dans les colonies*, 87.

pointed to shortcomings in the training of teachers who, according to him, were not sufficiently prepared to provide suitable education.³⁴

This critical view is particularly revealing in terms of the double logic that governed the process of internationalisation of native education in the interwar period. On the one hand, these two conferences helped place the educational evolution of the colonised territories in a broader international context. Albert Charton and André Davesne drew lessons from this with regard to West Africa, a region which was seen as a “laggard” in this field.³⁵ Similarly, other participants also emphasised the virtues of drawing comparisons. The British delegate and former secretary-general of the government of the Federated Malay States, George Maxwell, declared that the meeting had provided “all the colonising nations with new lights for the fulfilment of a singularly difficult task,”³⁶ while Paul Crouzet stressed that the conference “will have been instructive to all.”³⁷ On the other hand, it should be noted that the “intercolonial” scope of these meetings remained very limited. Indeed, foreign delegates were very few and played a minor role in the debates. They confined themselves to presenting more or less lengthy reports describing the educational organisation of their respective territories and answering the few questions asked by the audience. Moreover, as Paul Crouzet again pointed out, it was impossible to make valid recommendations that could apply to all colonies. The prevailing doctrines were extremely varied—for example, in terms of languages of instruction (European or vernacular)—and this would prevent the development of a single educational model.³⁸ Thus, while ideas and proposals for reform did circulate across national and imperial boundaries, it was impossible to establish effective cooperation in this field, develop a common educational paradigm, or standardise colonial policies.

This conclusion also applies to the debates taking place in other international and imperial circles of the time, such as the International Colonial Institute (ICI), which Albert Charton joined in 1937.³⁹ This organisation, founded in Brussels in 1893, put the question of educational adaptation on the agenda of its 1931 meeting, which was also held in Paris. In the introductory report the Belgian Octave Louwers provided a comparative analysis of educational organisation in the British, French, Belgian, and Portuguese colonies in the world. He noted that the education of the natives was now an “irrepressible phenomenon” and that it was “necessary to give the natives education,” especially so as to support the economic development of the colonies. According to Louwers, the reports submitted by ICI members, including prominent figures such as Georges Hardy, also showed that the “cause of adaptation has been won almost everywhere at present.”⁴⁰ All agreed that the education of native people “must be good, adapted to their social state, to their mentality, to their needs, and to the place they have to take in the general economy and evolution of civilization.”⁴¹ Nevertheless, in this case too participants confined

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 93–4.

³⁵ Gamble, “Peasants of the Empire,” 778.

³⁶ Exposition coloniale internationale, *L'adaptation de l'enseignement dans les colonies*, 290.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 311.

³⁸ For a comparative analysis, see Ana Isabel Madeira, “Portuguese, French and British Discourses on Colonial Education: Church-State Relations, School Expansion and Missionary Competition in Africa, 1890–1930,” *Paedagogica Historica* 41:1–2 (2005), 31–60.

³⁹ It has to be noted that during the 1930s the content and aims of colonial education were discussed by a wide range of actors, including missionaries, anthropologists, linguists, and reformers linked to the New Education Fellowship. On these debates, see Peter Kallaway, “Education, Health, and Social Welfare in the Late Colonial Context: The International Missionary Council and Educational Transition in the Interwar Years with Specific Reference to Colonial Africa,” *History of Education* 38:2 (2009), 217–46.

