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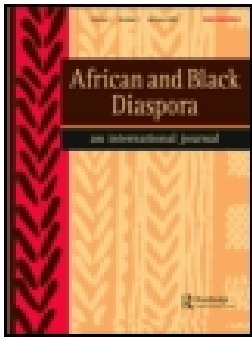
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Freedom time: negritude, decolonization and the future of the world

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BOOK REVIEW

Freedom time: negritude, decolonization and the future of the world, by Gary Wilder, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2015, 384 pp., \$28.95 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-8223-5850-3

It is a common refrain that anti-colonialism and the arguments that fall under its oeuvre is a failed project, that the new postcolonial states failed one after another, and that those argumentative positions can be relegated to the past. It is less common to find arguments that re-evaluate the 'old' arguments against colonialism that analyze its forms of governance, social order, and knowledge practices. Siba Grovogui suggests that we consider these old arguments against colonialism as counterpoints that 'give expression to unique modern experiences through analyses of culture and national politics but also the effects and implications of the "Westernization" of global politics' (Grovogui 2009, 330). Imaginaries that expose other ways of making sense of the world we inherited are evident in these counterpoints. Grovogui is writing in an *International Political Sociology* forum, but I think his urgings are relevant here. Something important happens when we ask about the agnotology involved in situating as 'past' much out-of-print, critical, and multifaceted engagement with Cold War power dynamics. This query encourages one to approach such material as important enough to be relegated to the past and center the question of what in it is accessible to researchers today.

In *Freedom Time*, Gary Wilder examines the imaginative politics in the work of Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor, two critical thinkers accused of betraying the anti-colonial project. Wilder presents their arguments in a new frame and one that he connects with contemporary political unrest. This is a book in which Wilder *thinks with* Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor in order to *think through* a historical moment using what he calls an 'imperial optic'. *Thinking through* an imperial optic is an insightful approach and very successfully accomplished in this instance.

Wilder offers a critical reading of Césaire and Senghor's contribution to social theory that readers would do well to engage. The prevailing understanding held that decolonization meant state sovereignty. Wilder opens with the recognition that Césaire and Senghor present a critique of the narrowness of this understanding, a critique that is at the very core of their work. Through Wilder's reading, Césaire and Senghor can be understood to have thought at the intersection of the actual and the imagined, in order to critically imagine possible futures. Wilder suggests that their work illuminates the problems that they confronted and presents novel frameworks for accommodating and extending the limits of what 'could be thought' (in this case, state-centric imaginaries). For example, with these frameworks, Césaire and Senghor 'link[ed] political universality and cultural multiplicity, democratic equality and legal plurality, autonomy (for peoples) and solidarity (as humans), popular sovereignty and planetary interdependence, humanist and cosmopolitan norms with mutual responsibility and socialized risk' (255). In concrete terms, for instance, Césaire supported the process of Departmentalization, which made former colonial territories formal 'Departments' of France. Wilder argues that Césaire wanted to 'convert formal liberty to substantive freedom' (248), and not without some success, for 'postnational political arrangements have developed in Martinique, Guadeloupe and Guyane' (246–247). Wilder's reading sits uneasily alongside approaches to decolonization that would assume national independence as a necessary prerequisite for colonial emancipation. For Wilder, it would be 'to mistake a product of decolonization for an optic through which to study it' (4). Here, national independence is an argument produced by and

within the process of decolonization, but other arguments were also possible (and actually did emerge). This imagining of other potential futures is precisely the contribution that Wilder posits Césaire and Senghor offer us.

By thinking with and thinking through, Wilder is presenting an insightful approach. 'Thinking with Césaire and Senghor means engaging a future that might have been' (256, emphasis in original). To this end, Wilder is suggesting that we study these thinkers, not for their proposals, but instead for the problems that they identified – 'concerning the relation of state sovereignty to human freedom or the prospects for self-management, plural democracy, and human solidarity in an interdependent world' (256). Importantly, I think, he writes that,

... *thinking with* is not just an exercise in contextualization; it also means listening carefully to what their analysis of that world might teach us about ours, treating them not only as native informants symptomatic of their era but as critical thinkers whose formulations about politics, aesthetics, and epistemology might help us fashion frameworks with which to reflect upon related phenomena. (12, emphasis in original)

I find this orientation to 'old' arguments against colonialism to be both refreshing and fruitful. Nationalist logic of decolonization is one explanation for the 'failure' of anti-colonialism. Wilder links effects of its modes of dispossession to the 2005 riots in France. One might add to this reading the 'riots' in Dublin (2006) and England (2011) as well as more contemporary political developments. Wilder's contestation rests on 'the assumption that European states *had* empires but were not *themselves* empires' (4, emphasis in original). If analysts interpret them as empires – as did Césaire and Senghor – then claims for sovereignty along nation-state lines does not logically cohere. Wilder is critiquing approaches to France's colonial history that start from a methodological nationalism. He writes, '... to treat France as an imperial formation and consider French history from an imperial perspective, we must unthink France as object and unit' (6). He argues that Césaire and Senghor 'worked through' empire and aimed to 'unthink' France. 'Even as student-poets in the 1930s, they did not simply call for political inclusion but made a deeper demand that "France" accommodate itself legally and politically to the interpenetrated and interdependent realities its own imperial practices had produced' (7). This strategy of 'unthinking' is reflected in Wilder's own approach of embedding Césaire and Senghor thinking within a broader constellation of those contemplating what freedom might look like in the postwar historical moment. For him, '[i]dentifying and fashioning "historical constellations" is one way of writing a "history of the present" that is related to but distinct from the more familiar strategy of producing genealogies' (15). To develop 'constellations' one would place together events, analyses of events, and socio-political thinking that may appear disconnected in order to see what links become visible.

Wilder suggests two ways a reader might approach his book. One might read it as 'an intellectual history of Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor between 1945 and 1960' (3). Indeed, the text is quite a thorough examination of their work and activities in this period. On the other hand, one might approach the book insofar as 'it attempts to think *through* their work about the processes and problems that defined their world and continue to haunt ours' (3, emphasis in original). This book meets the intricate and intimate task that this reading would require. Wilder embeds Césaire and Senghor's writings within their historical specificity, but more than this, he captures the way that they navigated the dominant arguments of their time, arguments that we may now understand to have limited the idea of decolonization to self-determination, and national sovereignty. I would suggest a third possible reading that places Wilder's approach at the center of our analysis. His approach to reading the past-present and the past-in-the-present helps to evaluate methodological questions about how to approach texts produced in a historical moment distinct from the one in which we are currently working. Wilder's diligent reading presents another way to read writers who have historically been read through

very different lenses. He also painstakingly connects his historical material to a contemporary conversation with a rich and extra-disciplinary bibliography that enables a discerning researcher to connect older engagements with contemporaneous history and politics to more recent ones.

In *Freedom Time*, Gary Wilder aims to deterritorialize social thought, to decolonize intellectual history, and to inquire into the politics of time. This book speaks to themes and modes of inquiry taking place across disciplinary divides in areas related to but not limited to Political Theory, Citizenship studies, Cosmopolitanism, Globalization Studies, and International Studies.

Reference

Grovogui, S. 2009. "Counterpoints and the Imaginaries Behind Them." *International Political Sociology* 3 (3): 327–331.

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