

## Seeking Imperialism's Embrace: National Identity, Decolonization and Assimilation in the French Caribbean

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One of the rare occasions on which a French Overseas Department has ever made both national and international headlines occurred in March and April 2017 when, over the course of one turbulent month, demonstrators filled the streets in towns in Guyane, French South America. While a masked group calling themselves the '500 Brothers' attempted a vigilante campaign which closed shops and patrolled streets – ostensibly in the name of social justice and the struggle against violence and insecurity – a mass general strike closed the airport, schools, and many businesses and public services. In an ironic nod to the frequent rocket launches that take place at the European-run Guiana Space Centre (CSG) – an institution perceived by many as distant from the day-to-day life of the population whilst also being responsible for economic dependence on France and inflation in the cost of living – the organizational collective behind many of the 2017 actions called themselves 'Pou Lagwyiann Dékolé': a Creole-language name indicating their desire to see Guyane itself 'take flight', economically speaking.

The Guyanais are by no means the only 'Overseas French' to have been markedly restive in the past decade. Between January and March of 2009, spurred on by the collective 'Liyannaj Kont Pwofitasyon', Guadeloupean workers held a general strike to protest against low wages and extortionate prices for essential items such as petrol and food. Martiniquans also began strikes and protests from the February, whilst a smaller but similarly motivated movement was active in La Réunion from March. These demonstrations occurred hundreds – sometimes thousands – of miles apart and responded in large part to conditions specific to each locality. Yet they shared certain concerns common to all the French Overseas Departments: namely, that compared to the norms of 'metropolitan' France, prices, unemployment, and crime rates are high, whilst wages are low. Protests in the French Americas over the past 50 years have sometimes demanded the righting of past imperial wrongs in terms of cultural politics and public ethics, Christiane Taubira's campaign for the recognition of slavery and the slave trade as a crime against being a case in point (the campaign provoked national debate and resulted in the 2001 'Taubira Law'). Yet as the past decade has attested, protestors have very often taken to the streets and the picket lines in order to demand perceived and actual rights as French citizens to equality of opportunity in a practical sense: to access education, affordable food, stable employment and social security. These complaints are by no means new: comparable protests occurred in the French American territories not long after their incorporation in 1946 as fully-fledged

'départements d'outre-mer' (DOM) of the republic and throughout the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Yet the multiple economic and cultural tensions of these postcolonial societies were in 2009 and 2017 just visible and audible enough that central government and national press were, for once, unable to ignore them.

The often-massive local scale of protests notwithstanding, Parisian reporters and politicians tend to spend no more than a few days in the DOM, departing as soon as unrest appears to die down. These places disappear once again from public consciousness in the 'Hexagon', resurfacing only as comfortably 'exotic' holiday options. The periodic turbulence that continues to mark them, coupled with the lack of awareness of their local conditions which prevails thousands of miles away in the 'métropole', demonstrates well how the DOM – currently consisting of Guyane (South America), the Caribbean islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe, plus La Réunion and since 2011 Mayotte (Indian Ocean) – remain in a double bind. Isolated from surrounding territories in terms of politics, economics and often language, they are nevertheless part of their regional environment, whilst at the same time being ill-understood in the métropole, their status as full departments of France often ignored and sometimes regretted.

The DOM – as distinct from less-integrated 'collectivities' of the French '*outre-mer*' such as Saint-Martin and St Pierre-et-Miquelon – are no less French than Paris. Indeed, they are not always more culturally diverse than some urban areas of the Hexagon, though they offer perhaps the ultimate example of 'superdiversity' as a result of their complex migration histories. For these very reasons, they must be integral to any understanding not only of the global legacies of empire but also of France itself, shaped as it is by its imperial past and its problematically postcolonial present. Not only this, but the DOM – and perhaps especially the Antilles – have over the course of the 20th and early 21st centuries functioned as crucibles giving rise to transformative literature, political inventiveness and creative versions of citizenship.