⁴⁰ Institut colonial international, *L'enseignement aux indigènes/Native Education. Rapports préliminaires, XXIe session, Paris, 5–8 mai 1931* (Bruxelles: Établissements généraux d'imprimerie, 1931), 12.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 15–16.

themselves to presenting the situation in their respective colonies and did not call for greater international cooperation.⁴²

Paris 1946: Internationalising Development

The situation changed radically after the Second World War. Debates on colonial education were increasingly linked to broader reflections on the “development” of the countries of the South. UN specialised agencies, and UNESCO in particular, played a central role in this process.⁴³ As its first director-general, Julian Huxley, noted, this organisation rapidly tried to define a new educational paradigm—called fundamental education—in an attempt to support a campaign which worked towards “equalising” living and working conditions throughout the world.⁴⁴

Once again, Albert Charton’s trajectory helps shed light on the new rationales that governed the production and circulation of educational knowledge. Back in Europe after more than twenty years spent overseas, in 1946 he became the director of the Service de l’Enseignement et de la Jeunesse of the Ministry of Overseas France and worked very actively with UNESCO. He was one of the contributors to a major work entitled *Fundamental Education: Common Ground for All People*. Published in 1947, the text sought to define the contours of a paradigm in support of the “global attack”⁴⁵ on ignorance advocated by Julian Huxley at the first UNESCO General Conference held in Paris in November–December 1946. The fight against illiteracy was no doubt a priority but particular attention was also paid to the living conditions of peoples in the countries of the South (health, nutrition, housing, etc.), including the colonies, as well as to the modernisation of agricultural techniques.

In the months that followed UNESCO became the main hub of the global debate on the links between raising educational standards and the social and economic development of the world’s “backward” countries. The content, scope, and methods of fundamental education were gradually defined during several informal meetings held at the Paris headquarters between 1946 and 1948.⁴⁶ Under the aegis of a former British colonial official, John Bowers, they brought together dozens of experts from the West and the South (Brazil, China, Egypt, Guatemala, Mexico, India, and Turkey, among others),⁴⁷ representatives of the New Education Fellowship,⁴⁸ and members of European colonial administrations. Albert Charton very regularly took part in these meetings. He was joined by other leading specialists such as Margaret Read, director of the Colonial Department of

⁴² Similar conclusions were also drawn by the participants at the *Conférence internationale pour l'enfance africaine*, which took place in Geneva in 1931. On this conference, see Dominique Marshall, “Children’s Rights in Imperial Political Cultures: Missionary and Humanitarian Contributions to the Conference on the African Child of 1931,” *International Journal of Children’s Rights* 12:3 (2004), 273–318.

⁴³ On this issue, see Corinna R. Unger, Marc Frey, and Sonke Kunkel, eds., *International Organizations and Development (1945–1990)* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Amy L. S. Staples, *The Birth of Development: How the World Bank, Food and Agriculture Organization, and World Health Organization Changed the World, 1945–1965* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2006); Daniel R. Maul, *Human Rights, Development and Decolonization: The International Labour Organization, 1940–1970* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

⁴⁴ Phillip W. Jones, *International Policies for Third World Education: UNESCO, Literacy and Development* (London–New York: Routledge, 1988).

⁴⁵ Julian Huxley, *L’UNESCO. Ses objectifs et sa philosophie* (Paris: UNESCO, 1946), 29.

⁴⁶ On the history of fundamental education, see Joseph Watras, “UNESCO’s Programme of Fundamental Education, 1946–1959,” *History of Education* 39:2 (2010), 219–37.

⁴⁷ On the role of non-Western educationalists in the early years of UNESCO, see Joseph Watras, “Was Fundamental Education Another Form of Colonialism?,” *International Review of Education* 53:1 (2007), 55–72.

⁴⁸ Joseph Watras, “The New Education Fellowship and UNESCO’s Programme of Fundamental Education,” *Paedagogica Historica* 47:1–2 (2011), 191–205.

