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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 Martin Thomas, Exeter University.

The French Imperial Nation-State is an important book; important not just because it challenges us to rethink the ways in which we evaluate the French Empire, and European colonialism in general, but also because it convincingly demonstrates an alternative means to understand why French imperialism developed as it did after 1918. At its core lies a deceptively simple question: How can we account for what happened to the French Empire in the twenty years between the end of the First World War and the start of the Second? Gary Wilder's response breaks new ground, but, in order to grasp the scale of his achievement, we need to pause a moment to consider how the issues he addresses have been thought of hitherto.

Historians of empire increasingly reject as trite any characterization of the interwar period as some sort of chronological bridge between the age of high imperial expansion and the postwar decades of colonial collapse. But there is little consensus about a more fundamental conceptual problem. Did interwar methods of French imperial governance and indigenous reactions to them assist the Empire's survival or did they precipitate its decline? The answers offered have, in broad terms, fallen into three main categories.

The first have been instrumental, empirical, and metropolitan in focus, their attention centered on the failure of reformist initiatives, the colonially calamitous French currency adjustments of the years 1926 to 1938, and the more calculated exploitation of reserved colonial markets to underpin uncompetitive home industries.[1] One strength of this approach is that it clearly locates contributory causes of imperial breakdown—systematic denial of widened (and erstwhile promised) political participation, chronic colonial deficits, and falling real incomes—in the interwar years. But this accent on tangible outcomes, on effects more than causes, might also be construed as a weakness, given that we need to know not just what happened, but why.

With wholly structuralist explanations of imperial decline now out of fashion, the idea that the end of European empire might be reducible to impersonal forces, whether economic, political, or strategic, is rarely entertained. In some senses, this may be lamented, not least in light of the fact that perhaps the most salient catalyst for imperial change in the interwar years was a protracted economic crisis whose impact on colonial populations was generally catastrophic.[2] Nonetheless, the turn away from structuralism in general, and Marxist models of capitalist imperialism in particular, has, in other senses, enriched the study of colonialism. For one thing, it has helped place issues of race and culture, and of gender and sexuality, at the heart of empire, bringing to bear the perspectives of social anthropology and gender history in doing so.[3] For another, the turn away from economic modeling and class formation has been matched by attempts to reach a deeper understanding of the intellectual basis for specific colonial policies[4] and a much stronger recognition of the agency of colonized peoples as authors of their own political destiny.

This stress on the agency of indigenous actors is apparent in the second category of explanation of colonial change in the interwar years and beyond. This second approach accords primacy to politics, above all to the rise of organized anti-colonialism in various guises from secular nationalism to worker

militancy and the cultural rejectionism of religious groups and clan-based communities threatened by creeping westernization.[5] If its virtue lies in the stress on the agency of colonized peoples, its vice is in the sometimes narrow concentration on sites of political conflict between the colonial state and nationalist forces, powerful clerics, or tribal leaders that, in some cases, represented only a privileged elite.

The third, and perhaps currently the most vibrant school of interpretation, puts cultural factors to the fore, reminding us that the primordial aspect of the colonial encounter was more mental than physical. Put simply, the key to understanding the nature of colonial rule rests in the imaginary construction of subject peoples—their supposed racial characteristics, their limited acculturation to all things ‘civilized’, their emotional propensity to irrational behavior—in the minds of colonial rulers and the wider French population.[6] From these underlying assumptions of racial difference, of colonial primitivism, and, of course, of European cultural supremacy, all else flowed. Here again we need to tread warily. While few would deny that colonial stereotyping, so evident in interwar French popular culture, was also integral to policymaking, there is a real danger that, in identifying the source and durability of these prevalent stereotypes, we ascribe them too much power, making specialist officials and other influential constituencies of opinion nothing more than the sum of their accumulated prejudices. Put another way, cultural constructions of a colonial ‘other’ mattered, but they were perhaps less immutable than a rigid critique of Orientalist thinking might suggest. Precisely because these ideas were constructed, they were also subject to variation and reinvention, depending on the lived experiences of the individuals concerned.

