

9 Nonsovereign Futures? French Caribbean Politics in the Wake of Disenchantment

Yarimar Bonilla

On January 20, 2009—the same day that Barack Obama was sworn in as the 44th President of the United States—labor activists in the French Overseas Department of Guadeloupe launched the longest general strike in local history. For a period of 44 days schools and universities were closed, all major commerce was suspended, banks shut down, government services were discontinued, public transportation came to a halt, barricades blocked major roadways, and an estimated 100,000 people (one-third of the population) took to the streets in protest.¹ The demonstrations were fueled by a broad discontent with the general socioeconomic landscape of the French Antilles: particularly the high costs of basic goods and services, the astronomical rates of unemployment and the enduring economic disparities with mainland France (despite the island's juridical integration into the French Republic as an Overseas Department).² The political platform for the movement was a list of 120 demands geared at offsetting *la pwofitasyon*—a polyvalent creole phrase that semantically unites profit and exploitation.³ No single term in English (or French) can singlehandedly capture this Creole concept, which is itself rooted in the long history of exploited Caribbean labor.

Between January and March of 2009, news coverage in France featured dramatic images of the protests: barricaded streets, overturned trash dumpsters, car frames aflame with angry demonstrators chanting in the streets: “Guadeloupe is ours, not theirs! They cannot do as they please in our country!” Some observers began to question why these former sugar colonies remained a part of the French Republic since their residents seemed to be so unhappy with the arrangement. Although the French president at the time, Nicolas Sarkozy, insisted on the importance of the Antilles to the Republic (repeatedly asserting that their independence was out of the question), many were left wondering: what is the contemporary relationship of these societies to the French nation? Are they exploited territories of neocolonial dominance? Or, as many argued, are they welfare states, kept afloat through the benevolence of their former metropole? And what of these activists marching in the streets? If they were unhappy with the current political and economic relationship

with France, why weren't they fighting for independence? Why would they criticize the legacies of French colonialism in the region, yet still opt to remain a part of the French Republic?

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The questions that swirled around the 2009 strike are representative of the discourses that surround postcolonial societies like Guadeloupe. These places, which opted for juridical integration with their metropolitan centers rather than political independence, are often cast as political aberrations in a world of nation-states. They are constructed as isolated exceptions to the rule of decolonization. However, the fact is that there is a large configuration of Caribbean societies that have opted for juridical integration with their metropolitan centers rather than political independence. Places like Guadeloupe, Puerto Rico, the British Virgin Islands, The U.S. Virgin Islands, Anguilla, Aruba, Bermuda, Bonaire, Cayman Islands, Curaçao, Saba, St. Barths, St. Martin, and the Turks and Caicos all fall outside of the traditional definitions of either independent states or official colonies (at least not as defined by organizations such as the United Nations). (See Table 9.1.) This political topography defies the state-centered moral geography of a clearly bounded nation defined by a distinct land, people, and state (Steinberg 2005).

Table 9.1 Political Configurations in the Caribbean

Country	Status	Memberships
Anguilla	Overseas territory of the United Kingdom	CARICOM (associate), EU-OCT, OECS (associate)
Antigua and Barbuda	Independent state within the British Commonwealth of Nations	ACS, CARICOM, CCJ, CELAC, CSME, OAS, OECS, UN
Aruba	Constituent country of the Kingdom of the Netherlands	ACS (associate), CARICOM (observer), EU-OCT
The Bahamas	Independent state within the British Commonwealth of Nations	ACS, CARICOM, CELAC, OAS, UN
Barbados	Independent state within the British Commonwealth of Nations	ACS, CARICOM, CCJ, CELAC, CSME, OAS, UN

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Table 9.1 (Continued)

