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Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. 352 pp. \$75.00 (hb). ISBN 0226897729. \$25.00 (pb). ISBN 0226897680.

Review Essay by Robert Aldrich, University of Sydney.

Gary Wilder's book constitutes a significant contribution to the study of French colonial and metropolitan history. The modern French nation-state 'was never simply a self-contained parliamentary republic that also happened to possess overseas colonies' (p. 25); it was, as his title puts it, an 'imperial nation-state', and *la plus grande France* was not just a rhetorical phrase. Taking issue with other historians who argue that imperialism was an anomaly, or a contradiction, to the ideas of republicanism,[1] he asserts that republican traditions and institutions provided a structure for articulation of both a policy of 'colonial humanism' and a movement of 'cultural nationalism' pioneered in interwar Paris. The 'universalism' proclaimed as a basis of republicanism nevertheless came into conflict with the 'particularism' that demanded recognition for specific indigenous cultures. Wilder sees universalism and particularism as antimonies between which political theorists and cultural figures tried to manoeuvre (by, among other strategies, separating citizenship from nationality). The dissonance between them rendered the system dysfunctional and plunged it into crisis, but the problem arose precisely because of this 'contradictory political rationality that generated recurrent structural impasses' (p. 22).

The first half of Wilder's volume is devoted to the new approach to colonial governance that emerged in full force after the First World War. Promotion of the 'association' of indigenous populations replaced a manifestly unsuccessful 'assimilation'. Conditions for acquisition of citizenship, in the wake of sacrifices of natives *morts pour la patrie*, were broadened (though few of the colonised managed to fulfil the criteria). Albert Sarraut's economic and social programmes undertook the *mise en valeur* of the colonies, the development of human and natural resources. Welfarism, statism, and productivism (which added up to 'colonial modernity'), Wilder points out, replaced the prewar liberal *mission civilisatrice*. A fresh generation of administrators embraced cultural relativism, largely abjuring stereotypes about African savagery under the influence of Paul Rivet, Marcel Mauss, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, and other social scientists at the Institut d'Ethnologie. Men such as Maurice Delafosse, Georges Hardy, and Robert Delavignette, among other administrator-scholars to whom Wilder introduces readers, embodied a reformist and self-consciously anti-racist 'colonial humanism'. This cannot be reduced, he asserts, to a figleaf of colonial domination—previous historians have been more eager 'with announcing that reformism failed than with sufficiently exploring the thing itself' (p. 78).

Meanwhile, Africans, West Indians, and other colonial migrants arrived in Paris, established literary salons, wrote poetry, published journals, and grappled with issues of cultural identity and political enfranchisement. Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Léon-Gontran Damas, and René Maran became the most famous; alongside African Americans of the Harlem Renaissance, they gave birth to a new movement that valorised African heritage, pursued innovative styles of writing, and advanced an emboldened analysis of colonialism and its prospects. This story forms the second half of Wilder's book.

The history of Negritude is well known, and most readers will already have some knowledge about these Africans and Antilleans in Paris. Maran's Goncourt-winning novel *Batouala*, Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, and Senghor's poems are now duly esteemed in the canon of Francophone literature. Wilder provides a fine discussion of the links between these men (and women such as the Nardal sisters,

whose salon offered a central meeting-place), and he is especially good in coverage of the political implications of their writings. He denies that they were either primarily precursors of an anti-colonial resistance movement that would only bear fruit with colonial independence, or that they were only interested in culture rather than politics. Wilder convincingly argues that for the Negritude authors, particularly Senghor, colonial power structures did not preclude combats against cultural alienation. Cultural particularism—in this case, African culture—might be nurtured, they thought, within the framework of a reconstructed colonial rule. Wilder states, ‘Their two-sided formulations of Franco-African identity, black humanism, Panafrican republicanism, and cultural politics implicitly challenged the grounding dichotomies (modern-primitive, individual-collective, rational-racial, national-global, political-aesthetic) on which the distinctiveness of France’s civil society and public sphere depended. By embracing both sides of these pairs at once, colonial subjects practiced a transformative imperial citizenship’ (p. 197). These public intellectuals were, in effect, demanding cultural *droit de cité* in the imperial nation-state, ‘to claim membership *within* Greater France *as* Negro-African citizens’ (p. 212, his emphasis).^[2]

Whether this could be done depended on the will of colonial authorities, and in his first chapters Wilder focuses on the somewhat less well-known evolution of colonial policy. He takes the colonial humanists’ ideas seriously and gives them credit for trying to recast the colonial system. Policy-makers with good intentions, anthropological sensitivities, and sometimes socialist sympathies were nevertheless caught in a double bind, as they aimed for both the preservation of traditional indigenous societies and their metamorphosis into modern Gallicised ones. Authorities, for instance, wanted to safeguard native collectivism as a repository for tradition and guarantee of cohesion. At the same time, and in contrary fashion, they promoted individualism by such measures as obligatory registers of births, marriages, and deaths (the colonial *état civil* on which Wilder has several excellent pages) and by registration of property under the Torrens title system. Extension of political rights, however, remained off the agenda. Reformers thought natives too politically immature to exercise full political rights—political immaturity, he notes, had replaced biological inferiority to justify denial of political participation—and thus deferred the granting of the vote to some distant and unspecified future moment.