This is Wilder’s starting point, for this is a book about the conjunction of evolving ideas and political practices among two discrete and well-informed groups: on the one hand, those at the cutting edge of administrative innovation within the empire, and, on the other, the black African and Antillean students, writers, and poets that forged the cultural nationalism of the Negritude movement in interwar Paris. His work is genuinely interdisciplinary. For example, borrowing from Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, Wilder adapts the concept of antinomy—of two conflicting and yet equally valid solutions to a given problem—to explain how and why reformist French administrators (the colonial humanists of the book’s subtitle) and the leading lights of the emergent Negritude movement reached such diametrically opposed conclusions about the treatment of dependent populations within the ‘imperial nation-state’.

A word here about Wilder’s employment of this term ‘imperial nation-state’. Ostensibly contradictory, the idea that France and its overseas dependencies were somehow unified into a transnational whole makes sense when, as Wilder makes so clear, the central intellectual challenge for imperialist reformers was to devise some means to render France, the guardian and repository of the nation-state ideal, capable of applying those same ideals to its overseas empire.[7] As he notes, the imperial nation-state was a mass of contradictions: at once conceptual and material, avowedly egalitarian and yet racially discriminatory, theoretically grounded in popular consent, but actually rooted in violent conquest. The point though, is that Wilder refuses to leave matters there. Valuable as it may be, it is relatively easy to identify the problems inherent in an imperial system wedded to ideals that it could not fulfill in practice. Wilder’s goal is more ambitious: to integrate empire within the very fabric of the Third Republic. In his words, ‘The crucial analytic question is not how the universalist republican nation was able to maintain and justify a racist colonial system, but how republicanism, bureaucratic authoritarianism, and colonialism were internal elements of an expanded French state that were articulated within an expanding imperial system’(p. 26.). By unraveling the conflicting elements in this imperial nation state he illustrates why interwar colonial reform took the form that it did from conception to eventual implementation, or, more often than not, non-implementation. His focus is intellectual and cultural insofar as he analyzes the scholarly backgrounds, the academic interests, and the attitudinal formation of the reformers in question, but it is also political in as much as he explains why so few of the reformist plans they envisaged ever came to fruition.

Here we see why concentration on the twenties and thirties makes such good sense. The goal of ruling empire according to locally adapted precepts of social welfare defined in opposition to mercantilist exploitation and erstwhile cultural assimilation was made imperative by the colonial impact of World War I. Imperial cohesion, always tenuous at best, was tested to the limit by the strains of conscription, economic exaction, and the unprecedented presence in France of tens of thousands of colonial subjects, whether in uniform or in factory garb. As a result, prewar justifications for empire, whether based on the satisfaction of metropolitan needs, the 'right to rule' of industrially advanced societies, or the trickle-down benefits of gallicization and gradual economic modernization, seemed indefensible and anachronistic in the face of mounting postwar demands for wider citizenship, the unconstrained growth of local civil society, and the alleviation of material hardship. With greater urgency than ever before, the interwar dilemma for colonial reformers was to square the impossible circle of universalist ideals with the reality of institutional racism, of differential rights between French and non-French within the Empire as a whole.

The contradiction between the state's professed egalitarianism and the limited conferment of citizenship rights is familiar to scholars of women's history in the Third Republic.[8] So, too, it has informed innovative discussions among colonial historians about the widespread turn to associationist policies across the Empire in the early twentieth century.[9] But Wilder frames the matter differently, identifying colonial policies in French West Africa, the geographical focus of his study, in terms of social policy and protocolonial development. Above all, he detects a common thread running through interwar reform, namely, a belief in the power of the state to ameliorate social conditions and so change people's minds about the potential beneficence of empire. There is, therefore, less emphasis laid upon official collaboration with indigenous auxiliaries and the cultivation of a loyal, dependent elite in Wilder's depiction of French rule in West Africa, much more on what he terms 'colonial humanism': the management of indigenous populations through economic modernization, the codification of customary law, and welfare initiatives. The administrative cadres, École Coloniale staff, and politicians preoccupied by the entrenchment of a more collaborative style of colonial rule after the traumas of World War I thus conceived their work in terms of a grand imperial nation-state whose foundations were embedded in flawlessly republican principle.[10] The desirability of wider public inclusion in a republican political community suggested, even prescribed, a humanist approach to colonial reform based on the calculation that, through exposure to French welfare policies and political norms, dependent populations could be elevated to the socio-political standards of their rulers.