Country	Status	Memberships
Belize	Independent state within the British Commonwealth of Nations	ACS, CARICOM, CCJ, CELAC, CSME, OAS, UN
Bermuda	Overseas territory of the UK	CARICOM (associate)
Bonaire	Special municipality of the Kingdom of the Netherlands	EU-OCT
British Virgin Islands	Overseas territory of the United Kingdom	CARICOM (associate), EU-OCT, OECS (associate)
Cayman Islands	Overseas territory of the United Kingdom	CARICOM (associate), EU-OCT
Colombia	Independent	ACS, CARICOM (observer), CELAC, OAS, UN
Costa Rica	Independent	ACS, CELAC, OAS, UN
Cuba	Independent	ACS, CELAC, OAS, UN
Curaçao	Constituent country of the Kingdom of the Netherlands	ACS (associate), CARICOM (observer), EU-OCT
Dominica	Independent state within the British Commonwealth of Nations	ACS, CARICOM, CCJ, CELAC, CSME, OAS, OECS, UN
Dominican Republic	Independent	ACS, CARICOM (observer), CELAC, OAS, UN
French Guiana	French Overseas Department (DOM)	EU-OMR
Grenada	Independent state within the British Commonwealth of Nations	ACS, CARICOM, CCJ, CELAC, CSME, OAS, OECS, UN
Guadeloupe	French Overseas Department (DOM)	EU-OMR
Guano Island Act Islands	U.S. territory	
Guatemala	Independent	ACS, CELAC, OAS, UN

Table 9.1 (Continued)

Country	Status	Memberships
Guyana	Independent state within the British Commonwealth of Nations	ACS, CARICOM, CCJ, CELAC, CSME, OAS, UN
Haiti	Independent	ACS, CARICOM, CELAC, OAS, UN
Honduras	Independent	ACS, CELAC, OAS, UN
Jamaica	Independent state within the British Commonwealth of Nations	ACS, CARICOM, CCJ, CELAC, OAS, UN
Martinique	French Overseas Department (DOM)	EU-OMR
Mexico	Independent	ACS, CARICOM (observer), CELAC, CSME, OAS, UN
Montserrat	Overseas territory of the United Kingdom	CARICOM, CSME (pending UK approval), EU-OCT, OECS
National Wildlife Refuges	U.S. territory (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)	
Nicaragua	Independent	ACS, CELAC, OAS, UN
Panama	Independent	ACS, CELAC, OAS, UN
Puerto Rico	U.S. territory	CARICOM (observer)
Saba	Special municipality of the Kingdom of the Netherlands	EU-OCT
Saint Barthélemy	Overseas collectivity of France	EU-OMR (until 2012)
Saint Kitts and Nevis	Independent state within the British Commonwealth of Nations	ACS, CARICOM, CCJ, CELAC, CSME, OAS, OECS, UN
Saint Lucia	Independent state within the British Commonwealth of Nations	ACS, CARICOM, CCJ, CELAC, CSME, OAS, OECS, UN
Saint Martin	Overseas collectivity of France	EU-OMR

(Continued)

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Table 9.1 (Continued)

Country	Status	Memberships
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	Independent state within the British Commonwealth of Nations	ACS, CARICOM, CCJ, CELAC, CSME, OAS, OECS, UN
Sint Eustatius	Special municipality of the Kingdom of the Netherlands	EU-OCT
Sint Maarten	Constituent country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands	ACS (associate), CARICOM (observer), EU-OCT
Suriname	Independent	ACS, CARICOM, CCJ, CELAC, CSME, OAS, UN
Trinidad and Tobago	Independent state within the British Commonwealth of Nations	ACS, CARICOM, CCJ, CELAC, CSME, OAS, UN
Turks and Caicos	Overseas territory of the United Kingdom	ACS (associate), CARICOM (associate member), EU-OCT
U.S. Virgin Islands	U.S. unincorporated territory (Office of Insular Affairs, U.S. Department of the Interior)	
Venezuela	Independent	ACS, CARICOM (observer), CELAC, OAS, UN

Note: ACS = Association of Caribbean States (established 1994); CARICOM = Caribbean Community; CCJ = Caribbean Court of Justice (set up 2001–2005); CELAC = Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (started early 2010); CSME = Caribbean Single Market and Economy (part of CARICOM); EU-OCT = European Union—Overseas Countries and Territories (special relationship with EU); EU-OMR = European Union—Outermost Regions (part of the EU); OAS = Organization of American States; OECS = Organization of Eastern Caribbean States; UN = United Nations.

