

## Guadeloupe and Martinique and the fight against "profittation": a new twist to an old story in the French Caribbean.

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It took some time for the media and public opinion of metropolitan France to get interested, so uncurious are they usually of the social and "racial" struggles of distant overseas territories. All of a sudden they were called to attention, awoken, as if the overseas départements had taken the lead to express a rampant discontent pervading the whole of France. French Caribbean islands, first the Guadeloupe on January 20th 2009, then Martinique from February 5th, started an unlimited and complete strike. "I wouldn't have thought any such thing was possible", reported a young woman returning from her first trip to Martinique, though she only experienced the first two days of the strike. Witnesses recount nearly apocalyptic scenes: "on the twelfth day, schools, administrations, shops, companies are all closed. Barricades prevent access to activity zones. In bakeries, bread is rationed, in the streets, garbage is accumulating and rats are starting to infest them"<sup>1</sup>. Reportedly "the black market is flourishing", hidden, quasi clandestine practices are developing in the night to provide food for hotels<sup>2</sup>. Exchanges between Martinique and the neighbouring independent island of Ste-Lucie, are booming<sup>3</sup>, as if, by contesting a disputed European connection, the island was being reinscribed in its "normal", Caribbean environment. Current events therefore have a spatial dimension. The movement is already perceived as "historical" and "unprecedented" by those who comment on it, lead it or take part in it<sup>4</sup>. There is in fact a long tradition of contestation, with an impressive list of popular uprisings, strikes and social movements. Many of these included violent or murderous events, at least until the beginning of the 1980s, and there are previous unbelievable records of length, such as the strike of municipal employees at Ste-Marie (Martinique), which lasted 749 days between 1993 and 1995<sup>5</sup>. However, if it is no major break in a local tradition of contestation, the present strike — which is ending in Guadeloupe as this article is being written (March 5th, 2009) — does have some previously unseen characteristics. Its roots plunge deeply in the social history of mobilizations in the French Caribbean, and it indicates a renewal of something which seemed to have disappeared: the ability of Caribbean cultures to challenge the basis of social equality, in a context shaped by the close, even intimate, experience of mechanisms of domination.

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<sup>1</sup> - Patrice Louis, « La grève générale pèse sur le quotidien des Martiniquais », Le Monde.fr, 16-01-09. (<http://www.lemonde.fr/>)

<sup>2</sup> - Benoît Hopkin, « En Martinique, face à la pénurie, le marché noir fleurit », Le Monde.fr, 28-02-09. (<http://www.lemonde.fr/>)

<sup>3</sup> - Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> - Éric Favereau, « C'était comme retenu, ça nous a sauté à la figure », Libération.fr, 02-03-09. (<http://www.liberation.fr/politiques/>)

<sup>5</sup> - Strikes and other social movements are listed extensively in *Madras, Dictionnaire Encyclopédique et pratique de la Martinique*, 1996, Éditions Exbrayat, Fort-de-France (see page 967 in particular for "long strikes"). A useful reference on the most important conflicts in the French Caribbean is Alain-Philippe Blérald, 1988, *La question nationale en Guadeloupe et Martinique*, Paris, L'Harmattan. For a critical approach of past conflicts, in particular anti-slavery revolts and their political instrumentalization in the present, see Édouard De Lépine, 1999, *Dix semaines qui ébranlèrent la Martinique*, Paris, Servédit, Maisonneuve & Larose.

By so doing, the movement has also displaced a number of stereotypes, not least the image of a society whose only horizon is "overconsumption" made possible by the generosity of public transfers. The resources necessary to indulge in binge spending on objects are quite simply not available to all. In this respect the movement has called attention to the very real gap between overseas départements<sup>6</sup> and the metropolitan average, which appears relatively comfortable even as many struggle to make ends meet. The connection between social justice and spatial justice is obvious.

To comment on events that are still taking place is not an exercise researchers are used to, since the time frames they operate within are different. It is risky (the risk being irrelevance) to try and interpret this movement on the basis of media reports, rather than with more academic sources and methods, armed only with critical concern. I hope not to test my reader's patience too much by taking this risk, attempting an exploration, and writing to try and make sense of elements that are still confusing and confused in my mind. My current research deals with earlier social conflicts and with the traces they have left in local memories, so the present functions as a sort of test of the paths I have taken before to try and understand the past<sup>7</sup>. This paper therefore aims to describe and analyze events using this research as an unobtrusive backdrop. It does, however, offer a provisional interpretation of the current movement as a "rebirth" of a practice of contestation. This practice both innovates in terms of ways of protesting the forms of social relations, and revives an older tradition, re-asserting the weight of the inherited social and racial divide.

### **Going over events: a struggle against "profitation".**

The name chosen by the group which led this 6-week long protest in Guadeloupe is extremely meaningful. The LKP – Liyannaj Kont Pwofitasyon – has baffled both journalists' and researchers' attempts to offer an accurate translation. The news website Rue89 chose "Stand up to profiteers"<sup>8</sup>; l'Humanité "Grouping against outrageous exploitation"<sup>9</sup>; Le Nouvel Observateur uses "Collective"<sup>10</sup> instead of "Grouping", and others, such as Politis or Le Point pointedly avoid translations<sup>11</sup>. The phrase is all but impossible to translate. According to many online references, « Liyannaj » refers to

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<sup>6</sup> - *Départements* are the subdivisions of the French territory below regions. Guadeloupe, Martinique, Guyane and La Réunion were made *départements* in 1946, making them integral parts of France, and since, also of the EU and the euro zone. The process known as *départementalisation* had far-reaching consequences which are analyzed later in the text (translator's note).

