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Departmentalization at Sixty *The French DOMs and the Paradoxes of the Periphery*

Dedicated to the Memory of Aimé Césaire (1913-2008)



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This collection of essays probes the resonances of the sixtieth anniversary of some of France's overseas colonies gaining accession to full integration into the metropole as *départements*. This event stands out in that it marks the only occasion in European colonial history where colonies on the verge of transformation were integrated into the political structure of the former colonial power. The compound issues undergirding the ongoing departmental relationship suggest a hierarchical structure still predicated on neocolonial patterns of domination and submission, centre and periphery. From *négritude* through *antillanité* and *créolité*, the deployment of various discourses of resistance and identity has not foreclosed the large-scale displacement of French Caribbean subjects to France that followed departmentalization in 1946, resulting in new ethnic and community concentrations and a certain creolization of the metropole itself. It is the tensions arising from these intersections of integration, migration and difference that lead us to interrogate the ways in which this process of exchange produces an increasingly pluralized - and, perhaps, polarized - metropole and its problematization of French principles of universalism.

A Word from the General Editor

Most of us are drawn to the African-Caribbean world through images of these ‘exotic’ lands. There are good reasons why such things seem attractive: we live in large-scale urbanized societies, and many people feel deprived of the sense of place and community and sacredness that their ancestors once enjoyed. While African-Caribbean consumer items are easily produced, marketed and consumed, how representative are they of the actual African-Caribbean intellectual fabric? And what misrepresentations have resulted from the long-standing disempowerment and exploitation of real African-Caribbean communities through those stereotypes, created by the colonial culture, that have fed into popular understandings of who they are supposed to be? It is ironic that France, a nation into which many different immigrant groups have poured, should be so insular and unaware of the cultures from which its many peoples originated. New immigrants are eager to remould themselves into the paradigm of successful Europeans while most families lose connection with their ancestral languages and cultures within two generations. Of course, at the same time, globalization and industrialization have caused tremendous change around the world throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As a result, negritude-infused cultures have only managed to survive on those fringes least affected by the homogenizing forces of Empire and Industry.

While the term ‘Autonomy’ or ‘Departmentalization’ that frames this dedicated volume may usefully describe the general characteristics of the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean isles, it must be remembered that they have long been developing as cultures separate from that of metropolitan France. While many common features can be detected through the lens of language and literature, they also deserve to be seen as distinct and independent societies, not just one ‘*outrre-mer* people’. The metropole and its *outrre-mer* now confront such key issues as the inclusion of other languages and cultures in the school curriculum and the discussion and inclusion of minorities and their histories in curricular texts. Dealing with these issues involves a reexamination of basic concepts of French national identity, education and culture, and expanding debates on the curriculum to include questions of race, religion, and ethnicity. While publishers, intellectuals and educators have become more sensitive in recent years to issues of equality and human rights, national curriculum standards still do not include the experiences of minority cultures. Ethnic schools continue to be suggested as an alternative for those rejecting the secular, national curriculum.

In reality, the growing diversification of French society has a major impact on education and literature at every level. The appearance of large numbers of children in schools whose mother tongue is not French and who have other cultural orientations that exist alongside mainstream French culture is a growing phenomenon. The teaching of immigrant and minority children or foreign students is a contested site in which there is an ongoing struggle about their role and future in the society. In sum, then, France is embroiled in a national controversy concerning the country’s capacity to assimilate different peoples and the role of education in socializing new immigrants. Questions about appropriate or effective educational policies and practice are embedded in larger issues concerning national identity and the responsibility of the government in educating those outside the mainstream. Whether the purpose of education in metropolitan France and its DOM-TOMs will continue to be to assimilate minorities or to help them develop their full potential as future citizens remains to be seen.

The very concepts of citizenship are in flux. Will citizenship and the corollary of culture associated with it continue to be based on the mythical purity and homogeneity of *francité*? Or will a newer concept of unity amidst diversity be adopted? Will France recognisably move from monocultural to multicultural concepts of citizenship and its accompanying culture? Questioning and expanding the boundaries of the nation involves reexamining who belongs and who is excluded. While departmentalization has been seen as the logical outcome of decolonization, there are many possible answers to the question of exactly what defines a French person, and therefore, many measures of Frenchness and multiple kinds of French identities. While conventional analysis of the French person and French culture focuses on the dichotomous comparison between narrowly defined categories of ‘*Français*’ and ‘*étranger*’, our understanding of

contemporary France will improve only through investigation of the cultural complexity of the decolonization process that led to the *départements d'outre-mer* and their crossroads and borderlands.

Capitalizing on a window of opportunity, Aimé Césaire and Gaston Monnerville succeeded in pushing through the French Assembly on 19 March 1946 the law proclaiming the *départementalisation* of France's *vieilles colonies*, including Guadeloupe, Martinique, Reunion and French Guiana. This was the end result of a longstanding pattern of colonial greed, such that the origin and progressive integration of these colonies extended back beyond 1848 to 1789. It is in that universalist if revolutionary vision that the seeds of nationalism leading to the disintegration of France's Empire were planted.

May Césaire rest in peace while we contemplate the impact of his legacy as the twenty-first century unfolds.

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