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Pierre Odin, *Pwofitasyon. Luttès syndicales et anticolonialisme en Guadeloupe et en Martinique*. Paris: La Découverte, 2019. xi + 311 pp. Maps, tables, figures, notes, and biographical index. €22.00. (p.b.) ISBN 9782348043475; €15.99 (eb). ISBN 9782348043475.

Review by Edenz Maurice, CERMA-Mondes Américains/EHESS.

During the first quarter of 2009, a general strike lasting forty-four days in the Guadeloupean archipelago and thirty-eight days on the island of Martinique once again put the French Antilles in the spotlight of national and international media. However, the novelty was the unprecedented Creole watchword "*pwofitasyon*," meaning "outrageous, capitalist and colonialist exploitation" (p. 11). In fact, this "semantic and symbolic innovation" emerged from the mobilization to denounce the exorbitant cost of petrol and basic necessities, and the monopolistic positions of numerous multinational corporations, such as the Groupe Bernard Hayot, which controls the retail industry (p. 176). More broadly, the watchword underscored the socio-racial discrimination that still fractures those post-slavery societies. In this context, Élie Domota became the Creole figure of the movement. Secretary general of the Union générale des travailleurs de Guadeloupe (General Union of Guadeloupean Workers, UGTG), the dominant Guadeloupean trade union, Domota was propelled to the front line as spokesman for the Lyannaj Kont Pwofitasyon (LKP), i.e. "the Union against outrageous exploitation," or the coalition of forty-eight Guadeloupean trade unions and cultural associations called upon to support a profusion of cultural, economic, political, and social demands (p. 19). Pierre Odin's dense and precise book accounts for the role of the Antillean unions in this popular revolt. It examines the anti-capitalist and anti-colonial heritage on which their activity is based and their propensity to favor struggle, characterizing the "configurations in which large-scale social conflicts in Guadeloupe and Martinique are born and develop" (p. 273).

This book contributes to the field of political sociology of trade unionism, social movements, and conflict. It is based on semi-directive interviews with leaders of the Antillean trade unions and two Trotskyist political organizations, Combat ouvrier (Workers' struggle) and Groupe révolution socialiste (Socialist Revolution Group, GRS), which, from the 1980s to the 1990s, took control of the Guadeloupean and Martinican trade union confederations that were independent from the French Confédération générale du travail (General Confederation of Labour, CGT), i.e. the CGTG (G for Guadeloupe) and the CGTM (M for Martinique). The author also interviewed grassroots activists. In addition to a precise chronology of the sixty interviews conducted, the reader will find in the appendix of the book a useful index offering twenty-four brief biographies.

Furthermore, the method includes participant observation from an interactionist perspective, whose ambiguities in the field Odin does not hide. Often forced to assume the posture of an "interim activist," the political scientist seems to go only where it has been decided that he can go (p. 295). The source base also raises some questions. Most of them originate from the private archives of Édouard de Lépine (1932-2020), a founding member of the GRS who went on to be a recognized Martinican militant historian and a local elected official more critical on the independence issue. This choice leads Odin to adopt the historical analysis praised by the organizations studied, and to pay little attention to the most recent works on the trajectories of Guadeloupe and Martinique following their transformation in March 1946 into French departments, then overseas departments.[1]

The book is divided into three parts, each of them consisting of two chapters. The first part traces the "genesis of contemporary trade unionism in the French Antilles" (p. 26). This genesis has its recent roots in the 1960s, as a result of the loss of faith in the future of socio-economic equality opened up by departmentalization and the affirmation of a postcolonial reading that castigates the persistence of the material and symbolic domination of whites, i.e. the local Creole named *békés* and the natives of mainland France, indifferently grouped under the term "metropolitan." Originating in Antillean student circles inspired by the Algerian war of independence (1954-1962) and the Cuban Revolution (1959), the project for the emancipation of Martinique was expressed in December 1962 in Fort-de-France with the manifesto of the Organisation de la jeunesse anticolonialiste de la Martinique (Martinique Anti-Colonial Youth Organization), which called for "unity for the definitive crushing of colonialism" (p. 41). A month later, the Groupe d'organisation nationale de la Guadeloupe (Guadeloupe National Organization Group, GONG), a Maoist organization of a few dozen students, declared itself ready to take up arms. In order to eradicate this threat, the government blamed it for the bloody repression in May 1967 of a workers' demonstration in Pointe-à-Pitre, an event analyzed by historian Jean-Pierre Sainton, the son of a founding member of GONG, as a massacre and now classified as a trauma.[2] In Paris, the protests of May-June '68 offered seasoned anti-colonial activists the repertoires of action of the revolutionary extreme left (Guevarist, Maoist and Trotskyist). At the same time, in the French Antilles, the "center of protest and politicization" spread to high schools, which were opening their doors to the poorest sections of the population and to Christian currents close to liberation theology (p. 45).