Kristen Stromberg Childers's lively and thorough work offers a timely exploration of the historical background behind such pressing contemporary issues. Focusing on Martinique and Guadeloupe, the two island 'departments' of the French Antilles, she asks how Antilleans shaped the historical circumstances in which they found themselves at the end of the Second World War in particular ways. After centuries of slavery, racism and legal and economic discrimination at the hands of the republic and empire – not to mention the Vichy regime – why did they then opt for a French future, and to what extent were the hopes and promises, both pragmatic and idealistic, that had been associated with this future met and realized? And what broader lessons might be learned in today's world from the Antilleans' idiosyncratic approach to dealing with the legacy of being, in the words of Martiniquan author Patrick Chamoiseau, a '*pays dominé*' ('dominated country')? The resulting work offers an important contribution to understandings of 'Black France' and the legacies of the Republic's entanglement with slavery and racialised oppression. Not only this, but by explaining the rationality behind ways of relating to the Republic and its political processes that may otherwise appear surprising it goes some way to explaining the context behind, firstly, the recent upheaval in the DOM and, secondly, the unexpectedly high proportion of votes (ranging between 11 and 28 per cent) cast for Marine Le Pen of the Front National in the traditionally Socialist DOM in the first round of the 2017 presidential elections.

Focusing on the two Caribbean islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique, Stromberg Childers's book sets out to explain the choice of 'departmentalization': an affirmation of French citizenship that, for its architects at least, went along with an insistence that this meant casting off rather than clinging to colonial shackles. It then outlines what happened next: amid the particular local circumstances of the Antilles, what became of the promises of equality made in 1946 throughout the decades which followed, a period associated with economic growth and social change in France? And – a question almost absent from scholarship hitherto – what influence did the United States have, both as spectre and as regional actor, on French governance in the Caribbean during this period?

The first chapter offers a detailed account of how the Second World War affected Antilleans and charts the role and impact of the US as a 'new player' in the French Caribbean during this period. It concludes by noting the absence of the US in often rose-tinted local 'memory' of the war years – and particularly in the

literature of Chamoiseau, Confiant and Glissant that is, rightly or wrongly, often taken as representative of Antillean culture – despite its formative effect on contemporary Antillean (in this case more specifically Martiniquan) identity (p. 45). The second chapter goes on to set out the political backdrop against which the Martiniquan poet-politician Aimé Césaire and his peers from Guadeloupe, Guyane and La Réunion opted for full 'departmentalisation' rather than for a lesser-integrated status, noting especially the Brazzaville conference which ruled out self-government for the colonies, the legacy of the Vichy government, and an increasingly dominant US. The chapter makes the case that, by doing so, the representatives chose the concrete, rational and legal 'benefits offered to full citizens of the new French Republic' over the ideological and psychological option of anticolonial nationalism, and that this was not 'a colonized people's unhealthy expression of centuries-long subjugation' but a 'proactive choice' aiming to 'bridge the gap between the black majority and the white minority on the islands': ultimately a 'means of making good on the promises of a universal, race-blind Republic and demanding that the special relationship between France and its *vieilles colonies* finally be turned more to Antilleans' advantage' (p. 48). There is a particularly illuminating discussion of Césaire's visit to Haiti in 1944, shortly before the departmental laws: one example of the Stromberg Childers's impressive ability to balance explanation of context and consequences with that of machinations and processes: the agency behind legal change. Haiti, for Césaire, is a counter-example: an example of a place with 'brilliant intellectuals' whose words do little or nothing to improve the appalling material conditions of the majority of the populace (p. 52). Ultimately, departmentalisation – at the same time as it represented a way to claim recognition for contributions to the war and Liberation – ensured that Martiniquans and Guadeloupeans, along with Guyanais and Réunionnais, could eat.

Two subsequent chapters outline the relationship between history, geography and identity in the Antilles, and how these feed into formulations of citizenship and belonging. A chapter on 'gender and the family dynamics of departmentalization' is welcome given the importance of this issue and the growing body of work on gender in the broader Caribbean; it also builds well on the thorough grounding which already exists in the form of Burton, Aldrich and Marshall's theorizations of sexuality and family dynamics in the French colonies. A final chapter on 'migration flows and the politics of exclusion' once again demonstrates theoretical embeddedness (one thinks of Saskia Sassen here) as well an orientation towards timely political issues.

