

## Call for papers

### INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

#### Ordinary justice and everyday policing in colonial context (French Empire, 18th-20th centuries)

17-18 September 2026

HARTIS-UMR 9028, Université de Lille  
Campus Pont-de-Bois, Villeneuve d'Ascq

Justice and policing are sometimes difficult to distinguish in a colonial context, as they appear to be interchangeable tools in the hands of a colonial administration characterized by the accumulation of judicial and executive powers. In the French Empire, the “*régime de l’indigénat*”, an exceptional criminal justice system (Merle, 2004; Mann, 2009; Merle and Muckle, 2019), became the paradigmatic example of this confusion of powers, opening the door to all kinds of abuse. Beyond the indigenous regime, “coercive networks” (Shermann, 2009) have been studied through the punitive measures put in place in various colonial contexts (Bernault, 1999; Thénault, 2012; Piret, 2014; Houlemare, 2014). At the same time, the notion of “colonial order” has given rise to important publications that have highlighted not only the plurality of devices—military and civilian—and actors—indigenous and European—involved in maintaining order, but also the specific and paradoxical contours of the notion of order in a colonial context, which is based on the imposition of norms claiming to be part of a process of “civilization,” but which ensures the maintenance of colonial domination through a never-ending “pacification” that brutalizes societies (Blanchard, Deluermoz and Glasman 2011; Blanchard, 2012; Denis and Denys, 2012; Bat and Courtin, 2012; Ginio, 2014). In addition to these publications, which brings together specialists in police agencies and new imperial history, we must also consider the field of legal history and justice, where the concept of legal pluralism has been used to account for the coexistence of different normative universes and judicial systems (customary, Muslim, colonial), characteristic of imperial territories (Benton, 2004; Roberts, 2013).

Works published over the past fifteen years or so point to a delay in historical production on the French Empire in these fields. PhDs recently defended or still in progress, as well as recent works, have addressed these issues, without constituting a unified field of research. The symposium aims to provide an overview of recent or ongoing work on these issues in the French empire—without excluding, for comparison purposes, pioneering work on the Belgian empire. The goal is to create a forum for dialogue between young and established researchers, pioneers and newcomers to the field, and specialists from different cultural areas.

While studying archives on repression and policing (such as registers of penalties imposed under “*indigénat*”) highlights the coercive nature of colonial rule, other archives (registers of complaints and claims, registers of indigenous court judgments) reveal a more complex relationship between the population and police and judicial institutions: by bringing cases before local authorities and courts, litigants become users of the justice system (Mann and Roberts, 1991; Roberts, 2005; Murphy, 2025). Judicial sources are also an exceptional resource for accessing marginalized actors who are usually invisible in colonial archives, such as women, the socially disadvantaged, slaves and dependents. Numerous studies have thus shown the numerical preeminence of women among those who bring cases before the available courts, particularly to obtain divorce, thereby reconfiguring gender relations (Roberts, 1999; Rodet, 2007, 2011, 2014; Lydon, 2010).

Far from seeking to pit these two approaches against each other, this symposium aims to rethink the links between the colonial state's “use of force” and the inhabitants' “demands for justice” (Blanchard, 2017) in a colonial context by bringing together historians of the “colonial order” and proponents of a social history of justice. To this end, the focus will be firmly placed at the local level, as close as possible to the actors and their practices. Justice and policing will be considered as local institutions that shape everyday life as much as they offer opportunities for recourse to resolve conflict. Far from the most high-profile cases, it is the ordinary lives seen through the prism of these two institutions that interest us here.

The aim is therefore to explore the broad spectrum of ordinary conflict in colonial societies in order to identify its salient features. Highlighting the preeminence of certain types of conflicts at a given time allows us to identify “trouble spots” (Fallers 1969), tensions that translate into conflicts specific to a society grappling with the social transformations brought about by colonization.

Cases referred to or appealed to the colonial administration often shed light on the ordinary, conciliatory, or punitive justice that continues to be administered outside of it. The attention paid to the “indigenous off-screen” of colonial rule (Bertrand, 2008) thus reveals forms of resilience in societies, that is, their ability to maintain and preserve the norms that govern the conduct of their members outside the language and administrative procedures of the colonizer. The question then arises as to which of the conflicts that occupy them are resolved through negotiation outside the intervention of the colonial authority. This question ties in with that of the place of extrajudicial means in conflict resolution, as posed by historians of justice in European societies in the modern era (Garnot, 1996, 2000).

Without excluding topics that have already been thoroughly explored based on judicial sources in a colonial context, such as issues related to gender, marital conflicts, or slavery, the aim is to flesh out a history of everyday life in imperial spaces, whether rural or urban. Among the many topics that could be the subject of papers, we can mention, by way of example and without limitation: interpersonal violence, neighborhood conflicts, commercial disputes, disputed inheritances, honor and precedence, rumors, consumption (food, drink), clothing, uses of public space, soundscape (noise, music), migration, health issues, animals, access to resources (land, water), etc.

Participants are invited to trace the procedures for complaints or requests according to the authorities to which they are addressed, to distinguish between categories of claimants, particularly in terms of gender, to identify the areas covered by disputes and the attention given to them by the colonial administration.

The aim is therefore to seek answers to the following questions:

- ✓ **Who complains?**
- ✓ **To whom?**
- ✓ **About what?**
- ✓ **How do the authorities with judicial or police powers respond to requests for justice?**

To answer these questions, participants are invited to submit proposals that fall within one or several of the following thematic lines:

1. **The relationship between users and the judicial institution in a context of judicial and jurisdictional pluralism:** procedures for referral and appeal; petitions, requests, complaints and claims; recourse to spokespersons or public writers; forum shopping.
2. **Social life through the prism of judicial sources:** what do civil disputes and their subjects tell us about the ordinary conflicts that run through societies in the midst of transformation?
3. **The reception of applicants by colonial authorities and the processing of requests:** classification and prioritization of complaints according to their subject matter and the status of the claimant; translation of cases into legal terms; recording of statements and judgments in writing; procedures for appearing in court; use of interpreters; routine administration of justice by administrators and “indigenous courts”; criminalization of ordinary practices; persistence of forms of conciliatory justice outside colonial authorities.
4. **Indigenous actors in the judicial and police system:** power strategies; routine methods of coercion; use of force and abuse of power; analysis of social groups of intermediaries (guards and police agents, chiefs and notables, assessors, clerks, etc.).

## HOW TO SUBMIT PROPOSALS

Proposals should be sent to Isabelle Surun ([isabelle.surun@univ-lille.fr](mailto:isabelle.surun@univ-lille.fr)) by **Friday 6 March 2026 at the latest**.

They must present an original contribution based on original sources and indicate the thematic lines to which they relate.

Expected format: 2,000 to 3,000 characters, plus a brief bibliography and a short CV, in French or English.

Following the selection process, a response will be sent by 10 April 2026 at the latest.

Participants are invited to request funding for their travel expenses from their home institutions. Accommodation, lunches and dinner on 17 September will be covered by the conference organization. Travel expenses may be covered within the limits of the conference budget, particularly for doctoral students and participants whose affiliated institutions do not have a research budget. It will be possible to participate via videoconference.

A first draft of the oral presentations is expected by 1 September 2026, for the benefit of the discussants.

## ORGANISATION

Isabelle SURUN, HARTIS, ULille, IUF

**SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE**

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Catherine DENYS, HARTIS, ULille  
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