As ever, the practical stumbling blocks to success were enormous, lack of money to fund development schemes and the continued refusal to accord equivalent political rights to dependent populations foremost among them. Nothing particularly surprising there, but, as Wilder shows, the more profound problems facing the rulers of empire were conceptual. How could their universalist ideals ever be reconciled with the abiding belief in racial difference? How could they incorporate dependent peoples into the French imperial nation-state, albeit as its junior members, without in the process unleashing uncontrollable demands for political rights and the kind of cultural assertiveness exemplified by the pioneers of Negritude? How could tribal chiefs, educated indigenous functionaries, and other native elites be made the loyal defenders of empire when they were treated at once as collaborators and as rivals for power? It was these dilemmas, what Wilder terms 'the double bind' of colonial humanism that underpinned the interwar crisis of empire. Taken as a whole, his argument in the book's first half is both original and persuasive. While there is no denying the gulf between ambitious development plans and the limited achievement of reform so often identified by historians of the French Empire, we need to grasp the underlying logic that informed reformist thinking. Only then can we appreciate both what the architects of empire were trying to accomplish and why they were doomed to fail.

It is a message driven home in the book's second half, which turns the spotlight from the cultural environs of colonial policymakers to the intellectual milieu of the expatriate colonial communities in interwar Paris, the aforementioned students and activists of the Negritude movement in particular. As

Wilder makes plain, to treat Negritude uncritically as an organized 'movement' with determined political objectives and a well-defined cultural mission is to misunderstand its initial diffuseness and the ambivalent attitude toward French colonialism of the early Negritude writers. That said, the rationale for linking a study of Negritude to his earlier investigation of colonial reformism is self-evident. After all, the best-known figures of Negritude—Léopold Sédar Senghor, Aimé Césaire, and Léon-Gontran Damas prominent among them—were shaped by their early exposure to French education and literature, the bedrocks of republican acculturation so beloved of colonial reformers. More important, their central preoccupation was with the same 'double bind' as their colonial overseers: how to escape their inferior social status as imperial citizen-subjects with their abiding belief in what Wilder describes as 'an alternative Greater France', 'a nonracial supranational federation' (p.5). As a consequence, while their elaboration of a distinct African cultural identity took issue with the colonial humanists' reform schemes, Negritude was not intrinsically hostile to political association with France. Rather, as Wilder argues, by developing a uniquely African cultural nationalism, Negritude offered an escape route from the vicious circle that more militant anticolonial nationalists had to face: how to avoid replacing colonial rule with forms of governance and economic organization derived from it.

But if Wilder is a subtle and sympathetic judge of the literary output of Negritude writers, he is ultimately critical of what, in a telling phrase, he dubs the 'calcifying' of Negritude into a compliant nativist ideology that became complicit in the French colonialism it set out to confront. Once more, however, he cautions us against considering only deeds and not words, only actions and not the ideas that informed them. Much as he pleads for the evaluation of interwar reform as part of a deeper shift toward colonial humanism, so, too, he places Negritude and its limited short-term political achievements in the same context of interwar imperial crisis.

In sum, *The French Imperial Nation-State* urges us to think differently about rulers and ruled in France's interwar empire. If some might quibble with the accent on the softer, more intellectual side of reformist planning rather than on the harder realities of coercive control and acute economic distress, these are by no means ignored. And, as Wilder contends, we have perhaps been fixated by outcomes, by the manifest iniquities and cruelties of colonialism, to the detriment of the intellectual currents that produced and sustained them. Here again the originality of his approach is striking. The result is a book of remarkable range that no specialist can afford to ignore.