Table 1. UNESCO's Panels of Experts on Fundamental Education, 1946–1948

22 August 1946	Paris	Manuel Martínez Báez (Mexico); Elena Torres Cuéllar (UNESCO); Emmanuel Gabriel (UNESCO); Joseph Albert Lauwerys (United Kingdom); Henning Ravnholt (Denmark); Margaret Read (United Kingdom); Anísio Spínola Teixeira (Brazil); Frank Harvey Vivian (United Kingdom); Howard E. Wilson (United States); Kuo Yu-Shou (UNESCO); Alfred Zimmern (UNESCO)
9–10 December 1946	Paris	Albert Charton (France); Khwaja Ghulam Saiyidain (India); Chu Shih-Ying (China); W. E. F. Ward (United Kingdom)
31 December 1946–2 January 1947	London	Joseph Albert Lauwerys (United Kingdom); Margaret Read (United Kingdom); Chu Shih-Ying (China); Kuo Yu-Shou (UNESCO)
8–10 February 1947	Paris	Manuel Martínez Báez (Mexico); John Bowers (UNESCO); Paolo Carneiro (Brazil); Albert Charton (France); Elena Torres Cuéllar (UNESCO); Emmanuel Gabriel (UNESCO); Joseph Albert Lauwerys (United Kingdom); Kuo Yu-Shou (UNESCO)
17–19 April 1947	Paris	Manuel Martínez Báez (Mexico); Paolo Carneiro (Brazil); Albert Charton (France); Marion Coulon (Belgium); Ranjit Mohan Chetsingh (India); Reşat Nuri Guntekin (Turkey); Richard A. C. Oliver (United Kingdom); P. Post (Netherlands); Margaret Read (United Kingdom); Alf Sommerfelt (Norway)
20 June–3 July 1947	Paris	Jean-Jacques Deheyn (Belgium); Antonio Goubaud Carrera (Guatemala); André Martinet (France); R. L. Mellema (Netherlands); Adolph Myers (United Kingdom); Jaroslav Nykl (Czechoslovakia); Ivor Armstrong Richards (United States); Aurélien Sauvageot (France); Joseph Vendryes (France)
26 April–1 May 1948	Paris	Albert Charton (France); Maurice Colombain (International Labour Organisation); Hubert Deschamps (France); Zakir Husain (India); Ahmed Hussein Bey (Egypt); Léon Jeunehomme (Belgium); Pieter Koeze (Netherlands); Cyril Henry Philips (United Kingdom); Frederick Rex (United States); James W. Welch (United Kingdom)

the London Institute of Education and one of the authors of the 1944 report *Mass Education in African Society*.⁴⁹ Several other renowned educationalists were also present, including Joseph Albert Lauwerys, Aurélien Sauvageot, and Ivor Armstrong Richards (see Table 1).

The main issue at the heart of the debates was how to use education to foster the socio-economic development of the countries of the South, including “non-self-governing territories.” This was not a new problem and Albert Charton could make use of his long experience gained in Africa and Indochina. Indeed, such problems had already been largely discussed in several colonial and missionary circles since the 1920s. As the two “intercolonial” meetings of 1931 testify, it was also the subject of intense reflections within European administrations which published numerous reports on this question and made it one of the priorities of postwar colonial policy, for example at the Brazzaville conference in 1944.⁵⁰ During the debates held at UNESCO, Charton made it

⁴⁹ On the history of mass education in the British Empire, see Stephen Jackson, “Mass Education and the British Empire », *History Compass*,” 20:1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12709>.

⁵⁰ David E. Gardinier, “Les recommandations de la Conférence de Brazzaville sur les problèmes d’éducation,” in *Brazzaville, janvier-février 1944: aux sources de la décolonisation*, ed. Institut Charles-de-Gaulle (Paris: Plon, 1988), 170–80.

clear that there was a “close interdependence between economic and social development and education,” the latter being both a consequence of and a condition for raising living standards in “backward or poorly educated countries.”⁵¹ These effects of interdependence were presented as self-evident and were not explored in any particular detail. They were merely based on a subjective impression shaped by personal experience: no precise data or statistics were provided in support of this view. For this reason, at the end of a meeting organised by UNESCO in April 1947 the experts agreed that the definition of the concept of fundamental education should remain flexible and adaptable according to circumstances. One of its characteristics, however, was that it encompassed all sectors of a community’s economic and social life, from children to adults and including women. Albert Charton made this point very clearly:

It is for education to combat scourges and epidemics and, especially in the case of women, to wage the campaign against stillbirths and on behalf of child welfare and elementary hygiene in the home. It is for education to transform everyday life, to extend food production, improve the standard of nutrition and housing, to secure a water-supply.⁵²

This action had to be taken “immediately” in relation to “less developed” communities or social groups, precisely where “poverty, disease and ignorance constitute a danger to human progress and international understanding.”⁵³ The Far East, the Middle East, tropical Africa, and Latin America were presented by Albert Charton as the regions where the problem of popular and adult education was most acute, albeit to varying degrees depending on the context. In Asian countries with a strong civilisational and religious tradition the challenge was mainly to strengthen and expand existing educational structures. In the Arab and Muslim world, which was more receptive to Western influence and modernising reformism, as well as in Latin America, it was more a question of helping to meet the demand for education expressed by the local populations. In Africa education was, on the contrary, the indispensable condition “for obtaining access to the simplest forms of civilisation and is also an essential factor in improving the life of the people.” This differentiation between the regions of the world did not prevent Charton from concluding that UNESCO’s action was more generally aimed at “closed societies [. . .] in which human beings are cut off from general communication with the rest of the world.”⁵⁴

The expert panels in which the French official took part also helped set out the methods and techniques to be used in conducting fundamental-education campaigns. Particular attention was paid to the question of languages (which was the subject of an *ad hoc* meeting in April 1948) or the use of audio-visual material (such as radio or educational films). These theoretical reflections accompanied the preparation of the first UNESCO pilot projects in the field. In 1947 a fundamental-education programme was launched in the Marbial Valley in Haiti under the charge of Swiss-born American anthropologist Alfred Métraux.⁵⁵ An American missionary, Hugh Wells Hubbard, was further tasked with conducting a fundamental-education experiment in China which focused

⁵¹ UNESCO, *Fundamental Education: Common Ground for All Peoples* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1947), 131.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 53.

⁵³ UNESCO Archives, Paris, 375 A 022/06 “47.04,” Report of the Secretariat on the First Meeting of Experts on Fundamental Education, 17–19 April 1947.

⁵⁴ UNESCO, *Fundamental Education*, 126–27.

⁵⁵ On the Haiti project, see Chantalle F. Verna, “Haiti, the Rockefeller Foundation, and UNESCO’s Pilot Project in Fundamental Education, 1948–1953,” *Diplomatic History* 40:2 (2016), 269–95; Christine Laurière, “D’une île à l’autre. Alfred Métraux en Haïti,” *Gradhiva. Revue d’anthropologie et d’histoire des arts* 1 (2005), 181–207.

on producing hygiene-education materials (placards, posters, brochures, and films).⁵⁶ The following year the Danish agronomist Marius Gormsen was sent to Mponela, Nyasaland, as a consultant for a mass-education campaign organised by the Colonial Office.⁵⁷ Albert Charton did not take an active part in these experiments, which remained relatively small in scale and quickly encountered several technical and financial problems. Nevertheless, he continued to work with UNESCO; for example, in 1950 he wrote a presentation for the French section of a touring exhibition on fundamental-education textbooks which was held in Paris, Brussels, Amsterdam, and London.⁵⁸ He also joined the French National Commission for UNESCO.

The central role played by Albert Charton within the expert panels makes it possible to identify two central elements in the process of internationalisation of educational debates after the Second World War. On the one hand, his interventions at UNESCO clearly show that the experiments carried out in the colonial world, particularly in Africa, between the two world wars were used as a reservoir of ideas and practices which fully contributed to the definition of a paradigm like fundamental education. On the other hand, they illustrate the importance of educational issues in the initial international “development” policies. Indeed, the fight against educational inequalities had become a central issue for all the countries of the South and was one of the priorities of the technical-assistance programmes set up by UN organisations, particularly after the creation of the UN Expanded Programme of Technical Assistance in 1949.

