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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 Patricia Lorcin, University of Minnesota.

Since the 1960s, when most of France's overseas territories gained their independence, the development of the historiography of French imperialism/colonialism has undergone a number of shifts. Although most of these early works were anti-imperialist in nature they varied in their political approach. They were, for the most part, political, social, or economic histories with a core-periphery structure that often reinforced the notion that the French colonies were a law unto themselves and that their history was peripheral to mainstream French historiography. In the 1980s and 1990s this scenario changed in a spectacular fashion as the influence of Foucault, Said, and other theoretically minded scholars gave rise to the linguistic and cultural 'turns'. As a result, the history of France's overseas empire(s), usually relegated to the margins of mainstream French historiography, moved closer to center stage. Cultural historians and literary scholars reshaped colonial history by demonstrating that culture, art, and science were as much 'tools of empire' as were governmental and economic policies. Although the core-periphery structure was sometimes retained, the two were no longer seen as essentially separate, and it is now accepted that the empire has had an impact on twentieth-century French political, social, and cultural structures. The empire has, to paraphrase the title of Herman Lebovics' recent work, been brought back home. [1]

Gary Wilder's ambitious *The French Imperial Nation-State* is an attempt to reconfigure this historiography and provide a new slant to the metropole-colony relationship by focusing on two intersecting movements that prevailed in the interwar years. The first, elaborated by republican reformers, was 'colonial humanism'; the second, elaborated by West African and Antillean elites, was the cultural nationalism of Negritude. Wilder argues that each exemplified and developed in relation to 'France's disjointed imperial character' (p. 4). The book is divided into three main parts: the first develops the concept of the imperial nation-state; the second presents and elaborates the idea of colonial humanism; and the third, the most cogent in my view, describes Negritude as a three-faceted movement of 'African humanism'. The underlying quest of the work, which provides its overall structure, is to explore how colonial elites made use of categories of Western political modernity when those very same categories had been used in their domination. The three parts of the book are therefore linked at various intervals throughout the text, but for the purposes of this essay I shall deal with each separately.

In the first part of the book, Wilder reconfigures the nation-state into an imperial nation-state with the aim of resolving the contradictions between the promises of republicanism and the practices of colonialism. Wilder eschews the oppositions developed in recent historiography between the French colonial empire and the national republic, racism and universalism, and the national and transnational, suggesting that these binaries were not oppositional but that they cohabited, creating tensions in both colony and metropole that eventually gave way to more serious conflicts. He singles out Alice Conklin's *A Mission to Civilize* [2] as the main focus of his critique, aligning her with colonial reformers and colonized elites insofar as they all protected the French republican ideal while denouncing its violations in the colonies without exploring the connections that sustained and connected the two (p. 8). It is a very unfortunate juxtaposition and a misreading of Conklin's work. Referring to La Capra's notion of transferential relationships to history, whereby the issues in the object of study are repeated with variations or displaced analogues in the author's account of them, Wilder warns against scholarship that is formulated by 'acting out' rather than 'thinking through' a historical moment and thus sets out to

work through the imperial nation-state, which he tells us should be treated as ‘an artefact of colonial modernity’ (p. 8). The point, therefore, is to write French history from an imperial rather than an imperialist standpoint. The line between imperial and imperialist is a fine one, and while Wilder argues his case thoroughly, using a theoretical structure drawn from Arendt, Foucault, and Marx, the wider implications, in the present climate of rampant imperialism, are more disturbing. It would be as easy to misconstrue ‘thinking through’ as endorsement, just as it is easy to write off the critique of colonialism inherent in ‘acting out’ as a ‘protection of the French national-republican ideal’ (p. 8). But the main and valid point that Wilder develops in this section is that the Republic, whether in France or in its colonial manifestation, was imperial in nature and therefore it could only ever fall short of its ideals.

Part two deals with ‘colonial humanism’, which, Wilder tells us, was ‘a systemic political rationality that extended and modified metropolitan welfarism’ (p. 50). As Wilder rightly points out, the interwar years were ones of anxiety both in the colonies and the metropole as challenges to imperial legitimacy developed and the Third Republic sought to cope with the devastation of the war. As far as the colonies were concerned, the response was reform, spearheaded by a series of figures connected to colonial institutions either in the metropole or in the French West Africa. Colonial humanism was not, Wilder argues, a mere extension of the doctrine of association but was more complex. Its protagonists were believers in empire but realized that without a rational response, both to the demands of the colonized elites and the problematic social situation in the colonies, the colonial edifice would ultimately collapse. The argument introduced in the first part of the book, that the colonies were seen as sites of renewal for a war-torn France, is fleshed out in the second. Wilder does a good job of tying in the political, social, and economic developments in the metropole with the desire to integrate the colonies more fully. He discusses the activities and theoretical works of leading colonial administrators and officials, such as Marius Moutet, Albert Sarraut, Jules Harmand, and demonstrates the role or influence of ethnologists, such as Marcel Mauss, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, and Paul Rivet, in the quest to understand ‘native’ society. The role of ethnologists and anthropologists in acquiring the knowledge that could and did inform ‘native’ policy was not an interwar phenomenon, however; it had nineteenth-century antecedents in both Algeria and French Indochina, a connection that Wilder does not make. The interest in the colonial peoples was, of course, connected to concerns about who should or should not be granted citizenship and voting rights and how civil society in the colonies should be restructured. It is in demonstrating these links that Wilder is at his best.