<sup>7</sup> - The first results of this research are to be published in 2009 in Christine Chivallon, « Mémoires de l'esclavage à la Martinique. L'explosion mémorielle et la révélation de mémoires anonymes », Cahiers d'Études Africaines and Christine Chivallon, « La diaspora noire ou l'ailleurs impossible. À propos de l'Insurrection paysanne de 1870 à la Martinique », Diasporas, Histoire et Sociétés.

<sup>8</sup> - Chloé Leprince « Guadeloupe : Paris dit 'statut', le LKP crie 'faux débat' », Rue89, 02-22-09

(<http://www.rue89.com/>)

<sup>9</sup> - Rosa Moussaoui, « Guadeloupéens et Martiniquais debout contre la 'profitation', Humanité.fr, 19-02-09

(<http://www.humanité.fr>)

<sup>10</sup> - Jean-Paul Marie, « Et la Guadeloupe est devenue un volcan », Le Nouvel Observateur, n° 2311, 19-25 Feb. 2009.

<sup>11</sup> - Alain Lormon, « Un processus pré-insurrectionnel », Politis, n° 1040, 19-25 Feb. 2009. Yves Cornu, « Antilles. La vérité sur le LKP », Le Point, n° 1901, 19 Feb. 2009.

links, weaving. But rather than accuracy at all costs, why not just accept the lexical inventions of Creole speakers, like the very explicit word "profitation". This neologism may be more adequate to evoke the situation than other, more institutionalized words. "Profitation" refers simultaneously to profit, the usurpation of the profit, and points to the injustice of that usurpation; it semantically unites "profit" and "exploitation", two terms that could be separated to argue that the quest for economic profit could occur without raising the issue of its fair allocation. The term, in a way, conveys information about the experience of Creole societies. Steeped in a history fraught with deeply unfair social relations, these societies create forms of critical awareness associated with creative forms of expression, sometimes difficult to pin down because they fall outside institutional norms. The process subverts words and imposed codes in order to undermine the principles of authority they serve.

LKP started as a result of mobilizations which occurred in December 2008 (much as they did earlier in Guyane) to protest the price of petrol. The powerful union Union Générale des Travailleurs Guadeloupéens (UGTG) created in 1973 around a "constellation of unions calling for independence"<sup>12</sup> led the protest. The recent movement, however, operated an unforeseen convergence between diverse organizations; a total of 49 associations and unions turned to a single figure of leadership, the Secretary General of the UGTG, Élie Domota, though his organization does not claim supremacy in the movement. "We usually agree on nothing" states Élie Domota, but "something clicked this time. Within three hours we had agreed on a manifesto"<sup>13</sup>. Earlier divides were overcome, and a sense of unity prevailed, with a member of the General Secretariat of a rival union, the CTU (Centrale des Travailleurs Unis) asserting that all have the same weight and "the UGTG has given up its hegemonic habits"<sup>14</sup>. The LKP is a result of this unity. By no coincidence, it started its official existence on January 20th, 2009, the day the first Black President was being sworn in in the US, and called for a "general strike". Wide-ranging claims were made in all aspects of collective life, from living standards to environment, cultural promotion, education, healthcare and collective memory<sup>15</sup>. What these claims have in common is their articulation to the essential theme of the defense of equality and respect for individual rights, seen as something to fight for, and not a given. The list which gives an inventory of them<sup>16</sup> concludes with a general call to stop "pwofitasyon", and to indict those responsible for the "massacres of May 1967", carried out by the armed forces against protestors in the streets of Pointe-à-Pitre and which resulted in 87 deaths, long denied<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> - Blérald, 1988, « La question nationale... », op. cit., p. 132.

<sup>13</sup> - Éric Favereau, Antoine Guiral, « Le surprenant succès du LKP, objet politique non identifié », Libération.fr, 04-03-09. (<http://www.liberation.fr/politiques/>)

<sup>14</sup> - Pierre-Yves Lautrou, Hervé Pédurand, « Guadeloupe : ce que le LKP ne dit pas », L'express.fr, 25-02-09, (<http://www.lexpress.fr/>)

<sup>15</sup> - There is a list of these claims on the official LKP website: <http://www.lkp-gwa.org/revendications.htm>

<sup>16</sup> - Here are a few of these many claims: tax breaks with social justice objectives; a 5-year plan to eradicate insalubrious housing; rehabilitation of clandestine road hauliers; creation of an emergency fund for vocational training; amnesty for illegal workers; solutions to structural problems in hospitals; protection of the environment; an end to the opening and extension of supermarkets; rehabilitation of places significant for local memory ....

<sup>17</sup> - Jean-Paul Marie, 2009, « Et la Guadeloupe est devenue... », op. cit.

Of all these claims, those to do with the cost of living were paid the most attention. Both a decrease of prices of daily necessities, and raises of 200 euros for the least well paid workers were called for, which ignited hopes among French Caribbean and, arguably, metropolitan populations, which awoke suddenly to the fact that it was possible to claim, and to aspire to, a fairer allocation of wealth.