NOTES

[1] The now classic exposition of this view is Jacques Marseille, *Empire colonial et capitalisme français. Histoire d'un divorce* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1984). Echoes of this approach are also evident in Daniel Lefeuvre, *Chère Algérie. Comptes et mécomptes de la tutelle coloniale 1930-1962* (Paris: Société Française d'Histoire d'Outre-Mer, 1997); Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémerly, *Indochine: la colonisation ambiguë, 1858-1954* (Paris: La Découverte, 2001); and my own *The French Empire between the Wars. Imperialism, Politics, and Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

[2] See, for example, Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, 'L'Afrique coloniale française et la crise de 1930: Crise structurelle et genèse de sous-développement,' *Revue Française d'Histoire d'Outre-Mer* 63:232 (1976): 386-424; Pierre Brocheux, 'The state and the 1930s depression in French Indochina,' in Peter Boomgaard and Ian Brown, eds., *Weathering the Storm. The Economies of South East Asia in the 1930s Depression* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2000), 251-70; and Ann Booth, 'Four colonies and a kingdom: A comparison of fiscal, trade, and exchange rate policies in South East Asia in the 1930s,' *Modern Asian Studies* 37:2 (2003): 429-60.

[3] Take, for example, the following three collections of essays: Julia Clancy-Smith and Frances Gouda, eds., *Domesticating the Empire. Race, Gender, and Family Life in French and Dutch Colonialism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998); Margaret L. Meriwether and Judith E. Tucker, eds., *Women and Gender in the Modern Middle East* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999); and Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power. Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). Another, more recent, path-breaking study of sexuality and empire is Robert Aldrich, *Colonialism and Homosexuality* (London: Routledge, 2003).

[4] A prime example of this new colonial intellectual history is Eric Savarese, *L'Ordre colonial et sa légitimation en France métropolitaine* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998).

[5] To use the Algerian case as an example, see Ahmed Koulakssis and Gilbert Meynier, *L'Emir Khaled premier za'im? Identité algérienne et colonialisme français* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1987); Benjamin Stora, *Nationalistes algériens et révolutionnaires français au temps du Front Populaire* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1987); Mahfoud Kaddache, *Histoire du nationalisme algérien, tome I: Question nationale et politique algérienne, 1919-1951* (Algiers: Entreprise nationale du livre, 1993); Kamel Bouguessa, *Aux sources du nationalisme algérien. Les pionniers de populisme révolutionnaire en marche* (Algiers: Casbah Editions, 2000).

[6] The literature here is growing fast. Recent key works include Patricia M. E. Lorcin, *Imperial Identities. Stereotyping, Prejudice and Race in Colonial Algeria* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999); Elizabeth Ezra, *The Colonial Unconscious: Race and Culture in Interwar France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000); Emmanuelle Sibeud, *Une science impériale pour l'Afrique? La construction des savoirs africainistes en France, 1878-1930* (Paris: EHESS, 2002); Pascal Blanchard and Sandrine Lemaire, eds., *Culture coloniale. La France conquise par son empire 1871-1931* (Paris: Autrement, 2003); Sue Peabody and Tyler Stovall, eds., *The Color of Liberty. Histories of Race in France* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); and Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard, Gilles Boëtsch, Eric Deroo and Sandrine Lemaire, *Zoos humaines. Au temps des exhibitons humaines*, 2nd ed., (Paris: La Découverte, 2004).

[7] Although Wilder clearly differentiates his arguments from those of Alice Conklin, her work on colonial reformers' conceptualisation of subjects' rights is an essential complement to his. See, in particular, Conklin, 'Colonialism and human rights: a contradiction in terms? The case of France and West Africa, 1895-1914,' *American Historical Review*, 103:2 (1998): 419-42.

[8] Wilder's informative discussion about the exclusion of colonial subjects from the republican *cité* echoes Siân Reynolds' treatment of women's exclusion from the political apparatus of the late Third Republic, see her *France between the Wars. Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996), especially chapter 9.

[9] The key work here is Alice L. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize. The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997). See also James E. Genova, *Colonial Ambivalence, Cultural Authenticity, and the Limitations of Mimicry in French-Ruled West Africa, 1914-1956* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004).

[10] This point emerges strongly in a major study devoted to the administrator, author, and École Coloniale director, Robert Delavignette, rightly a key figure in Wilder's analysis: see Bernard Mouralis, Anne Piriou and Romuald Fonkoua, eds., *Robert Delavignette savant et politique (1897-1976)* (Paris: Karthala, 2003).

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

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