These places are rarely talked about (either individually or as a whole) within discussions of either postcolonialism or political sovereignty because they challenge normative assumptions of our contemporary political world. For, although it has become clear that nationalism and sovereignty are Western political categories—“ideal types” without perfect instantiations of reference—these terms continue to be deployed throughout the world, and the societies that do not fully exhibit the traits associated with these conceptual norms are frequently branded with the labels of “failed states” or “weak nationalisms.” They are either dismissed as unexplained accidents of history or pathologized as sites of failed emancipation.

The idea that these societies are “accidents of history” posits their existence as a gesture of postcolonial benevolence on behalf of their colonial centers, which are assumed to be subsidizing their economies—at a purportedly “high cost.” For example, a recent article in the French magazine *Le Figaro* calculated the “cost” of the French Overseas Department of Guadeloupe to the French Republic at 2.5 billion euros.⁴ However, this is an odd equation as the majority of these costs represent government salaries and public services common to any department of France—thus in this sense Guadeloupe carries as much of “a cost” to the nation as does Paris. Moreover, the attempt to quantify the “cost” of Guadeloupe for French taxpayers fails to recognize that Guadeloupean residents are themselves also taxpayers, and major consumers of French goods and services. In fact one could argue that nonsovereign societies are best understood as protected markets, rather than subsidized welfare states. Historically it was the sugar fields and plantation economies of the Caribbean that fueled the economic development of Europe by feeding the coffers and workers of the industrial revolution.⁵ Today these sites continue to serve as the economic and political scaffolding of the global economy by providing pools of outsourced labor, offshore financial havens, and overseas zones of unregulated military and tactical operations.⁶

Although these societies are integral to the functioning of the contemporary imperial economy they are frequently constructed as “dependent” appendages or welfare states. This trope of postcolonial benevolence—through which societies are constructed as “dependent” when they are in fact constitutive of imperial economies—is not exclusive to the nonsovereign parts of the Caribbean. Nominally independent states of the region are also constructed as dependent “debtor nations” propped up through international lending and financial assistance. We see this for example in Haiti, particularly in the discourse of benevolence on behalf of “donor nations” after the recent earthquake. Yet, when we do the math, we find that the overwhelming majority of funds that actually materialized for earthquake relief (since many were pledged but never donated) have reverted to American corporations and government agencies.⁷

As the other chapters in this volume suggest, political sovereignty in the Caribbean (and beyond) is best understood as an aspirational model rather

than an actually existing condition.⁸ The nominally independent nations of the Caribbean have repeatedly had their political and economic sovereignty challenged through military invasions, electoral interference, security legislation, and the multiple barriers placed on international trade with other countries in the Global South. The postwar principles of anti-interventionism established by organizations such as the United Nations have been repeatedly violated in the Caribbean in the name of abstract enemies such as the Cold War, the War on Drugs, and the War on Terror.

Thus, although the discourse of exceptionality surrounding nonsovereign societies has traditionally severed them analytically from theorizations of nominally sovereign nations, the socioeconomic conditions and political struggles unfolding in these societies speak directly to the postcolonial challenges faced by nominally sovereign states across the globe. Further, as the global economy becomes increasingly regulated through international institutions of empire (G8, WTO etc) the *simon quoi* of nonsovereign societies—the fact of being economically and politically organized in the service of outside interests—can be said to characterize most of the the global south, irrespective of any local structures of self-rule.