After 44 consecutive days of strike, the practical consequences of which one can imagine, there have finally been relatively few incidents to deplore. Violence did not break out as one could have feared, with a mobilization running so close to the deeply painful and unpacified issues which plague these societies. Street demonstrations against "expensive life" (*la vie chère*) drew crowds of 50 000 people in Pointe-à-Pitre on February 14th, 30 000 people in Fort-de-France on February 16th, yet were effectively contained by collective security. In Guadeloupe, stewards wore memorable "Sécurité LKP" T-shirts. Compared to the virtually silent demonstrations which take place in metropolitan France, these had overtones of noisy, colourful, lively carnival parades, despite a sense of gravity and of the importance of the matters at stake. A sung slogan rapidly became popular which ran: « La Gwadeloup sé tan nou, la Gwadeloup sé pa ta yo » (Guadeloupe is ours ; Guadeloupe isn't theirs), which was copied in Martinique. Street riots did take place, with particularly intense violence in the last two weeks of February, and the unelucidated death of a union activist, Jacques Bino, next to a barricade during the night of February 17th-18th. His name was given to the agreement signed about the 200 euros raise on low salaries. His funeral was a solemn occasion and contributed to unify further a community forged by this unusual struggle<sup>18</sup>. The violence was kindled by the departure of Yves Jégo, the Secretary of State for Overseas Territories, by the silence of President Sarkozy and the roughness of the negotiations, though much of it remains latent and likely to fire up anytime. The violent incidents which took place during the protest are probably minimal compared to what could have been, barricades, burned cars, broken shopfronts, and arrests notwithstanding.

The movement is popular in Guadeloupe as well as in Martinique. I won't go into the differences between the two islands, but Guadeloupe played the more important role, and provided a model for protest in Martinique and in La Réunion (in the Indian Ocean). The "Collectif du 5 Février" formed in Martinique does not have the same scope as the LKP. Paradoxically, unions are more important there than associations, though one could have expected "cultural militancy" to have been foremost in Martinique, Guadeloupe being more radical politically. In Guadeloupe the movement went so far beyond the unions that philosopher Jacky Dahomay has suggested it could be seen as the emergence of a "local civil society", a society that had been deprived of its ability to "elaborate a common reason", and at last found means to express its unity against the French state and the political elite<sup>19</sup>. Such a progressive dynamics is not obvious in Martinique, though we need more time to tell.

Today, March 5th, 2009, after 44 days of strike, the agreement is ratified in Guadeloupe, and answers most of the claims about the cost of living. There are celebrations in the street. The LKP is talking of

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<sup>18</sup> - Ségolène Royal, the French Socialist Party's candidate in the 2007 Presidential election, attended Jacques Bino's funeral. During the strike, other leaders of the Left, like José Bové or Olivier Besancenot also made the trip to support protestors in Guadeloupe.

<sup>19</sup> - Jacky Dahomay, February 2009, « Que voulons-nous, Guadeloupéens ? », unpublished paper circulated by e-mail by the author, a professor of philosophy who teaches in Guadeloupe.

"victory"<sup>20</sup>. Its spokesman Elie Domota is being praised by journalists for "handling the crisis with undeniable maestria"<sup>21</sup>. But he prefers to talk about a "stage" and not to talk of "victory"<sup>22</sup>. The movement wants to continue, to last, without being appropriated by the political, and aims "to create a citizenship of the people"<sup>23</sup>.

It is much too soon to foresee what will become of the movement, but we can try and understand how it represents a change, with profound historical roots, if only by the surprising modes of intensive mobilization it carried.

### **An unprecedented challenge to an uncontested legitimacy**

As stated above, the movement carried by LKP and to a lesser degree by the Collectif du 5 Février is not a break with habits of contestation, if set in the historical context of large uprisings. However, it does appear novel and unprecedented. I would like to look at this paradox, of a movement both novel and shaped by history. This apparent contradiction needs to be reset in perspective, on a backdrop of distinct temporalities which have contributed to typify these insular societies; I will argue the typification was interiorized, or accepted, by Caribbean populations themselves, to the point where it paralyzed the workings of a popular consciousness particularly aware of issues of social equality, based as it is on the grounding of slavery.

The mobilization against "expensive life" took place after a long period of drowsiness of popular claims, as expressed in frequent uprisings and riots until the 1970s. I would venture to say that the strikes of 1974 in Martinique<sup>24</sup>, and those of 1967 in Guadeloupe<sup>25</sup> were the end of that cycle, before the effects of départementalisation were fully felt, despite the independentist bombings in Guadeloupe during the 1980s. I don't mean that there were no social conflicts in the ensuing years, far from it: they have always been central to the political life of these islands. But recent decades, particularly since the Mitterrand presidencies, have considerably complicated popular understandings and the political expression of social issues. The image of a "comfortable society" has imposed itself gradually, as the French state constructed a service-based economy, based on social benefits and public employment.

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<sup>20</sup> - Béatrice Gurrey, « L'accord signé en Guadeloupe met fin à 44 jours de grève », **Le Monde.fr**, 05-03-09. (<http://www.lemonde.fr/>)

<sup>21</sup> - Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> - Interview of Élie Domota on **France Inter** le 5-03-09 in Daniel Mermet's programme, « Là-bas si j'y suis ».