Paris 1947: Imperial Internationalism

While they testify to the circulation of knowledge between colonial milieus and international organisations, Albert Charton’s activities in the aftermath of the Second World War also help shed light on the emergence of a new form of imperial internationalism, closely linked to the attempts of European powers to re-legitimise colonialism’s “civilising mission” in an age of imperial crisis. At that time, colonial rule was indeed increasingly contested not only by anti-colonial and pan-African movements but also within the United Nations.⁵⁹ Against this background, colonial administrations intensified their mutual collaboration in many technical fields. In doing so, their goal was to showcase the “compatibility” of the colonial policy with the emerging global discourse on development and human rights.

Between 1945 and 1948 more than twenty-five bilateral or multilateral meetings were organised in Europe or Africa on a variety of subjects such as health, epidemics, labour, animal diseases, soil conservation, and agriculture. Education too was at the heart of the discussions.⁶⁰ In June 1947 a meeting took place in Paris between representatives of the British Colonial Office (the influential educational advisers Christopher Cox and William Ernest Frank Ward), Belgian Congo (Jean-Paul Quix), and a French delegation led by Albert Charton. The aim was to exchange experiences but also identify ways of establishing cooperation in the field of education. Among the topics at the heart of the discussions, fundamental education received particular attention. Three elements were placed at the

⁵⁶ On UNESCO’s educational activities in China, see Yarong Chen, “The Historical Relations between UNESCO and China with a Focus on the Mutual Impacts, 1945–1950” (PhD diss., Aalborg University, 2020).

⁵⁷ On the Nyasaland project, see Daniel Kark, “Equivocal Empire: British Community Development in Central Africa, 1945–1955” (PhD diss., University of New South Wales, 2008), 203–10.

⁵⁸ UNESCO, UN SCO/LD/71, Guide de l’exposition sur les manuels d’éducation de base, 3 février 1950.

⁵⁹ Raymond Ray Douglas, Michael D. Callahan, and Elizabeth Bishop, eds., *Imperialism on Trial: International Oversight of Colonial Rule in Historical Perspective* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006).

⁶⁰ Marc Michel, “La coopération intercoloniale en Afrique noire, 1942–1950: un néocolonialisme éclairé?,” *Relations internationales* 34 (1983), 155–71.

heart of this paradigm: improving school attendance, especially at the primary level; combating illiteracy; and raising the standards of “hygiene, housing, agricultural production, professional skills, cultural activities (art and music).”⁶¹ Emphasis was also placed on other issues such as women’s education, technical and vocational education, teacher training, and the question of languages to be used in schools and literacy campaigns (local or metropolitan). In all these areas the participants called for “the greatest possible co-operation between governments,”⁶² especially in the production and use of films, books, printed material, and radio, but also in the secondment or temporary exchange of personnel.

The parallel with the agenda set by UNESCO experts is striking. This similarity was facilitated by actors such as Albert Charton, Margaret Read, and W. E. F. Ward, who were present on all occasions and helped circulate knowledge between international and imperial circles (see Table 1). However, it also reflects the emergence of rivalries and competition with UN organisations, UNESCO in particular.⁶³ Colonial experts clearly and repeatedly pointed out that the responsibility for educational development in the African colonies lay with the European administrations. In 1948, Albert Charton made the same point at a UNESCO meeting, namely that stimulating scientific research and providing education in the colonies was a “duty of the mother country.”⁶⁴ Thus, inter-imperial cooperation was more than a space for producing new knowledge on education: it was very explicitly conceived as a strategy for defending the “colonial educational record” in a context of strong internal and external opposition.⁶⁵ On the one hand, it helped demonstrate on the national and international stage the metropolises’ renewed commitment to the “well-being” of the local populations, including in terms of education.⁶⁶ On the other hand, as historians such as Jessica Lynne Pearson have shown, it provided a valuable argument for avoiding any “intrusion” from international experts in sub-Saharan Africa, the only part of the world still almost entirely under colonial rule.⁶⁷ The meetings between colonial experts made it possible to develop common positions on issues that were on the agenda of UN bodies based in Geneva and New York. As Albert Charton pointed out in a note from May 1947, European colonial administrations and, where applicable, the Ministry of Overseas France had “the greatest interest in adopting together with the British and Belgian delegates a joint or at least parallel attitude towards the United Nations and the specialised agencies.”⁶⁸ In 1949, for example, several meetings were convened to establish a common response to the resolutions passed by the UN Assembly in November 1948 regarding the development of education in the trust territories. These included calls for improved access to education and the creation of a

