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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 Gregory Mann, Columbia University.

With *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars*, Gary Wilder has given us a rich, dense, and provocative analysis of the emergence of a republican and colonial political rationality in the interwar years, with particular reference to French West Africa (*l'Afrique Occidentale Française*, AOF). *The French Imperial Nation-State* defies easy categorization or synopsis. Taxonomically, the book is a hybrid history of ideas. Historiographically, it represents a new twist in the "imperial turn" that places metropole and colony in the same analytic field. Methodologically, it represents a thinking through of the intellectual coherence of what Wilder terms "the imperial nation-state" and a plea for a "new rapprochement between history and social theory" (p. 302). This is a complex book open to diverse and divergent readings.

I come to *The French Imperial Nation-State* as a historian of Africa--and the French empire within it--rather than as a French colonial historian. In my reading, the key contribution of Wilder's work is to recognize the contradiction of republican imperialism as both irreducible and irreconcilable and to situate it as neither immaterial nor extraneous to the logic of governance within the empire (that is, in both metropole and colony). The colonial constellation of institutionalized if unarticulated racism, authoritarian bureaucratic rule, and capitalist exploitation thus becomes an integral element of republicanism that does not need to be--and indeed can not be--explained away as exceptional or dismissed as marginal to the development of imperial and post-imperial France. Instead the contradictory yet simultaneous existence of republican citizens and racialized colonial subjects constituted an imperial political logic that strained to include both the founding (universalist) premise of the republic and the necessary (particularist) premise of empire. Drawing on the development of the concept of antinomy by Kant and Lucáks, on Michel Foucault's writings on political rationality, and on Hannah Arendt's analysis of rights, race, and nation, Wilder forcefully extricates himself--and French colonial historiography--from the tiresome and shop-worn conundrum of a republican imperialism or an imperial republicanism.

One of the virtues of Wilder's work is that even as he crosses well-trodden terrain, he comes to it with a new perspective, an enabling gaze. Wilder's contribution builds on Alice Conklin's *A Mission to Civilize*,^[1] as his concentrated criticism of her work makes clear (see notably pp. 6-8; 303, fn 2). Premised on the imperial/republican conundrum through which Wilder successfully navigates, *A Mission to Civilize* analyzed the rhetoric and understanding of the *mission civilisatrice* among the governors general of the AOF through 1930. While tacking between rhetoric and practice, it underscored the sharp changes in that ideological commitment occasioned by the First World War. Wilder critiques this approach, but one could argue that the similarities between the work of these two historians are significant (although still not so great as their differences). Both take colonial rhetoric seriously, perhaps too seriously. But Conklin's France is a republican one; Wilder's is statist, welfarist, and sporadically humanist. Whereas Conklin quite explicitly set her analysis within the framework of the government general of the AOF--where metropolitan policy met colonial practice--Wilder moves beyond that administrative frame and the point of articulation between republic and empire it is taken to represent. Indeed, part of Wilder's argument is that the political forms of the parliamentary republic--in which power resided in the elected assembly and authority "derived from popular consent"--and the

colonial administration—in which conquest anchored authority and power was expressed (although not exclusively) through bureaucracy—were “structurally interrelated and not simply added to one another” (p. 25). The identification of such a seamless interface between two such radically different forms of governance may prove to be an adventuresome one, but the hypothesis underscores the argument that in the Third Republic, “the disjointed relationship among culture, nationality, and citizenship [was] a feature, not a failure, of the national-imperial state” (p. 9).^[2]

The ability to sustain that argument is the core of Wilder’s achievement. Having recognized the central gambit, one can move on to the meat of the book, that is the exploration of what Wilder terms “two intersecting movements to revise the imperial order: one by republican reformers elaborated a new logic of administration in West Africa (colonial humanism), and another by African and Antillean elites in Paris formulated new currents of cultural nationalism” (p. 4). Over 300 densely argued pages, Wilder works through the evolution of a purportedly humane and universalist colonialism that saw some of its central tenets adopted and refashioned into a cultural nationalism by a handful of its most gifted West African and Antillean critics. In doing so, he revisits familiar material and crafts new arguments from it. A close reading of poetry produced by Léopold Sédar Senghor, Léon Damas, and Aimé Césaire in the early years of the Negritude movement follows an overview of black political activism in interwar Paris. Although networks of African and Antillean dissidents suffered from what Wilder characterizes as “an overdetermined tendency toward organizational implosion” (p. 184), they nonetheless worked to generate the political and intellectual environment in which the Negritude movement would take root.

While the Negritude writers sparked a large analytical literature, scholars have paid rather less attention to the movement Wilder refers to as “colonial humanism.” By this term, borrowed from Girardet and others,^[3] Wilder means “the interwar reform movement, its underlying political rationality, and the corresponding form of government that developed in AOF after World War I” (pp. 76-77). Under this banner, he embarks on a profound exploration of the reformist vein within French colonial administrative discourse on the AOF. Alongside his innovative navigation of colonial antinomies, the singularity of Wilder’s contribution is to be found here, in the coupling of administrative and ethnographic discourse and emergent Negritude in colonial humanism.^[4]