Not coincidentally, as relationships of nonsovereignty become increasingly imposed on the residents of nominally sovereign states, the political status of places like Guadeloupe are coming increasingly under revision. Over the course of the past 20 years the political formulas of the nonsovereign Caribbean have been the subject of a large wave of referenda, plebiscites, and other electoral performances.⁹ Many see these events as an attempt on the part of European countries to get rid of its “expensive” old colonies, but in fact the new formulas put into place often represent an *increase* of economic and military ties with a *decrease* in political rights. This is most clearly seen in the case of the Netherland Antilles, which were dissolved in 2010 with Curaçao and St. Marteen becoming constituent countries within the Kingdom of the Netherlands while three other islands (Bonaire, St. Eustatius, and Saba) became autonomous special municipalities of the Netherlands. Under the new arrangement St. Maarten and Curaçao will have greater self-government, but its citizens will retain Dutch passports and matters of defense and foreign policy will remain under the Netherlands’ jurisdiction.¹⁰

The case of the Netherland Antilles (which was arrived at through a local referendum) is emblematic of how most populations in the nonsovereign Caribbean engage calls for status changes. In most cases, local populations have responded to calls for political change with resolute ambivalence (see Miles 2004; 2006; Negrón-Muntaner 2007) regardless of whether these initiatives spring from local politicians or are the product of larger restructuring efforts coming from the metropolitan center. When presented with a plethora of traditional political options, the residents of the nonsovereign Caribbean consistently opt for “none of the above” preferring what I describe as relationships of “strategic entanglement” to the traditional models of incorporation or

independence.¹¹ The lack of electoral support for formulas of political autonomy or independence is commonly read as symptomatic of an economic and psychological dependence on colonial welfare. However, I would suggest that the seemingly exceptional disinterest in “political freedom” among nonsovereign populations is rooted less in an actual dependence on foreign subsidies than in a political disenchantment with Western categories of sovereignty and freedom. For example, while conducting research on contemporary labor activism in Guadeloupe I asked one of my informants if he supported political independence for the island, he responded by saying:

It’s not that I don’t believe in independence for Guadeloupe, it’s that I don’t believe in independence! It doesn’t exist—anywhere. You’re always dependent on something . . . on those who are more powerful; on those who have what you need . . . political independence has no meaning without economic independence!

He went on:

Those people who propose independence, they are charlatans! These are people who have clearly never looked around the Caribbean, they don’t understand the power of a country like the United States and how it rules the region, heck, they don’t even understand a little country like France!

Lucas’s words reflect a consciousness of the fictions of sovereignty and a clear understanding of its limits. On the one hand the residents of the non-sovereign Caribbean recognize that sovereignty does not exist—anywhere. They are embedded in a sea of nominally sovereign nations mired in postcolonial crises of structural adjustment, international trade regulations, NGO shadow states, interventionist humanitarianism, and the heavy hand of supranational institutions (IMF, G8, World Bank, etc.) that are said to carry out “governance without government.” Not to mention the role of imperial presences like the United States, and what Lucas wryly describes as “the little country” of France. However, on the other hand, the lack of interest in political independence does not imply the absence of political subjectivity among these populations. For example, Guadeloupeans will often say that their citizenship is French, their passport is European, but their *pays* (territory/country) is Guadeloupe.

Lucas’s critique of sovereignty echoes the writings of many IR theorists who argue that sovereignty is at best a form of “organized hypocrisy” (Krasner 1999) increasingly losing its relevance in the modern world. However, although these scholars recognize that the categories of Westphalian sovereignty fail to accurately represent our current political landscapes, they suggest that we lack the language from which to imagine alternatives outside of these terms. In the words of RBJ Walker (1993):

The Cartesian coordinates may be cracked, identities may be leaking, and the rituals of inclusion and exclusion sanctified by the dense textures of sovereign virtue may have become more transparent. But if not state sovereignty . . . what then?

In the section that follows, I take up this question of “what then” by looking at the political projects that are emerging in the wake of disenchantment with national sovereignty in the nonsovereign Caribbean and specifically among labor activists in Guadeloupe. I offer an ethnographic analysis of how a general strike that was launched in Guadeloupe in January 2009 provides an example of a collective political project that pushes against the epistemic limits of Westphalian sovereignty in the search for alternative forms of political organization and political subjectivity within the context of a strategic entanglement with France and Europe.