Odin's work reveals a turning point in the 1970s. The failure of the strategy of armed insurrection led to a reconversion of the political struggle into a trade union struggle, which gave birth in 1973 to the UGTG. In competition with each other, independence and revolutionary activists tried to take advantage of the decline of the monoculture model to gain a foothold in the countryside and to win over the men and women who were still subjected to working conditions in the plantations that were reminiscent of those of the long night of slavery. In February 1974, the death of two agricultural workers during the severe repression of the Chalvet strike (Martinique) sounded in a way like "the swan song of anti-colonial activism," which carried very little sway in public opinion (p. 69). Nevertheless, the arrival of the Left in power in 1981 reinforced the autonomy of the Antillean trade union field and the conviction of a trade unionism of struggle.

Part two considers another specificity of Antillean trade unionism: their political work. Two trajectories are followed to demonstrate the extent to which trade unionism and politics are intertwined. On the one hand, Odin tracks UGTG, the pro-independence union. On the other

hand, he follows developments in CGTG and CGTM, two confederations attached in Guadeloupe and Martinique to the rhetoric of class struggle. The predominant place occupied by these organizations justifies this parallel. Claiming ten thousand members, UGTG and CGTM are by far the largest and most influential Antillean unions. In the name of defending employees, they do not hesitate to resort to sit-down strikes and blockades of traffic routes or fuel depots that condemn the islands to several days of paralysis. According to UGTG, the social issue is however inseparable from the racial discrimination inherited from a centuries-old colonial history. When it judges it useful, the pro-independence union therefore promotes an extensive definition of the working class that associates the notion with the idea of a Guadeloupean people, real or imagined, excluding the "white colonists" but allowing tolerance towards the small local black employers. This is a frequent point of friction with the communist confederations.

The analysis of the politicization of the dominant Antillean trade unions reveals a second characteristic: the building up of popular education and worker leadership. Among the significant aspects of this inclination, Odin points to the teaching of the Creole language and its deliberate use in media spaces or institutional forums. He also emphasizes the priority given to historical training provided by historians or teachers, some of whom are union members, others sympathizers. At the UGTG, this purports to "*fey mémwa maché pou fêy consyans vansé*," i.e. "to do the work of memory in order to awaken consciousness," which is the basis of a project of empowerment prior to independence (p. 102). For the CGTM, as for the CGTG, this historical formation aims on the contrary, to reaffirm "the borders that separate the employer and the employees" and the relationship between the primitive accumulation of capital and black slavery (p. 143). As "the main entrepreneurs of mobilizations," the Antillean unions ultimately form multi-positional organizations (p. 1).

The last part is devoted to the famous social conflict that gives the book its title. A coalition of "small building contractors" triggered this conflict on December 3, 2008 when they blocked the streets of Pointe-à-Pitre to impose a revision of the price of petrol (p. 191). On March 14, ten days after Guadeloupe, the signing of a crisis exit protocol in Martinique marked the final outcome. Here, Odin's research has the huge benefit of capturing the major turning points of this social and popular movement against *pwofitasyon* and getting us to seriously consider the situations of uncertainty that favored "the generalization of the conflict" (p. 175).

The first turning point came on December 5. Thanks to the UGTG's large victory in the *prud'hommale*, an industrial tribunal election, E. Domota set about creating the LKP, which announced eleven days later the start of the general strike on January 20, 2009.[3] The valuable coalition work carried out was then emphasized. First, it was in order to build a unitary movement and to impose a single slogan, given the heterogeneous, even divergent, positions that the protesting coalition brought together. Secondly, it drew up a platform of 175 demands, the most important of which allowed for a 200 euro per month increase for low wages and minimum social benefits. Finally, this coalition work aimed to "avoid any 'coalition within a coalition'" (p. 196).