<sup>23</sup> - To quote Rosan Mounien, co-founder of UGTG, member of LKP, in Pierre-Yves Lautrou et Hervé Perdurand, 2009, « Guadeloupe... », op. cit.

<sup>24</sup> - These strikes affected various sectors and parts of the island during several weeks, and ended with a fight on the "Chalvet" plantation in the northern part of the island, where there armed forces shot on crowds of workers, leaving one dead and several wounded.

<sup>25</sup> - This strike was essentially led by construction workers in Pointe-à-Pitre, and armed forces having shot protestors caused street riots which ended in a bloodbath (85 dead according the official count). The repression by metropolitan forces hit the nationalist movement GONG (Groupe d'Organisation Nationale de la Guadeloupe) badly, many of its members were arrested and tried. Aimé Césaire and Jean-Paul Sartre appeared at the trial to help the defence.

It is a fact that wealth increased considerably. Between 1950 and 1980 the GDP of Martinique was multiplied by 7, making it one of the richest islands of the Caribbean along with Guadeloupe. In 2007 GDP per head was 3200 euros in Dominica, 4125 euros in Ste-Lucie, neighbouring independent islands; in Martinique and Guadeloupe the figures were 19 700 and 17 400 euros respectively. While these figures are high for the region, they are considerably lower than the average for metropolitan France, 29 765 euros in 2007<sup>26</sup>. Along with a number of other indicators testifying to undeniable progress during the last three decades, these give credit to the idea of privileged societies. Opposed to the tragic destiny of Haïti, the old "sister island", they allow the construction of the alternative of abjectly poor independence vs. opulent dependence. Stereotypes die hard because of the enormous gap between the two situations: on the one hand, Caribbean countries struggling to develop their economies; on the other, Western countries which rule the world economy. While the societies did indeed become richer, as a result of the plantation economies giving way to service-based economies, these were characterized by a marked imbalance (with services employing 81% of the workforce, vs. 72% in metropolitan France). The two levers of growth were emigration, which was encouraged, and public employment. Civil servants represent over a quarter of the workforce (26% in Martinique, vs. 21% in metropolitan France)<sup>27</sup>, and receive preferential treatment since they receive a "cost of living bonus", 40% over salaries paid to civil servants based in metropolitan France. Other salaries tended to be lower than in metropolitan France, until equality was finally obtained (in 1996 for the minimum wage, in 2000 for the RMI, the minimum income for people 25 years of age and over).<sup>28</sup> In a general context of deliberate undermining of local food production, the money thus handed out in salaries and benefits triggered high imports of goods. Hence a peculiar economic order, oft depicted, in which the islands produced what they didn't consume, and consumed what they didn't produce, with a general picture of massive trade deficit. Exports are mostly agricultural products, even as cultivated surfaces shrink. In Martinique, refined oil slightly mitigates the situation, but economic dependence is nearly as absolute as it is in Guadeloupe<sup>29</sup>.

The years after both islands were made French départements saw an economic take-off which, in all respects, put local societies in an uncomfortable position, and had something of a mirage. "Overconsumption", "assisted economy", "artificial economy", were among the phrases used to describe the reality of populations both integrated into a space over which they have no control (French national space) and in a way uprooted from their proper place (the Caribbean). The emergence of a class of civil servants, and the importance of other public monetary transfers, lent credence to the image of a fabricated society, dispossessed of its own destiny, and condemned to keep running to catch up with an exogenous model. Départementalisation thus compounded the old process of assimilation and exacerbated the contradiction which haunts Caribbean systems: two fused yet opposite parts following conflictual trajectories, with statutory decolonization taking place not as separation, but as dilution. This contradiction was repeatedly analyzed throughout the 1970s

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<sup>26</sup> - INSEE figures quoted by Jean-Paul Marie, 2009, « Et la Guadeloupe est devenue... », op. cit. and by Yves Cornu, 2009, « Antilles. La vérité sur... », op. cit.

<sup>27</sup> - INSEE, « Tableaux Économiques Régionaux (TER) de la Martinique », 2007-2008 edition (data for 2006)

<sup>28</sup> - Source : Madras, Dictionnaire..., 1996, op. cit., p. 965. See also L'e-essentiel, 5 Oct. 2002, <http://www.cnaf.fr/web/WebCnaf/nsf/>

<sup>29</sup> - INSEE, « Tableaux Économiques Régionaux (TER) de la Guadeloupe », 2007-2008 edition and INSEE « Tableaux... Martinique », op. cit.

and 80s, with a new sense of loss taking over from earlier historical losses: being torn from Africa; the "social death" of slavery; the illusion of abolition within the context of continued colonial oppression. In these interpretations, the dominating paradigm is that of "alienation", and the "Caribbean malaise" has been described as intensified by this tendency to "exist in reference to"<sup>30</sup>, to be oneself "only by renouncing one's condition, breaking community ties, refusing one's heritage and even one's very self"<sup>31</sup>. In those years the famous ideas of "dispossession"<sup>32</sup> or "derealization"<sup>33</sup> were formulated. And while some authors see "alienation" as "Caribbean intellectuals' hackneyed notion", they still concede that "départementalisation destroyed in a few decades the fragile, but real, community that history, for all its faults, had nonetheless created"<sup>34</sup>.