Only a very few of the colonised, those who relinquished traditional civil status and proved their adoption of French ways, were eligible for citizenship. One was Senghor, a French-educated Catholic who acquired citizenship at the age of twenty-seven. Senghor, the centenary of whose birth is being celebrated in 2006, is a key figure in colonial culture and politics: the first African to pass the *agrégation* examination, a *lycée* teacher and then professor at the Ecole Coloniale, member of the French parliament from 1946 through 1958 (and briefly a junior minister), president of independent Senegal for twenty years, and *académicien*. Though he was an eloquent critic of colonialism and later became the architect of a relatively peaceful and mutually agreed decolonisation of French West Africa, Senghor in the interwar years tried to conceptualise the ways in which African culture could cohabit with French colonialism. Wilder provides a pertinent analysis of Senghor’s work, especially an unjustly obscure but revealing speech delivered before an audience of two thousand, including many colonial dignitaries, at the Chamber of Commerce in Dakar in 1937. Newly returned from his years of study in the metropole, Senghor outlined ideas shared with advocates of colonial humanism such as his friend Governor-General Marcel de Coppet, arguing for political but not cultural assimilation. The personal links between Senghor and colonial administrators, his attention to both culture and politics, and the intermingling of European and African influences in his works made (and make) him a bridge between continents and the harbinger of a cultural pluralism that still finds uneasy acceptance in present-day France.

Wilder’s book shows a wealth of documentation; it is informed by the ideas of Marxism, and of Foucault, Arendt, and other philosophers. The interpretation is persuasive, although the last chapters, unfortunately, do not bring together the two parts of the book and the complementary issues of colonial policy-making and Negritude as successfully as one might wish. The text occasionally becomes clotted

with pedantic words—‘nomothetic’, ‘idiographic’, ‘micrological’, ‘epistemophilic’—and a few passages read like unrevised chunks of a doctoral thesis. In general, however, it provides a discussion accessible to both students and more advanced scholars. Not all readers will accord the overseas empire the large place Wilder presupposes it occupied in French public life in the interwar years, and his interpretation necessitates acceptance of that pivotal position. Some will legitimately observe that for all the scholar-administrators imbued with humanist ideals, the empire retained old school bureaucrats not so informed by the new notions circulating in Paris. In New Caledonia, for instance, the reformist and relativist ideas of the missionary ethnologist Maurice Leenhardt concerning indigenous Melanesians came up against the impervious policies of administrators and their settler allies.[3]

As Wilder’s subjects are colonial policy-making in sub-Saharan Africa, and the cultural movement fathered by African and Antillean writers, taking him to task for not looking at other areas of the empire would be unfair. Further examples would not necessarily disprove his arguments and could indeed illustrate intracolonial connections and influences; Sarraut, after all, had served as Governor-General of Indochina. However, governance varied widely in France’s possessions. Algeria, of course, was integrated into France constitutionally as a set of *départements* (as the ‘old colonies’ of the Caribbean and La Réunion would be after 1946), while Morocco, Tunisia, Tonkin, and Cambodia were protectorates. The French regarded indigenous cultures in North Africa and Indochina very differently from those of black Africa, and native institutions in the Maghreb and Asia—monarchies and religions such as Islam and Buddhism—often proved more resistant to cultural transformation. Wilder touches very briefly on the cultural activities of Maghrebins and Indochinese in interwar Paris, but their relationship with black Africans is not treated in detail. To what extent was ‘colonial humanism’ applicable (and applied) throughout the empire?

One or two points might have received amplification. The use of colonial forces in the First World War lies in the background to the interwar—and inspired Senghor’s *Hosties noires*—but little is said about an experience formative of postwar attitudes.[4] Wilder rightly glosses over aspects of interwar colonial culture that have received sustained historical attention, such as the 1931 colonial exhibition, but perhaps he could have given more consideration to the Popular Front’s programme. The efforts of Marius Moutet to extend political participation for colonial natives were ultimately thwarted, but those initiatives represented the best chance to take colonial humanism to its logical conclusion.