The second turning point allows us to understand the popular legitimacy that the movement gained and the enthusiasm it aroused in Martinique. On January 23, 2009, Nicolas Desforges, the prefect of Guadeloupe, authorized the live broadcast of the negotiations on a private channel. Far from demonstrating the role of mediator traditionally granted to the representative of the state, the operation gave credence to the trade unions' skills and their diagnosis in order to establish

"the high cost of living" as a "public problem" (p. 170). In Martinique, television played the same unexpected and decisive role. Focusing on the economic stranglehold of the *béké* families, the documentary entitled *The Last Masters of Martinique* sent shock waves through the island on January 30. On February 5, at the call of the Kolectif 5-Février (K5F), the Martinican coalition of twelve organizations, 20,000 people took to the streets of Fort-de-France, thus bringing Martinique into a renewable strike.

In both cases, explains Odin, the media coverage and popular enthusiasm exceeded the expectations of the union leaders and surprised the elected representatives, the prefectural authorities and the Antillean sections of the Mouvement des Entreprises de France (MEDEF, French Business Movement). Similarly, contrary to the media or retrospective discourse, "unity of action was not given in advance" (p. 180). This is even more visible in Martinique, given the dominant political role played by the Parti Progressiste Martiniquais ("Martinican Progressive Party"), the partisan structure created by Aimé Césaire in 1958, and the liabilities of the relations between Trotskyists, which justified appointing Michel Monrose, a less prominent union figure, as the K5F's spokesperson.

A third and final turning point was reached on the night of February 17-18 with the death of Jacques Bino, a tax official and member of the CGTG and the LKP. His assassination, whose perpetrator has still not been judged by the courts, rekindled memories of May '67 and encouraged the February 26, 2009 signing of an interprofessional agreement, known as the Bino agreement, which included an increase of 200 euros for low incomes. However, the MEDEF waited until March 4 to accept to pay part of this increase. It was no different in Martinique, where employers stalled the conflict over an extended period. Furthermore, as Odin points out, not without bitterness, despite the exposure of the blatant aberrations of the economic circuits in the French Antilles and the impact of the mobilization, "the *prvofitasyon* as denounced by the LKP and the K5F is still in place, the agreements not having been applied everywhere and the 'price freeze' having been circumvented by the supermarkets" (p. 267).

The book would have benefited from a longer-term historical perspective. As a significant example, the major issue of "high living costs" was a recurrent theme of social movements, sometimes violent, from the inter-war period onwards. Contrary to the author's assertion, its "original pattern" did not emerge "directly from the departmentalization of 1946-1947" (p. 19). A few words on the repercussions of the Antillean struggle in the overseas territories, as well as in mainland France, sometimes against the persistence of socio-racial divisions, sometimes for an increase in purchasing power, would have been useful to better attain the stated aim of "contributing to a 'connected' history of protest" (p. 30). Finally, a comparison with the situation in French Guiana would have reinforced the central argument of the singularity of Antillean trade unionism. As a member of the CGTM confederal bureau recalled, the price of petrol played a similar role in November 2008 in rallying the Guyanese population for three weeks against high living costs. However, the mobilization was unique in this French isolate of the South American bloc in that it was initiated by the employers' organizations. [4]

These considerations do not detract from the quality of the study. One can only be delighted to have such a work at one's disposal, as it constitutes a major contribution to trade unionism studies as well as to anti-colonialist and anti-capitalist militancy, and sheds new light on the postcolonial history of two French territories seeking to free themselves from the past of slavery, in order to lay the foundations of a less unequal society.

## NOTES

[1] Maël Lavenaire, "Décolonisation et changement social aux Antilles françaises: De l'assimilation à la 'Départementalisation': socio-histoire d'une construction paradoxale (1946-1961)" (Ph.D. dissertation, Université des Antilles, 2017); Sylvain Mary, "Les Antilles, de la colonie au département: Enjeux, stratégies et échelles de l'action de l'État (1944-début des années 1980)" (Ph.D. dissertation, Sorbonne Université, 2018).

[2] Raymond Gama et Jean-Pierre Sainton, *Mé 67: Mémoire d'un événement* (Pointe-à-Pitre: Société guadeloupéenne d'édition et de diffusion, 1985). Report of the Commission for Information and Historical Research on the events of December 1959 in Martinique, June 1962 in French Guiana and May 1967 in Guadeloupe, Ministry of Overseas France, 2016.

URL : <http://www.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr/rapports-publics/164000717/>.

[3] The *prud'hommes* elect the representatives of employers and employees who sit on the *prud'hommes* council to arbitrate professional disputes. In December 2008, the UGTG came first, with over 51% of the votes.

[4] Marie-Emmanuelle Pommerolle, "Guyane, un mouvement social et identitaire ?", *Mediapart*, Nov. 27, 2008.

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