What is noticeably absent from this section, however, is the role of women. The interwar period saw a rise in the activity of women in the colonies. The May 1931 conference of the *États Généraux du Féminisme* was devoted to women in the French colonies. Wilder points to the fact that gender was the wedge that separated the colonial peoples from citizenship insofar as women and family structure were deemed to be indices of cultural affiliation and those of the colonial peoples were too ‘traditional’, but goes no further. Women in France may have had citizenship, but they did not have the vote. This fact, which Wilder overlooks, was an added complication in the debate in the colonies about citizenship and voting rights for the colonized peoples. During the interwar debates as to who should be given the vote among the colonized (men), members of the colonial sections of the *Union Française pour la Suffrage des Femmes* were often outraged that ‘native’ men should be considered for voting rights when French women were denied the privilege. Furthermore, French feminists and social activists, such as Cécile Bruschi, Clotilde Chivas-Baron, and Hélène Renaud, were, for their own political agendas as much as for their ‘civilizing’ ideals, involved in the debates about the family and improving the lot of ‘native’ women. They deserved some mention in the discussion of colonial humanism.

The final section on African humanism discusses the multiple dimensions of the Negritude movement. Although Wilder focuses on the activities and works of Léopold Senghor, Aimé Césaire, and Léon-Gontran Damas, all of whom were at the center of the social and political networks of Africans and people of African descent in the metropole, he also discusses a significant number of peripheral personalities who were involved in the movement, politically, socially, or culturally. Wilder’s debt to

theorists such as Bhabha, Spivak, and Chatterjee is evident, but his analysis of Negritude is refreshing, encompassing both the intellectual and sociohistorical issues at its core. The Negritude movement was trivalent in that it engaged colonial thought, French culture, and black politics, but Wilder argues against evaluating it as one of revolutionary or reactionary nativism. Instead he emphasizes its dual character, which developed in relation to the paradoxes of colonial government. He traces its development from its intellectual and political antecedents to its culmination as a multifaceted movement.

Wilder comes into his own when analysing Negritude poetry and prose and explicating the differences between the leading protagonists of the movement. He develops the engagement of the Negritude authors with issues of race, culture, nationality, and citizenship, stressing that the colonized elites could not escape the fact that racialization was integral to colonial modernity hence appealing to Republican universalism served little purpose. Negritude poetics, Wilder suggests, were not calls to action but rather sites of engagement and, on occasion, allegories of political desire. It is a pity that in discussing the themes in the works of these writers he does not draw a few parallels to literature in other parts of the empire. For example, the theme of *métissage*, whether cultural or 'racial', as doomed to failure, which Wilder discusses in relation to Ousmane Diop's *Mirage de Paris*, was also prevalent in interwar literature of the colonies, whether written by colonized elites or colonials. It was not just a 'struggle to reconcile cultural *métissage* with racial authenticity' (p. 200); it was also an indication of its mimetic quality insofar as it mirrored the themes in colonial literature that reinforced the belief in the cultural incompatibility and inferiority of the colonized to the colonizing.

In his brief conclusion Wilder reflects on his own experiences in West Africa and on the decline of French influence in the area. He opens with the death of Léopold Senghor in 2001, whose funeral Jacques Chirac and Lionel Jospin did not attend. Senghor was not, of course, a head of state at the time of his death, but their absence was still seen as a slap in the face by Africans who considered Senghor to have been one of France's oldest African 'friends' and those Senegalese who had come to expect to see French officials in high places at such events. The French press reported it as France's second devaluation of its relationship with Africa after the CFA devaluation in 1994.[3] If these two events were, as Wilder suggests, a sign of France's declining relationship with Africa, he makes no mention of the real swan song of the Franco-West African relationship, namely the funeral of the president of the Ivory Coast, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, in February 1994. Taking place a month after the devaluation of the CFA franc, it was attended by François Mitterrand and his prime minister, Edouard Balladur, Valerie Giscard d'Estaing, Jacques Delors, seven former French prime ministers, three plenipotentiaries of French officials, including 'Monsieur Afrique', Jacques Foccart, to say nothing of the 20,000 guests. To be sure, Houphouët-Boigny was a head of state and Franco-Ivorian cooperation had been the post-independence embodiment of the neocolonial relationship, but France's decision to attend was not just a question of diplomatic protocol. It was also designed to divert attention from the crippling economic impact the CFA devaluation would have on West African economies. Unlike Senghor, Houphouët-Boigny was not a member of the Negritude movement. The difference between the two funerals was, of course, a present-day manifestation of the difference between postwar economic cooperation and interwar 'humanist' connections, but, I would suggest, in its own way it was also linked to the way in which Franco-West African relations played themselves out relative to Negritude. As such it would have been relevant to have included some reference to, if not an analysis of, the connection between the two events.

The French Imperial Nation-State is a complex book to read. Its originality lies not so much in what Wilder says, but in how he chooses to say it. It impresses with its attention to detail and mastery of theory but frustrates with its semantic convolutions, and its sporadic lack of clarity and ambivalence. But the most jarring aspect of an otherwise provocative and intellectually stimulating work is Wilder's 'fetishizing' (one of his frequently used terms) of binaries or, more precisely, presenting coupled concepts to illustrate or underscore his arguments. To cite but a few examples: imaginary/real,

discursive/structural, constructed/effective (p. 21); concrete/abstract, present/represent, crucial/invisible, integral to/separate from (p. 28); Greater France was both more and less than interwar colonial discourse claimed it to be (p. 39); produce/prohibit, protect/transform; promote/police, reward/restrict (p. 143). Is this an underestimation of his readers' ability to grasp the paradoxes of colonial rule (the 'colonial double bind') without endless reiteration, or is this, perhaps, Wilder's 'transferential relationship' to colonial history?

NOTES

[1] Herman Lebovics, *Bringing the Empire Back Home: France in the Global Age* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004).

[2] Alice L. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

[3] For example, Agence France Presse, Dakar, December 30, 2001; 'L'Afrique reniée', *Le Monde*, December 30, 2001; 'Les obsequies de Senghor', *Le Monde*, January 6, 2002.

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

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