Is that community the one that is re-emerging in the social movement led by the LKP? Though we can't tell how much of that potential community was in fact irretrievably lost as a consequence of départementalist dependence, we can make a few points about what occurred in the past thirty years. They gave rise to a dual social profile, one aspect of which was paid more attention than the other, with the emphasis on Caribbean reality as "disconnected". First aspect, the social, political and economic situation as transformed by the process of départementalisation developed a tendency described by analysts in the 80s as "a quest for hand-outs"<sup>35</sup>, "an attitude of constant request"<sup>36</sup> in which the subject of consumption shows his capacity to integrate the model of the Other<sup>37</sup>. This tendency has been rightly interpreted as "the social cost" of financial transfers, to be evaluated on the basis of much they undermine people's dignity, to what extent personal responsibility is lost by dependent or assisted persons<sup>38</sup>. The second aspect is that the change was operated in conformity with ancient structural divides, with historically dominating positions being continued and consolidated rather than rearticulated and reworked. Post-départemental society is by no means a new society. Rather it superimposed a framework that aimed to be totally republican on the former, completely colonial order. That is the limit of pseudo-egalitarian assimilation, since social inequalities are maintained or made worse, and the economy of transfers is unable to reduce them.

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<sup>30</sup> - Jean Benoist, 1972, *L'archipel inachevé. Etudes anthropologiques sur les Antilles Françaises*, Montréal, Presses de l'Université de Montréal, p. 8.

<sup>31</sup> - François Gresle, 1971, « Ambiguïtés des modèles et spécificités de la société martiniquaise », *Revue française de sociologie*, XII, pp 528-549 (quote p. 548).

<sup>32</sup> - Édouard Glissant, 1981, *Le discours antillais*, Paris, Seuil.

<sup>33</sup> - Francis Affergan, 1983, *Anthropologie à la Martinique*, Paris, Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques.

<sup>34</sup> - Roland Suvélor, 1983, « Éléments historiques pour une approche socio-culturelle », *Les temps modernes*, n° 441-442, pp. 2175-2207 (quotes on p. 2207 and 2198).

<sup>35</sup> - Bernard Petitjean-Roget, 1983, "Pour comprendre la situation économique des Antilles", *Les Temps Modernes*, 441-442, pp. 1853-1871.

<sup>36</sup> - Fred Constant, 1988, *La retraite aux flambeaux. Société et politique en Martinique*, Paris, Éditions Caribéennes.

<sup>37</sup> - Michel Louis, 1983, "Sur la consommation-Consumation ? - en Martinique", *Les Temps Modernes*, 441-442, pp. 1894-1910.

<sup>38</sup> - On this see Claude de Miras, 1988, " L'économie martiniquaise : croissance ou excroissance ", *Tiers-Monde*, vol. 29, n° 114, pp. 365-383. See also Fred Constant, *La retraite...*, op. cit.

Since the 1980s, these two aspects seem to have obfuscated judgment, even that of researchers, who did not really detect the inegalitarian processes in societies seen as rich and developed, even if "artificially" so. Social conflicts are to be understood in the light of this twofold tendency to apply republican frameworks and consolidate colonial frameworks. Those conflicts which arose in particular economic sectors were dismissed as "asking for more" on the part of already favoured sectors. A reputation of "strike islands" was constructed<sup>39</sup>. The legitimacy of protest is always questioned about these societies seen as a "paradise for civil servants"<sup>40</sup>, and whose dockers could be described as "nabobs"<sup>41</sup>. Claims sound unclear, torn as they are between explicit calls for an improvement of status, and a more muffled and indirect questioning of structural continuities. Activist discourse is perceived as fake, it is suspected of expressing nothing more than the indulgence in unsuitable identity politics. Radical and independentist movements no longer seem credible. The votes they earn in fact merely disguise the lack of belief in real independence, and signify no more than a form of cultural patriotism: this is exemplified by the parties elected, such as the MIM (Mouvement Indépendantiste Martiniquais) whose founder Alfred Marie-Jeanne is currently President of Martinique's regional assembly<sup>42</sup>.

The period which is now ending saw popular consciousness stranded on the superficial levels of départementalisation, which hid and made difficult to articulate clearly the persistence of deep inequalities: the sudden bonanza, deceitful as it was, caused a moral dilemma. It even became possible to think insular societies' integration within metropolitan France "was virtually complete, their cultural otherness being finally accepted by metropolitan powers as unlikely to harm the unity of the Republic"<sup>43</sup>.

The period that is now beginning could see the rebirth of expressions of popular critical thinking, which anthropologist Richard Price thinks is ever ready to resurface in Martinique. For him "modernisation, assimilation barely disguise the element of resistance which is never far from the surface of popular conscience"<sup>44</sup>. What is new since January 20th is the recovery of self-esteem, the return of assertiveness to contest and lead a fight freed from the ambiguities of a sectorial polarisation. The movement against "profitation" deals with social issues and not with their covering up by the benefits of départementalisation. This new-found assertiveness derives from a sense of legitimacy, with the downside of départementalisation being all but impossible to evade. It is no accident that it is being exposed in our neo-conservative times, though once again more hindsight will allow for a proper analysis of the conditions which made this revival of contestation possible.