GADELOUPE IS OURS

In Guadeloupe (and the French Caribbean more generally) labor stoppages and lockouts are relatively common occurrences, and a favored tool for the powerful labor unions in the region. However, the movement of 2009 was unique in that it was not simply a labor strike, but truly a society-wide mass strike that impacted the general social fabric and political imagination of the French Antilles. It is important to note that the strike of 2009 was carried out, not by a single labor union, but by a broad coalition of 48 different political, economic, cultural, and labor organizations. This included a wide assortment of trade union federations, political parties (including the Communist Party and the Green Party), and proindependence activists. The coalition also incorporated groups from what could be described as the wider “civil society” including environmental groups, consumer rights’ associations, advocates for disability rights, fair housing proponents, and even several cultural groups—particularly those promoting local *gwo ka* music and dance. The forging of this coalition is a significant development in an area that has long been characterized by fractured movements and deep political rifts. In fact, many suggested that one of the biggest accomplishments of the 2009 movement was the simple fact of being able to align such a broad spectrum of social actors within a shared political agenda.

The coalition of actors that led the strike took on the name of *Lyannaj Kont Pwofitasyon* (LKP), which can be loosely translated as the Alliance Against Profiteering. The LKP quickly inspired the development of similar movements throughout the French Overseas Departments. In Martinique activists came together as the *Collectif du 5 Février* (C5F), in Réunion activists launched a strike under the name *COPSAR* (*Collectif des Organisations Syndicales, Politiques, et Associatives de la Réunion*), and in French Guiana activists forged a new collective named *Mayouri Kont Lesplatasyon* (MKL) in direct allusion to the LKP.¹²

In many ways this alliance resembles the kind of “network politics” that are said to typify contemporary social movements (particularly international anticorporate globalization movements). This new form of political action, which came to national attention after the 1999 anti-WTO protests in Seattle, is known for its ability to rally a wide range of political actors and agendas (agricultural workers, labor unions, environmentalists, etc.) against a common enemy (global corporate capitalism and its regulatory institutions) and for its decentralized forms of organization and consensus based decision making (Juris 2008; Graeber 2002). At first glance, the LKP coalition might seem like a clear example of this new form of coalition politics. In fact, there are numerous echoes of the anti-corporate globalization movement present in both the political content and organizational form of the LKP (see Bonilla 2010). However, at the same time, the demands they formulated were also deeply rooted in the particular history of economic exploitation and racial inequality that characterizes the French Antilles. As Christine Chivallon (2009) notes, the political concept that emerged in Guadeloupe, *pwofitasyon*, semantically unites exploitation and profit, in a way that foregrounds the fundamental relationship between the search for wealth and the issue of its unfair allocation. There is no single term in English (or French) that can adequately capture this Creole concept, which is rooted in the deep colonial history of Caribbean societies.

It should be noted that as a French Overseas Department, Guadeloupe affords relatively high salaries and standards of living compared with other Caribbean societies. It has one of the highest per capita incomes in the region, and the minimum wage is the same as in France (almost \$1,200 per month when the strike began). However, these high salaries are accompanied by even higher prices on most consumer goods and services—ranging anywhere from 20 percent to 170 percent more expensive than in mainland France (Doligé 2009). Merchants argue that high transportation costs, taxes, and tariffs oblige them to charge more for imported goods. Local political activists contend that the high prices are also the product of a larger colonial—thus, racial and economic—history.

The fact is, that the economy in Guadeloupe has long been controlled by a small white minority, commonly referred to as the *békés*, that dominates the majority of the import-export industry and most major wholesale and retail operations. These elites are seen as the direct descendants, in both biological and economic terms, of the area’s previous generations of plantation owners and slaveholders. It was partly the fear that independence from France would consolidate the *békés’* economic dominance that led many in the region, including intellectuals like Aimé Césaire, to turn to the political project of French incorporation, as a possible escape from the economic dominance of the planter class. In the face of an exploitative and racially self-segregating economic elite, the politicians of Césaire’s generation embraced the promises of political and economic equality represented by the French Republic (Burton 1978; Constant 1998). As Justin Daniel suggests,

“obtaining rights from the state was the path followed by these classes to take revenge on history and to struggle against the *békés* (white creole class) and their hegemony” (2001: 64).