Through the lens of colonial humanism, Wilder’s imperial nation-state is an oddly harmonious space. Yet colonial administrators, capitalists, and metropolitan functionaries and war planners never properly harmonized in interest or in purpose. In fact, the failure of such a development is one of the great peculiarities of colonial capitalism. But Wilder’s is a study of thinking, not of doing. Studying doing would entail greater attention to how “humanist” development projects were carried out and to how the ideas of a narrow cadre of reformers were debated, deployed, or dismissed within the colonial administration.^[5] Men like Maurice Delafosse, Georges Hardy, Jules Brévié, and Robert Delavignette were influential figures in colonial thought, and they came to hold high posts in Paris and Dakar. Yet by Wilder’s own categorization, they were *reformers*; it is difficult to concede that they could have represented both the status quo and its antithesis (if that is not too strong a term). For much of the interwar period theirs were minority voices—albeit well-placed ones—within an administration in transition. The colonial library from which they drew, and to which they made their contributions, did not include a liberal *vade mecum* to colonial rule (arguably until Delavignette’s 1939 *Vrais chefs de l’empire*). Throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s, grizzled *broussards* and young “*Colos*,” as graduates of the Ecole Coloniale were known, waged a tug-of-war in *chefs-lieux de cercle* and colonial capitals across the AOF. There may be no clear answer as to who was winning it at any given moment, but insights are likely to be found in the archives of Conakry, Abidjan, Bamako, Libreville, and in the writings of Delavignette himself. In 1962, the former director of the Ecole Coloniale bemoaned the lost opportunities of the interwar years when “[la] France... se bornait à combiner l’immobilisme colonial avec le verbalisme impérial.”^[6] Something did change in colonial administration in the 1930s, as Wilder argues, but we have yet to calculate the sum of such subtle shifts in imperial rhetoric and ambitions as theorists and their students, the new generation of administrators, were then pronouncing.

Having contributed no small amount to the *verbalisme*, Delavignette suggests that *immobilisme* carried the day.

By the same token, the colonial humanism argument fails to account for either the quotidian violence of colonial rule or the spectacular violence of early infrastructural projects (e.g., railroad building) or later “development” projects, particularly large-scale immigration systems such as the Office du Niger that were dependent on coerced and brutalized laborers, forced migration, and compulsory cultivation. That quotidian violence can be defined as episodic and peripheral suits Wilder’s argument for an ascendant colonial humanism. Inattention to structural and systematic violence does not; rather, it troubles the argument and the categories on which it relies. Violence and coercion were absolutely central to the developmentalism Wilder encompasses within the term colonial humanism (there can be no question of whether or not forced labor was an intentional feature of such projects; see pp. 324–25, fn 59). They were also relentlessly targeted by African dissidents and their allies in the pages of *Les Continents*, *La Race Nègre*, and other politically engaged publications. Yet such violence is unaccounted for by the colonial humanism argument. Can the prevalence of both structural and episodic violence be reconciled with the preeminence of a reformist colonialism? Or must an argument grounded in the latter leave the former unexplained?

I’ve digressed. Critiques of new imperial histories too often fall back on the trope of violence, thereby engendering an inflationary rhetoric of recrimination. That is not my intention here. More importantly, Wilder makes it clear that a counter-reading like the one I have proposed above is immaterial to his argument—that it is in fact a mis-reading (pp. 77–78, 301). The value of studying the rhetoric of colonial humanism, in his view, does not lie in ascertaining its “success” or “failure.” Admittedly so; indeed, balancing the two is another worn-out tactic of analysis. But this does not preclude asking whether or not it remains possible to evade the trap of confounding rhetoric with practice and to avoid adopting colonial language in an attempt to portray—and critique—colonial politics.

Perhaps it doesn’t matter. This book is not about the “colonial situation,” in George Balandier’s celebrated formulation. It does not seek to situate the AOF within the empire or to take on the enormous diversity of communities and “situations” that the colonial federation sought to frame. Instead Wilder’s interest lies in the framing itself, in the categories of rule and the containers of politics. His interest is rigorously maintained. Invested in structure, *The French Imperial Nation-State* disdains some of the dynamic questions it raises, notably the possibility of connections between reformist visions of a broader, more participatory imperial federalism, sporadic calls by politically engaged African expatriates for closer imperial integration, and the inclusive imperialism represented by the French Union from 1946.[7] Instead, Wilder listens closely to the discourses of a select group of colonial administrator-reformers and African-descended student-poets and their pan-Africanist allies on the nature of political community in the context of a particular republican empire. He engages in highly focused readings of moments when participants in a “republican imperial sphere” and a “black public sphere” echoed and occasionally interpellated each other. The result is a sophisticated treatment of the interface of abstractions, and as such it will prove a vital and influential text for studies of twentieth-century French imperialism. As I suggested above, Gary Wilder’s important book will be read in many different ways. It has been a privilege to be invited to read it in my own.

NOTES

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

[2] Where Wilder sees an “imperial nation-state,” Frederick Cooper argues that “France, in 1946, was not a nation-state, but an empire-state” (Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 153). Wilder, in turn, explicitly rejects the latter phrase (p. 25). However, both would agree that the republic and empire were mutually constitutive. Cooper’s book was published shortly before Wilder’s. The recent appearance of both, as well as of James Genova’s work (cited below), testifies to the current vigor of the field of French-African colonial history.

[3] Wilder borrows the term from Raoul Girardet’s *L’Idée Coloniale en France de 1781 à 1962* (Paris: Table Ronde, 1972).

[4] A recent, problematic work that attempts to think through the discursive problem of culture and colonial governance in the AOF is James D. Genova, *Colonial Ambivalence, Cultural Authenticity, and the Limitations of Mimicry in French-Ruled West Africa, 1914-1956* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004). Genova’s book appeared too late for Wilder to engage with it.

[5] The contributions of European commentators outside of the ethnographic-administrative nexus are marginal to Wilder’s analysis.

[6] R. Delavignette, *L’Afrique Noire Française et son destin* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), 23.

[7] This is significant, as many of Wilder’s central questions could be fruitfully explored in the post-1946 period, when the meanings of such central concepts as “republic,” “nation,” “nationality,” and “citizenship” mutated rapidly.

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

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