Perhaps something needs to be said as well about the exclusivist nature of Negritude, especially for Antillean identity. The attachment of the Antilles to France predated the scramble for Africa by centuries. Africa and the Antilles were joined by the slave trade, but the definitive emancipation of slaves in 1848, the granting of citizenship to West Indians, and the social configurations of Caribbean society made these colonies very different from sub-Saharan Africa. The late nineteenth century saw the emergence of a black and (especially) *métis* middle class of teachers, doctors, lawyers, and parliamentarians in Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Guyane, an elite incorporated into Third Republic ideals and administration. Men such as Césaire were a product of this society, but they reacted against the imitation of all things French and an overwhelming devalorisation of African inheritance, by many in the West Indian coloured elite. Their journals are critiques as much of cultural mimesis as colonialism *qua* political domination, and this aspect of the French West Indian situation is worth underlining. The West Indies and La Réunion also illustrate a limitation of the idea of Negritude because of the diverse migrations to the islands and the juxtaposition, and blending, of cultures there. White and *métis* groups continued to occupy important places in colonial and postcolonial society. There occurred a substantial immigration (particularly to La Réunion) by Indians as indentured labourers and free migrants. Chinese arrived in the *vieilles colonies* in the nineteenth century, followed by Lebanese after the First World War, and in Guyane by Hmong from Southeast Asia after 1954. This mosaic of cultural groups prompted a new generation of cultural figures in the 1980s and 1990s, the novelist Patrick Chamoiseau prominent among them, to develop the idea of *créolité* as a step beyond Negritude—a movement born, paradoxically or not, in islands that had not been politically decolonised.[5]

That Wilder's book suggests reflections on varying conjugations of culture and governance throughout France's empire underlines the value of his study. His volume, like much of the 'new colonial history', reaffirms that colonies and metropole need to be seen in the same historical and analytical field: the colonies formed a part of France, and neither French policy nor culture could exclude that presence. Wilder's specific 'take', however, is to reconfigure the state, intrinsically and integrally, as 'imperial nation-state'. Furthermore, he contributes to a recent refocussing of attention away from the period of conquest to the years of the 'apogee' of empire in the 1920s and 1930s.[6] The great academic surge of interest in the French empire has benefited from the cultural turn in colonial studies, but his work also very usefully brings together culture with policy-making, reminding us of the need for renewed attention to administration, economics, and social policy as well as cultural representations and performances.

Wilder provides two other salutary reminders for a postcolonial perspective on empire. Although racialism provided the underpinning for imperialism, historians must be careful to appreciate the degrees and nuances of ethnocentrism: the enormous gulf between the 'exterminate the brutes' racism of some gung-ho conquerors and the cultural relativism of Delafosse and Delavignette. 'Colonial humanism' might be cynically dismissed as just another cover for naked exploitation and racism, yet doing so would overlook the very real changes that occurred from the era of Arthur de Gobineau to that of Mauss, Rivet, and Lévy-Bruhl. Furthermore, Wilder helps us recall that the administrators of the 1920s and 1930s (and later) were working within certain imperial parameters, trying to reformulate policies within a context that seemed destined to endure. Senghor himself, at least in the 1930s, was writing within the colonial paradigm rather than from a position that predicted, or even militated for, destruction of French overlordship; Negritude writers were 'engaged critical intellectuals who theorized the national-imperial order in which they were embedded' (p. 300). That the colonial order did fall apart was not for want of efforts, however doomed, by reformist scholar-administrators and innovative cultural nationalists to resolve its contradictions.

NOTES

[1] Wilder is explicit about his disagreement with Alice Conklin's *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

[2] 'Negro-African', a term used by Senghor, distinguished black Africans from North Africans, and even settlers, who in Algeria sometimes referred to themselves as 'Africans', too.

[3] See James Clifford, *Person and Myth: Maurice Leenhardt in the Melanesian World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

[4] See, most recently and most comprehensively, Jacques Frémeaux, *Les Colonies dans la Grande Guerre: Combats et épreuves des peuples d'outre-mer* (Paris: Soteca/14-18 Editions, 2006).

[5] See my 'From Francité to Créolité: French West Indian Literature Comes Home', in Russell King, John Connell and Paul White, eds., *Writing Across Worlds: Literature and Migration* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 101-124.

[6] See Martin Thomas, *The French Empire between the Wars: Imperialism, Politics and Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

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See also the Review Essays on this book by Martin Thomas, Gregory Mann, and Patricia Lorcin, as well as Gary Wilder's response to all four Review Essays.

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