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<sup>39</sup> - US tourists apparently dubbed Martinique the « Strike Island » : Patrice Louis, 2009, « La grève générale... », op. cit.

<sup>40</sup> - Yves-Michel Ryols, « L'outre-mer étouffe d'être le paradis des fonctionnaires », L'expansion.com, 01-05-2006. <http://www.lexpansion.com/>

<sup>41</sup> - Yves-Michel Ryols, « La vie de Nabab des dockers de Fort-de-France », L'expansion.com, 26-04-2006. <http://www.lexpansion.com/>

<sup>42</sup> - Since 1982, when regions were officially created in France, the DOM (overseas départements) have also become regions (translator's note). About the MIM, see Jeanne Yang-Ting, 2000, *Le mouvement indépendantiste martiniquais*, Petit-Bourg, Ibis Rouge Éditions. For further information on Caribbean politics, see Justin Daniel, 2002, " L'espace politique aux Antilles françaises ", *Ethnologie française*, XXXII, 4, pp. 589-600.

<sup>43</sup> - Michel Giraud, 1999, « La patrimonialisation des cultures antillaises. Conditions, enjeux et effets pervers », *Ethnologie française*, XXIX, 3, pp. 375-386 (citation p. 377)

<sup>44</sup> - Richard Price, 2000, *Le bagnard et le colonel*, Paris, PUF, p. 181.



That it is widely perceived as legitimate is obvious from media reports, as evidence of an unacceptable situation accumulates. One is astonished to discover "the appalling figures measuring social problems" in overseas départements, where "figures of deprivation in metropolitan France are multiplied. 23% of the workforce is unemployed, three times the figure for France (sic). Four times the proportion of people living with the RMI (...) and twice the proportion of poor despite the fact the poverty line is lower".<sup>45</sup> Youth unemployment is telling of the economic disaster, with 50% of those under 25 years out of work (60% for those without a degree).<sup>46</sup> The real meaning of "vie chère" is made explicit: prices for everyday items are staggering, even in "hard discount" stores, in the area of 40% above prices in metropolitan France. For less essential items, such as ready-made meals, the difference is as much as 112%<sup>47</sup>. This aspect of Caribbean islands does not sit neatly with their casting in metropolitan imaginations, as, in the words of Jacky Dahomay, territories conferring "a modicum of sun, beach, and palm trees on a sickly, exhausted republican identity"<sup>48</sup>. Suffering is by no means absent from tropical islands, as these figures begin to suggest, while more detailed studies unveil more precisely the extent of "Creole distress", the vulnerability of populations close to absolute destitution<sup>49</sup>. The movement initiated by the LKP and the « Collectif du 5 février » succeeded in opening eyes on these phenomena, both among negotiators and metropolitan public opinion, thereby reclaiming dignity. The people described itself as « *doubout* » (upright, standing) and found new strength to challenge a governing class which couldn't ignore the glaring facts set out in figures.

But legitimacy also derived from the unprecedented acknowledgement, even by high-placed representatives of the state, of another aspect of social and economic inequalities: the racial dimension of social relations in these islands. It is a historical turning point: for the first time the existence, within the Republic, of a group whose reproduction as an elite is based on strict racial endogamy, is acknowledged; for the first time a taboo is lifted, the enduring weight of colonial and slavery is made manifest, thanks to the way "the social movement disinhibited people"<sup>50</sup>. In a context of financial crisis, as "moralizing" liberalism is seen as necessary, it becomes easier to point an accusing finger at the monopolistic practices of the Békés (direct descendants of White colonists and slave masters<sup>51</sup>). After the agricultural decline of the 1960s, this group, which numbers less than 1% of the total population, was remarkably successful in trading activities, a success facilitated by

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<sup>45</sup> - Jean-Paul Marie, 2009, « Et la Guadeloupe est devenue... », op. cit.

<sup>46</sup> - INSEE, 2007-2008, « Tableaux économiques... », op. cit.

<sup>47</sup> - Cécile Everard, « Chariot plein, porte-monnaie vide », France-Antilles.fr, 04-02-09. <http://www.franceantilles.fr/>

<sup>48</sup> - Jacky Dahomay, février 2009, « Le mépris de Sarkozy ? », unpublished paper circulated by the author.

<sup>49</sup> - See Raymond Massé, 2008, *Détresse créole. Ethnoépidémiologie de la détresse psychique à la Martinique*, Presses de l'Université de Laval, Québec. The following report offers fascinating insights into poverty in Martinique, both from the perspective of those identified as "poor" and from that of social workers: Justin Daniel (dir.), Patrick Bruneteaux, Joëlle Kabile, Nadine Lefaucheur, Véronique Rochais, *Pauvreté, précarité et formes d'exclusion en Martinique : une approche qualitative*, Rapport pour le Ministère de l'Outre Mer, janvier 2007.