Stromberg Childers's book is the fruit of extensive research in the national and departmental archives of Paris, Fontainebleau, Aix-en-Provence, Guadeloupe and Martinique, with excursions into US and British records. It cites a vast range of relevant historians, anthropologists, cultural theorists and sociologists from Aldrich to Gary Wilder via Edouard Glissant and Richard and Sally Price. Anchored thus in broad and firm ground, *Seeking Imperialism's Embrace* makes a methodological intervention into French Caribbean studies by arguing that, although there are surely challenges involved in using 'traditional historical methodologies' to write the history of the Antilles, these methodologies are far from irrelevant, and are neither as 'limited' nor as 'stifling' as Edouard Glissant argued in *Discours Antillais* and as 'Creolists' such as Chamoiseau, Bernabé and Confiant have since suggested (p. 7). Indeed, it asserts, they are necessary if we are to understand it fully. This is a worthy aim, although given the often incomplete and sometimes damaged state of some material archived in the tropical climate of 'overseas France', a more in-depth discussion of the practical challenges involved in producing history from 'traditional methodologies' here would have been an interesting inclusion.

Stromberg Childers draws upon this wealth of sources to make a number of specific and important contributions to historical research, perhaps foremost among which is the book's focus on the question of the US influence. A convincing argument is put forward that US economic imperialism in the Caribbean, plus the spectre of racial segregation, formed a little of the reason why Antilleans became fully French, politically speaking, in 1946, and a lot of the reason why they remained so despite turbulence in subsequent decades. Indeed, the attention paid to issues of 'race' and to the persistent economic dominance of so-called *békés* – white property-owners who were often the heirs of slaveowners – justifies the book's Antillean focus inasmuch as these factors shaped tensions and conflicts to a particular recipe in the 1950s and 1960s and thus distinguish these two islands from the other two 'original' DOM of Guyane and La Réunion, from the

rest of the Caribbean, and from each other. Yet the book tells a great many other important stories on the way to its conclusion. Particularly pertinent is its explanation of the French government's efforts to develop the tourism industry in the Antilles and along with this, their attempts to transform Antilleans into model hosts who first of all were neither too incurious nor too inclined to harass visitors, and who, secondly, were conscious of the most colourful and musical dimensions of their 'folklore' (and this as far back as the 1950s, before the regional revivalism associated with French governments of the 1960s and 1980s). Since many of the anticipated tourists were American, furthermore, it is precisely in the domain of tourism that the tensions inherent in so-called French 'universalism' in post-slavery societies were particularly sharply exposed, as they met those of US racism. Stromberg Childers articulates these dynamics well, offering insight into the French governmental 'mind' as it sought advice and commissioned reports on how racial relations played out in bars and hotels across the Caribbean: who drank with whom and where, and what were the racial economics of conviviality: who was excluded from which establishments by virtue of skin colour and/or financial means?

A further stated aim of the work is to contrast the Antilles' path with the wars and decolonization processes in Africa and the former Indochina which have tended to shape historical writing on modern and contemporary France and its relationship with the wider world. This it does, but without explicit and extended comparative analysis, the contrast is mostly left to speak for itself. Given the scope of the book, this is sufficient: the detailed treatment of the relationship between US and French (neo-?)imperialism in the Caribbean here may pave the way for a future comparison with the case of south-east Asia, for example, elsewhere.

Stromberg Childers's book portrays well how, far from being a 'curious exception in the larger history of decolonisation', a proper consideration of the Francophone Caribbean can get to the heart of postcolonial questions which resonate well beyond France. The work obliges us to think critically about the limits and borders of the nation, by reminding us that relative boundedness of an archipelagic locality impacts both on and beyond a particular island. Even if the DOM are in many ways politically and economically isolated from their geographical neighbours, they are no less part of that geography for it, and indeed those distinctions are key factors shaping regional – and therefore also national and global – dynamics. Helping thus to unbind historical thinking from Hexagonal parameters, with *Seeking Imperialism's Embrace* Stromberg Childers has made an important contribution to historical understandings not only of these two islands but of France itself, and of the colonial and postcolonial histories that link France to the wider world.

Practically speaking, this book has broad potential appeal. Certainly, it should be read by scholars of contemporary France. The story of 'departmentalization', meanwhile, will offer a useful counterpoint to studies of 'decolonization' which – in the vein, ironically enough, of the Martiniquan Frantz Fanon – continue to equate the latter with national independence. This study also represents an especially valuable contribution to Caribbean and Latin American history, within which the French dimension remains underappreciated. A paperback edition, finally, would help its distribution amongst undergraduate or graduate students of French and imperial history – and perhaps a wider audience – who will appreciate its engaging and thoroughly readable narrative style.

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