⁶¹ Archives nationales d’outre-mer, Aix-en Provence [hereafter ANOM], 1AFFPOL/1389 (bis), Conférence anglo-franco-belge sur l’éducation dans les territoires d’outre-mer, 10–14 juin 1947.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ On the rivalry between UN organisations and colonial administrations, see Philip J. Havik and José Pedro Monteiro, “Portugal, the World Health Organisation and the Regional Office for Africa: From Founding Member to Outcast (1948–1966),” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 49:4 (2021), 712–41.

⁶⁴ UNESCO, UNESCO/FE/Conf.1/SR 7, Fundamental Education. Meeting of Experts, Summary Report, 29 April 1948.

⁶⁵ On similar issues (related to living standards), see Vincent Bonnetcase, *La pauvreté au Sahel: du savoir colonial à la mesure internationale* (Paris: Karthala, 2011).

⁶⁶ Naïma Maggetti, “La Grande-Bretagne à l’ONU dans les années 1940 et 1950: sa défense d’un colonialisme ‘libéral et éclairé,’” *Relations internationales* 1:177 (2019), 31–44.

⁶⁷ Jessica Lynne Pearson, “Defending Empire at the United Nations: The Politics of International Colonial Oversight in the Era of Decolonisation,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 45:3 (2017), 525–49.

⁶⁸ ANOM, 1AFFPOL/2225, Note pour Monsieur le Directeur des Affaires politiques, 9 mai 1947. Objet. Collaboration technique en Afrique.

university in the African territories concerned.⁶⁹ In March 1949, following a meeting with his French and Belgian colleagues, W. E. F. Ward was tasked with writing a memorandum detailing the reasons for refusing to set up a university shared by the African trust territories. This proposal, it was claimed, was not only “completely unfeasible and likely to seriously harm the interests of the Africans,”⁷⁰ but would also mean recognising, at least indirectly, the inadequacy of the educational provision offered by the European metropolises in charge of these territories. This argument could then be instrumentalised by “anti-colonial propaganda.”

Still informal and barely structured, this form of imperial internationalism gradually became institutionalised in the late 1940s. The first “Inter-African” offices were created shortly after colonial experts met in Brazzaville (conference on sleeping sickness) and Goma (conference on soil conservation) in 1948. A Scientific Council for Africa South of the Sahara (CSA), headed by the renowned British biologist Edgar Barton Worthington, was also set up in the aftermath of the African Regional Scientific Conference held in Johannesburg in October 1949.⁷¹ In January 1950, a few weeks after the launch of the United Nations Expanded Programme of Technical Assistance, an intergovernmental body, the Commission for Technical Co-operation in Africa South of the Sahara (CCTA), was founded in Paris. It included representatives from France, the United Kingdom, Portugal, Belgium, Southern Rhodesia, and the Union of South Africa.⁷² In the 1950s the CCTA carried out intense technical and scientific activities, organising several dozen conferences that brought together a considerable number of colonial experts on many subjects.⁷³ Education was also part of its spectrum of activities: meetings between the heads of colonial education services were organised in Accra in 1950, Nairobi in 1951, Tananarive in 1954, and Luanda in 1957.⁷⁴ Given the differences in the institutional organisation of the various African territories, however, no joint projects were conducted on the ground.

