Gérard Prunier. 2025. *Colonialism Devours Itself: The Warning of Françafrique*. London: C. Hurst & Company. 293 pp.

In *Colonialism Devours Itself*, Gérard Prunier writes a historically grounded and deliberately unsentimental analysis of *Françafrique*, the informal postcolonial system through which France maintained political, military, and economic influence over many Francophone African countries after independence. Rather than treating Françafrique as a scandalous aberration or a mere synonym for corruption, Prunier frames it as a coherent, albeit morally compromised, geopolitical construct that once served real purposes before collapsing under the weight of its own contradictions. The book reads not as a requiem, but as a warning, primarily to France, about what happens when you manage imperial decline through backroom deals and unspoken arrangements.

The opening chapters establish a genealogy that proves central to Prunier's argument. He insists that you cannot understand Françafrique without situating it within France's peculiar colonial trajectory and its post–World War II crisis of legitimacy. Unlike Britain, which managed a more flexible imperial disengagement, French decolonization was marked by centralism, ideological universalism, and a stubborn reluctance to actually relinquish control. Independence in Africa thus produced a strange hybrid: inclusion without autonomy, a formula that got operationalized through informal networks linking African elites, French military officers, intelligence services, and business interests. Cameroon emerges as the original model or prototype (p. 16) of this system, where counterinsurgency, political violence, and managed sovereignty came together to form Françafrique's basic toolkit.

Prunier then traces the system at its height during the first two decades after independence. Françafrique functioned as a rough but effective apparatus for managing stability, relying on military agreements, elite loyalty, and discreet intervention to keep friendly regimes in power and French influence intact. Prunier emphasizes that this phase was not defined solely by briefcases full of cash, but by the predominance of military logic and political informality. Franco-African summits, personalized diplomacy, and selective intervention created the illusion of order while suppressing any real democratic accountability. Françafrique worked not because it was legitimate, but because it was adaptable and opaque.

The moral and analytical heart of the book lies in Prunier's treatment of Rwanda. The Mitterrand years, often associated with rhetorical reform and ethical foreign policy, are instead characterized as a period of "non-reform." While the faces and the language changed, the structural foundations of Françafrique remained untouched. Rwanda becomes the logical outcome of a system that valued regime loyalty, military solutions, and geopolitical reflexes over actually understanding what was happening on the ground. France's continued support for a friendly regime despite mounting warning signs exposed the delusion that moral rhetoric can substitute for structural change. The genocide shattered whatever remained of Françafrique's claim to legitimacy and permanently damaged France's moral standing in Africa.

The chapters that follow chart a long phase of managed decline rather than sudden collapse. After Rwanda, Françafrique survived through sheer inertia, even as its effectiveness dwindled. French policy in the Congo and Ivory Coast revealed a persistent inability to read African political dynamics, while attempts at reconciliation with Rwanda show France's desire

to escape its past without actually confronting it. From 2012 onward, the erosion became public and generational. The Libyan intervention acted as a chaos multiplier in the Sahel, French military operations expanded without producing political control, and anti-French sentiment spread beyond elites to African societies at large. Prunier is careful not to overstate the role of new external actors like China or Russia; what matters is not that they are replacing France, but that their presence exposes how obsolete Françafrique's logic has become.

The final chapter offers no comforting resolution. Françafrique no longer exists as a functioning system, but its disappearance has left fragmentation rather than renewal. France remains militarily present but politically weakened, diplomatically audible but no longer authoritative. African actors increasingly chart their own strategies independently of France, treating it as one partner among others or as a convenient scapegoat. Most strikingly, Prunier identifies the absence of any replacement doctrine: France is improvising in a world it no longer shapes. This, ultimately, is the book's warning. Colonialism's afterlife, unmanaged and unexamined, devours not only its former subjects but also its heirs.

Prunier's study succeeds most in its long-term historical vision and its refusal to moralize cheaply. By treating Françafrique as a rational response to imperial decline rather than a simple conspiracy, he offers a more unsettling and ultimately more convincing diagnosis of why it failed. The book's limits are largely the product of its focus: African intellectual production and alternative futures receive less attention than structural decay. Even so, *Colonialism Devours Itself* is essentially rich reading for scholars of African politics, postcolonial power, and military intervention as well as a sobering reminder that informal empires exact costs long after the flags come down.

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