However, the project of political integration quickly proved disappointing in the Antilles. After Guadeloupe’s integration into the French Republic in 1946 the local economy collapsed, unemployment skyrocketed, residents left in massive numbers for mainland France in search of employment opportunities, and dependence on the French state deepened—while the economic dominance of the *béké* class only increased. These economic elites have proven remarkably resilient, quickly adapting to global economic tides and changing economic patterns in the Caribbean. They were able to shift from a production-based plantation model to a consumption-driven, import, tourist, and service dominated economy. As a result, the *békés* continue to be synonymous with the “owning class”—they have successfully morphed from planters into businessmen by continuing to control the shifting means of production in the French Antilles (Vogt 2005: 254). Meanwhile, the popular classes in Guadeloupe are faced with significant economic and social challenges: with an unemployment rate of 25 percent, compared with France’s 8.1 percent, and twice the French poverty rate (12.5% versus 6.5%), the contemporary economic landscape seems bleak, particularly for local youth (the unemployment rate is currently 55.7% for those under 25).¹³

The members of the LKP assert that they are united in their critique of the contemporary Guadeloupean social and economic landscape, but that they do not have a common political vision for the future. Although they offered a concept with which to describe their target of reform—*pwofitasyon*—they did not offer a parallel concept for the political initiatives they sought to implement. Some of the organizations in the collective are known for their pro-independence ideology, but others do not share it; in fact many of the members claim to have no political leanings at all, save for their opposition to high prices. However, as several prominent Antillean intellectuals have argued, the seemingly “prosaic” search for greater purchasing power carries with it a broader “poetic” gesture (Breleur et al. 2009) which has been interpreted as a desire for more local sovereignty and autonomy, if not necessarily outright independence. The LKP itself never issued a call for independence or sovereignty. However, during the course of the strike, a popular chant emerged as the quasi-official slogan of the movement:

La Gwadeloup sé tan nou
La Gwadeloup sé pa ta yo
Yo pé ké fè sa yo vlé
adan péyi an nou!

[Guadeloupe, it is ours
Guadeloupe, it is not theirs
They cannot do as they please in our
country!]¹⁴

The song—written by Jacky Richard, a local bank worker and LKP supporter, who said that the words had come to him in a dream—soon became

the preferred political chant at rallies and demonstrations and was eventually recorded and released as a single by the groups Akyo and Vokum.¹⁵ During the strike, these lyrics seemed to echo out of every corner in Guadeloupe: they were shouted by thousands of demonstrators during mass rallies, sung by children on the playground, blasted out of car radios and open windows, and emblazoned upon thousands of T-shirts sold by informal vendors on the side of the road.

Despite the lack of an explicit racial reference, many white émigrés or métropolitains from France, as well as local whites, *békés*, and/or light skinned residents, felt that the slogan carried a message of racial exclusion and intolerance. They argued that the seemingly unmarked “nou” referred exclusively to a nonwhite Guadeloupean population. However, in discussing the slogan with my informants they asserted that there was no clear and simple translation for this polyvalent creole phrase. They would consistently say that Guadeloupe belonged to those who fought for her, those who loved her. Ownership and belonging was thus not predicated through ethnic lineage or the rights of citizenship, but through political praxis.

If the defining criteria for membership in the “nou” or “us” was fuzzy, those surrounding the “yo” or “them” were even more so. At first blush “Guadeloupe is ours, Guadeloupe is not theirs” might seem like an anticolonial, anti-imperial slogan of a colonized “us” versus a colonizing “them.” However, the *pwofitan* or *pwofiteurs* have no nationality or political ascription; they are defined simply as those who profit. Although the figure of the *pwofytan* emerges as a foil to a “true” Guadeloupean people, this rhetoric does not place the burden of the contemporary malaise of the Antilles on the colonial relationship with France. The focus on the *pwofitan* constitutes a shift away from an anticolonial discourse aimed exclusively at a colonizing power. It represents a move towards a wider analysis of the winners and losers in the relationships of colonialism, globalization, and neoliberalism. Thus, it is not just a matter of who established the colonial relationship but of who is profiting from it today. The slogan suggests that the target of contemporary struggle is thus not the French colonial state, but the populations benefiting from Guadeloupe’s contemporary economic relationships—these include French corporations but also local elites—both economic and political.