Having once again left Europe for Indochina in 1948, Albert Charton did not take part in the activities of this new intergovernmental organisation. He nevertheless continued to be involved in several interimperial scholarly circles. In 1949 he presented a detailed report on education in overseas territories at a meeting of the International Institute of Political and Social Sciences Concerning Countries of Different Civilisations, which was the new name taken by the ICI in 1948. After his return to France in 1952 and until 1955 he was president of this body, which was renamed in 1954 the International Institute of Differing Civilisations. He attended several meetings, including an “intercolonial symposium” held in Bordeaux in 1952 where he presented another report on the issue of education.⁷⁵ During these activities he shared his thoughts on the future of the

⁶⁹ Assemblée des Nations unies, *Développement de l'instruction dans les Territoires sous tutelle*, 18 novembre 1948, <https://research.un.org/fr/docs/ga/quick/regular/3>.

⁷⁰ ANOM, 1AFFPOL/1389 (bis), Letter to the Under-Secretary of State, undated.

⁷¹ Damiano Matasci, “Internationalising Colonial Knowledge: Edgar Barton Worthington and the Scientific Council for Africa, 1949–1956,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 48:5 (2020), 892–913.

⁷² For an account of the history of the CCTA, see Isebill V. Gruhn, “The Commission for Technical Co-Operation in Africa, 1950–65,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 9:3 (1971), 459–69.

⁷³ Cláudia Castelo and Frederico Ágoas, “Inter-African Cooperation in the Social Sciences in the Era of Decolonization: A Case of Science Diplomacy,” *Centaurus* 63:1 (2021), 67–83.

⁷⁴ For an overview on the CCTA’s activities in the field of education, see Damiano Matasci, “Une ‘UNESCO africaine’? Le Ministère de la France d’Outre-mer, la coopération éducative intercoloniale et la défense de l’empire, 1945–1957,” *Monde(s)* 1:13 (2018), 195–214; E. T. Verdier, “CCTA-CSA and International Cooperation in the Field of Education,” *Civilisations* 10: 2 (1960), 201–10.

⁷⁵ See “Problèmes d’éducation outre-mer,” in *Symposium intercolonial (27 juin–3 juillet 1952)*, ed. Albert Charton (Bordeaux: Imprimerie Delmas, 1954), 50–2.

colonised territories, defending, not without a certain paternalism, an “enlightened conception” of colonialism and the benefits of the “civilising mission.”⁷⁶

Conclusion

Albert Charton’s trajectory provides a particularly interesting field of observation for analysing the entanglements that characterised the process of internationalisation of colonial knowledge. The micro-historical analysis conducted in this article makes it possible, first of all, to show the ways in which the ideas, models, and practices of colonial education were produced and circulated between various imperial, international, and interimperial bodies. In the 1930s “intercolonial” events were seen as a means of establishing a positive image of colonialism by publicising the commitment of government authorities to improving the educational level and living conditions of the colonised populations. After the Second World War, UNESCO and other UN specialised agencies helped place the question of education at the forefront of an international agenda that went far beyond the imperial sphere. Colonial experts such as Albert Charton were actively involved in this process. Nevertheless, the existence of such a “circulatory regime”⁷⁷ did not prevent the emergence of competing forms of internationalism, which led to the creation of new intergovernmental bodies such as CCTA. These complex interactions show that education during this period became one of the battlefields where “conflicting modernities”⁷⁸ and divergent visions of decolonisation clashed.