<sup>50</sup> - Béatrice Gurrey et Benoît Hopquin, « Békés : une affaire d'héritage », *Le Monde.fr*, 28-02-09. (<http://www.lemonde.fr/>)

<sup>51</sup> - Though based mainly in Martinique, Békés nonetheless control some economic sectors in Guadeloupe. Their physical presence there declined during the French Revolution, at a time when Martinique was occupied by the British and therefore did not benefit from what is called "the first abolition of slavery" (1794), though it was re-instituted by Napoleon in 1802.

speculation on land, of which it was the main owner<sup>52</sup>. The combination of a solvent market (civil servants) with the weight of big family companies in retail (40%) and the food industry (90%) accounts for the inflated prices that transportation costs alone cannot justify<sup>53</sup>. It also explains why the islands converted so rapidly and totally to super- and hypermarkets, with devastating effects on smaller outlets.

The might of the Béké minority re-enacts an ancient reality never eradicated; it is not a mere left-over, but a still operative structural relationship, the organizing principle of which is still a racial representation. Coincidentally, a documentary film was shown on television (Canal+) on January 30th, 2009, and made available on the web: it showed for the very first time the inside of a group known as "discrete", which leads a reclusive life in communities of the Atlantic centre of the Martinique<sup>54</sup>. Huge fortunes built on monopolies, the powerful networks of lobby groups, and scandals such as the ecologic disaster resulting from the illegal use of kepone-based pesticides, were all publicized. What clinches it is that one of the Békés interviewed reveals the cornerstone of the group: the will to "preserve the race". This statement, aired publicly in the midst of an unprecedented social movement, also had unforeseen consequences: the Béké, Alain Huygues Despointes, was charged with "incitation to racial hatred and eulogy of a crime against humanity"<sup>55</sup>. It is the first instance of the republican framework, which passed a law designating slavery as a crime against humanity (and set up a "Committee for the memory of slavery"), making exceptions possible within the general regime of equality and fraternity between citizens<sup>56</sup>. To fully account for this novelty, which testifies to a new awareness, it will probably be necessary to read the events of early 2009 in the light of the wide-ranging debate on the commemoration of slavery which preceded them<sup>57</sup>.

The main success of the populations acting with the LKP is that they left no doubt about the legitimacy of their claims, which was in a way acknowledged by the Secretary of State for Overseas Territories, Yves Jégo, who said: "This crisis is not a mere social crisis. The structure of the economy is totally archaic, it is the legacy of colonial trading posts (...). The conflict between colonists and slaves is hitting us in the face"<sup>58</sup>. In other words, "profitation" has a reality in facts.

<sup>52</sup> - On the use of land as a locus of reconduction of the master/slave conflict, see Christine Chivallon, « Espace, mémoire à la Martinique. La belle histoire de "Providence" », *Annales de Géographie*, 638-639, pp. 400-424.

<sup>53</sup> - Axel Gylden, « Les Antilles, le pays où la vie est plus chère... », *L'express.fr*, 17-02-09. (<http://www.lexpress.fr/>)

<sup>54</sup> - « Les derniers maîtres de la Martinique », documentray by Romain Bolzinger, available at the following address : [http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x8armv\\_les-derniers-maitres-de-la-martinique\\_news](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x8armv_les-derniers-maitres-de-la-martinique_news)

<sup>55</sup> - Fort-de-France, AFP, 04-03-09. <http://actu.orange.fr/>

<sup>56</sup> - It is the 2001 "loi Taubira", about the "recognition by the French Republic of the Transatlantic slave trade and slavery as a crime against humanity". About this law, see the report by the Comité pour la mémoire de l'esclavage, 2005 *Mémoires de la traite négrière de l'esclavage et de leurs abolitions*, Paris, La Découverte.

<sup>57</sup> - On the commemoration debate, see Christine Chivallon, 2005, "Résurgence des mémoires de l'esclavage : entre accélération généralisée et historicité singulière", *Diasporas, Histoire et Sociétés*, 6, pp. 144-155 and also Christine Chivallon, forthcoming, "Resurgence of the Memory of Slavery in France: Issues and Significations of a Public and Academic Debate", in Araujo A. L. (ed.), *Living history: Encountering the Memory of the Heirs of Slavery*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

<sup>58</sup> - Cyriel Martin, « Jégo : 'Le conflit entre les colons et les esclaves nous remonte à la figure' », *Le Point.fr*, 27-02-09. (<http://www.lepoint.fr/>).

## History both new and repeated

The movement closed a long period of hesitancy about the position to be taken about départementalisation. Aiming as it did to establish "parity" and "equality", the status was above criticism; however, it did not answer the question of dominant positions being consolidated, of racial divides, and the creation of new imbalances. This movement reasserted the truth of Aimé Césaire's warning (though he himself supported the law of assimilation): "Assimilating the Caribbean islands and their sisters to French départements doesn't only mean to foster more justice in overseas societies, but also to initiate a short-term policy to clear up the economy of those territories, by eradicating the private monopolies which condition their whole life"<sup>59</sup>.

"Theoretical département or real colony?" read some signs carried by demonstrators in the streets of Pointe-à-Pitre. The issue of independence was never raised (at least until the date at which this article was written), even though some of the members of the movement, such as the UGTG, are independentist. This issue may have been kept at bay by the need to construct a large and consensual platform, but that is probably not the main reason why there was no engagement with the national question. It is a tradition of social fights in the French Caribbean, consolidated as the history of the islands got enmeshed in the process of republican progress, since the Revolution. The LKP movement reasserts, in a way, the call for equality that has been central to the struggle for emancipation. The sense of belonging to the republican framework is not at fault, the framework is being questioned: that is the meaning of the alternative between a theoretical département and a real colony. It is a call for the republic to be really republican.