During the strike local politicians attempted to capitalize upon and channel the success of the LKP, attempting to position themselves as champions of the LKP’s underlying agenda while simultaneously disavowing their confrontational tactics. Following the launch of the general strike they called for a public dialogue between the LKP members, French government officials, and local business leaders. Unbeknownst to the LKP members they also invited local press, including the independent television station Canal 10, which ended up transmitting the entire negotiations live on television and the Internet. Presumably, the local politicians sought to highlight their own role in the resolution process; however, in the end they ultimately

demonstrated the limits of their power through their inability to broker an agreement. They also inadvertently created a new political hero by thrusting the LKP spokesperson, Elie Domota, into the spotlight.

In a place with little local programming, where most of what appears on television are French national productions or dubbed American sitcoms, the negotiations became known as the *feuilleton Guadeloupe*—or the local soap opera. The negotiations became a three-day televised media event that captured the local imagination. During this time Guadeloupeans—who were all home from work and school because of the strike—were glued to their television sets and sending each other text messages discussing the transmissions and reminding viewers to stay tuned for the next episode.

The main protagonist of the three-day televised event ended up being the LKP, and in particular Elie Domota. Over the course of the negotiation sessions Domota delivered a powerful *J'accuse* performance, directly confronting the French state for its lack of oversight, highlighting the lack of power of local elected officials, and publicly airing the corrupt practices and outrageous profits of the local employers. The viewers I interviewed described the event less as a negotiation than as a public trial, with Domota imagined as the people's prosecutor, unmasking the relations of inequality that prevail in Guadeloupe. Many suggested that Domota caught the attention of the public not just for the content of his interventions but also for the way in which he presented his case, his vast technical knowledge and his ease in discussing economic affairs. The LKP delegates, and Elie Domota in particular, projected a particular kind of administrative experience, and a familiarity with the local context that French appointed government bureaucrats were incapable of producing. In addition, they demonstrated a degree of political initiative that local elected officials also lacked. Whereas local elected officials are often seen as mere administrators of French dictated policies, the LKP leaders were viewed as political visionaries, unrestrained by the limits of French politics in the colonies.

As one LKP supporter I interviewed explained: "It was like listening to head of state . . . although he didn't have the means, he clearly had the knowledge and the will [volonté] to carry out political change." Other supporters argued that it was his tone and his manner that impressed them the most. They insisted that his attitude, his way of addressing the prefect and the *békés*, even his body language, the gestures he made when he spoke, and the way he carried himself demonstrated a confidence in relation to figures of authority that was unusual and remarkable.

For example Jean, a local middle school teacher explained to me:

You have to understand, this is a society where the white man is still imagined to be superior, they hold all the power—both economic and political—so to see un petit fils d'esclaves [grandson of slaves] talk to the prefect like that, to argue with him, to stand up to him, that is really something in this place!

Jean further suggested that it was not just that he spoke to the authorities as an equal, but rather that he seemed superior to them and had actually “schooled” the bureaucrats. Jean, and many others who had watched the televised event, insisted that Domota was clearly better informed, better prepared, and more knowledgeable about the workings of the local economy than either the French appointed prefect or the locally elected government officials.

Another remarkable aspect of the negotiations was the way Domota and the other LKP leaders were physically positioned relative to other political players in Guadeloupe. The negotiating table at the LKP was particularly striking in that it was not a two-sided negotiation between employer/employees as in a traditional labor strike. Rather it was a four-sided table that recognized the different political and economic players in Guadeloupean society: business leaders, local elected officials, representatives of the French government, and political activists. This arrangement recognizes the multiple sites of power in Guadeloupe; it makes evident the absence of a sovereign power dictating over contemporary Guadeloupean society and highlights instead the ways in which power is brokered between elected officials, appointed bureaucrats, economic elites, and grassroots activists. In fact, the final agreements that the LKP were able to reach were made by strategically leveraging each side of the table against the other. For example, a 200 euro monthly wage increase was obtained by cobbling together contributions from local and national governing bodies which would provide temporary tax incentives to the local employers. Rather than one sovereign party simply granting the wage increase, the different players came together demonstrating their interdependence and coordination.