Furthermore, the debates examined in this article provide a better understanding of the link between raising educational standards and the economic and social modernisation of “backward” countries. These problems were already apparent in the 1920s and 1930s, as shown by the discussions on adapted education at the “intercolonial” conferences held in Paris. Thus, the colonial world was a veritable “laboratory” where conceptions that associated education with raising standards of living gradually took shape.⁷⁹ These discourses and practices were later reactivated by other actors after the Second World War, serving as a basis for developing new paradigms such as fundamental education. An examination of Albert Charton’s trajectory allows us to show very clearly how international organisations such as UNESCO drew from colonial expertise a body of knowledge and practices that would help prepare their actions on the ground in the countries of the South. More generally, this case study also shows the value of decentring the history of colonialism by adopting a “connected,”⁸⁰ “decentred,”⁸¹ or

⁷⁶ Labrune-Badiane and Smith, *Les Hussards noirs de la colonie*, 583–91. See also Thúy Phượng Nguyễn, “De la ‘mission civilisatrice’ à la mission culturelle: un discours (post)colonial contrarié (Indochine 1946–1952),” in *Repenser la « mission civilisatrice ». L’éducation dans le monde colonial et postcolonial au XXe siècle*, ed. Damiano Matasci, Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo, and Hugo Gonçalves Dores (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2020), 141–56.

⁷⁷ Pierre-Yves Saunier, “Les régimes circulatoires du domaine social 1800–1940: projets et ingénierie de la convergence et de la différence,” *Genèses* 2:71 (2008), 4–25.

⁷⁸ Tony Chafer, “Conflicting Modernities: Battles over France’s Policy of Adapted Education in French West Africa,” in *France’s Modernising Mission: Citizenship, Welfare and the Ends of Empire*, ed. Ed Naylor (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 3–30.

⁷⁹ On the notion of “laboratory,” see Helen Tilley, *Africa as a Living Laboratory: Empire, Development, and the Problem of Scientific Knowledge, 1870–1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

⁸⁰ Simon J. Potter and Jonathan Saha, “Global History, Imperial History and Connected Histories of Empire,” *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 16:1 (2015), <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/577738>. See also Janne Lahti, ed., *German and United States Colonialism in a Connected World: Entangled Empires* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

⁸¹ Gareth Curless, Stacey Hynd, Temilola Alanamu, et al., eds., “Editors’ Introduction: Networks in Imperial History,” *Journal of World History* 26:4 (2015), 712.

“trans-imperial”⁸² approach capable of placing within a single analytical framework the dynamics of rivalries, connections, and cooperation that accompanied European colonial expansion and the process of the empires’ disintegration.

Annex I. Albert Charton: An Imperial, International, and Interimperial Career

1893	Born in Dounoux
1914–1919	Officer in the French army. Wounded in Artois (1915) and Verdun (1916)
1921	<i>Agrégation</i> in History and Geography
1920–1926	Professor at the Lycées of Casablanca (1920–1923) and Rabat (1923–1926)
1926–1929	Directeur d’études at the Institut des hautes études marocaines
1929–1937	Inspector-General of Education in French West Africa; Intercolonial congresses on education in Paris (1931); <i>Écoles rurales</i> in French West Africa (1930s); Creation of the Institut français d’Afrique noire (Dakar, 1936); Member of the International Colonial Institute (1937)
1937–1939	Director of the Intercolonial Information Service and Director of the Educational Service of the Ministry of Colonies
1939–1946	Director of Public Instruction in Indochina; Creation of the École supérieure des sciences (Hanoi, 1939)
1946–1948	Director of the Service de l’Enseignement et de la Jeunesse of the Ministry of Overseas France; UNESCO panels of experts on Fundamental Education (1946–1948) and colonial meeting on education (June 1947)
1948–1952	Inspector-General of Education in Indochina; Chief of the French educational service and cultural affairs adviser (1950–1952)
1952–1963	Inspector-General of Public Instruction in France; Member of the UNESCO French national commission; President of the International Institute of Differing Civilisations (1952–1955)
1963	Retirement
1980	Death in Mérignac

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⁸² Daniel Hedinger and Nadin Heé, “Transimperial History—Connectivity, Cooperation and Competition,” *Journal of Modern European History* 16:4 (2018), 429–52.

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