There seems to be a break with "the time of the départements", and a return to earlier concerns of Creole societies, always alert to issues of equality and liberty. This break was experienced by locals as a shock, as a sense that it suddenly became possible to realize and express things left unsaid until then; thus inhabitants of the Guadeloupe quoted in the newspaper *Libération*: "We saw (on private television channel Canal 10) the prefect, surrounded by his collaborators, all white, read theatrically a text by the Minister, get up and leave (...). Practically at the same time, employers' organizations, nearly white also, left the room. In that large room, only Black people remained. It was an incredible feeling. Those who were still there — the LKP delegation and the local elected representatives — all started speaking Creole. The French state as a foreign body"; "It was a shock. We heard nothing that we didn't already know, but all of a sudden it was all out in the open"<sup>60</sup>. Tongues were loosened, freed, and suddenly released bootlegged truths hitherto hidden by fabricated discourse. "We were transformed into digestive systems", at the end of a historical downfall from "the Black Code"<sup>61</sup> to the bar code"<sup>62</sup>: new phrases from freed minds. In Haïti, though poorer as a whole than the poorest

<sup>59</sup> - Aimé Césaire quoted in Blérald, 1988, « La question nationale... », op. cit., p. 124.

<sup>60</sup> - Quoted in Éric Favereau, 2009, « C'était comme retenu... », op. cit.

<sup>61</sup> - The Code Noir (a sort of Black Code), passed in 1685, defined the conditions of slavery in the French colonial empire and restricted the activities of free Negroes (translator's note).

<sup>62</sup> - Inhabitants of Guadeloupe on France Inter, 5-03-09, in Daniel Mermet's programme, « Là-bas si j'y suis ».

of the French Caribbean, a journalist writing in the « *Nouvelliste* », Dieudonné Joachim, calls for a similar "awakening" after "hibernation" and see LKP as "the result of a spurt of pride"<sup>63</sup>.

Is there, then, a return to the tradition of critical thought? It does seem so, at least as long as the movement lasted. The struggle against "profitation" confronts the French Republic to its own contradictions, and reasserts the values that should be carried by the republican ideal, and by so doing it recalls ancient rebellions spurred by what Jacky Dahomay has fittingly called "the equality drive" in cultures of the "counter-plantation", reactive cultures born from systems of exclusive domination<sup>64</sup>. Slave revolts which occurred in Guadeloupe prior to the first abolition have been analyzed as playing a crucial part in the construction of republican, universalist thought, as a contribution giving a new meaning to the equality of citizens<sup>65</sup>. In Martinique, the Southern Insurrection which took place as the Third Republic was being proclaimed (a few months before the Paris Commune) also challenged French ideals of a society based on justice<sup>66</sup>. It is fascinating to hear a manager of the CGPME<sup>67</sup>, raving against the LKP, echo the words used by the judges who tried the insurgents of 1870: "They want chaos, to ruin companies (plantations in 1870) and to install a new order"<sup>68</sup>...

Are French Caribbeans more republican than the Republic? More far-sighted than their compatriots in metropolitan France? Though I may be accused of being a naive idealist, I tend to think so, in part because a historic perspective gives elements to do so. The future of the LKP is uncertain, but at the present moment it expresses a surge of critical consciousness, "an open, wounded conscience", in the terms of the Caribbean authors of the "manifesto for post-capitalist societies". And since utopia is a necessary aim of politics, let's also follow these authors in renouncing academic realism and formulate the hope that this movement become part of a general quest for emancipation from the "vague, globalized system" which "confines existences to selfish individualities". And the hope that, in the words of the same authors, it may nurture a "politics" that "does not boil down to managing unbearable poverty and regulating the vagaries of the "market", but reclaims its essence by serving once again everything that gives soul to the prosaic"<sup>69</sup>.

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<sup>63</sup> - Carib Creole, « Haïti, Pwofitasyon : la population est en hibernation » (interview de Dieudonné Joachim), Carib Creole One, . (<http://www.caribcreole1.com>).

<sup>64</sup> - Jacky Dahomay, 2000, " Identité culturelle et identité politique. Le cas antillais ", in : KYMLICKA W, MESURE S., " Comprendre les identités culturelles ", n° 1, collection Comprendre, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France.

<sup>65</sup> - Laurent Dubois, 1998, Les esclaves de la République. L'histoire oubliée de la première émancipation, 1789-1794, Paris, Calmann-Lévy.

<sup>66</sup> - See Christine Chivallon, 2009 (à paraître), « La diaspora noire ou l'ailleurs... », op. cit.

<sup>67</sup> - La CGPME : Confédération Générale des Petites et Moyennes Entreprises (a union of bosses of small and medium-sized companies).

<sup>68</sup> - Pierre-Yves Lautrou, Hervé Pédurand, 2009, « Guadeloupe... », op. cit..

<sup>69</sup> - « Le manifeste de neuf intellectuels antillais pour 'des sociétés post-capitalistes' », Le Monde.fr, 16-02-09. (<http://www.lemonde.fr/>). This manifesto was circulated under the title « Manifeste pour les produits de haute nécessité ». It was signed, among others, by writers of the Martinique Patrick Chamoiseau and Édouard Glissant.

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