Interestingly, this 200 euros wage increase was the only demand in the 2009 strike that could be said to be a traditional labor demand. All the others stretched the traditional bounds of syndicalism by addressing colonial legacies and the “expensive life” of the Antilles. However, although it was the most traditional labor demand, it was also the demand that seemed the most implausible. At a time when workers were experiencing salary reductions, furloughs, and layoffs in many parts of the world—how could these labor activists on the margins of Europe possibly achieve a salary hike? And how could a community without political sovereignty raise its minimum wage?

At present it is still unclear what the long-term impact of the LKP will be. Although activists were able to sign agreements with employers and government officials on 165 points of negotiation, these agreements have not been fully implemented. Three years after the general strike discussions continue and many participants feel disappointed by the gains of the movement. However, the fact remains that the LKP (and its leaders) have become important emblems of hope for social transformation in Guadeloupe. In a place where the traditional political formulas of independence and departmentalization have lost their promise, the LKP sparked hope in an alternative model.



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If Guadeloupean residents are able to have an impact on the broad range of aspects that the final agreements touched upon—that is, if they are able to effectively transform their minimum wage, assert creole as their regional language, and push back against the tidal wave of cultural globalization and economic neoliberalism, can one say that they have obtained a form of self-determination? Most discussions of sovereignty within the realm of political science or international relations treat the political institution of the state and the territorial entity of the nation as an epistemological given. But in the liberal democratic tradition, it is also possible to locate sovereignty in the people, rather than in a territory or in institutions of government. If we define Sovereignty as a form of self-determination, one could conceivably argue that the ability of social movements to force the hand of political and economic actors is an act of popular sovereignty. Further, by examining how these processes are taking form outside of the search for an independent nation-state we are better able to disentangle the concepts of freedom, sovereignty, independence, and self-determination. Only then will we be able to historicize and provincialize (that is, root in a particular geopolitical moment) our current models of sovereignty.¹⁶

As Raymond Gama, one of the spokespersons for the LKP, explains:

Since the 18th century we have come to associate the nation with power, we have tied nation and state. But the concept of the nation-state has been surpassed by globalization. The little populations (*les petits peuples*) that were integrated into the big collectives (*grands ensembles*) are now in the process of creating new relationships. But they don't yet have the transcript of the future. In some ways we, [in Guadeloupe] are the harbingers of a new political agenda. Take the example of the UN: we can be in the UN without necessarily being French or having a Guadeloupean state. It's a paradox but we are trying to invent this new concept of political organization.

Gama's claim that perhaps Guadeloupe can become a member of the United Nations without being a nation might seem utopic or far-fetched, but the fact is that at present over one thousand nongovernmental agencies are associated to the UN.¹⁷ Recent scholarship on nonsovereign actors has focused precisely on how non-governmental organizations, military contractors, security firms and others agents are increasingly taking on duties typically ascribed to nation-states.¹⁸ If a military contractor can have state-effects (or perhaps one should say "sovereignty effects") why not a social movement?

However, as Raymond Gamma suggests, these activists don't yet have the "transcript of the future." That is to say: their actions outpace our current political vocabulary but are not limited or circumscribed within it. In fact, according to Gama the political scripts of the future will have *new* concepts through which emerging forms of political recognition will be articulated. Gama suggests that what currently exists is not the vocabulary of the future



but the germ of a new concept. In our discussions Gama recognized the epistemic constraints that the discourse of sovereignty represents, and the difficulty of moving beyond it:

Perhaps if people like myself, intellectuals, took the time to reflect they could find something. . . . But right now the only slogan we have is independence. That is why we don't cling to it—because we know it is empty. You can have independence and be *dans la merde*. That is why we are not committed to any slogan—we are committed to life. We want to transform our lives even if it's under the French flag. The nationalists were guided by one single idea—not a desire for social change, but a desire for the nation. We do not cling to the nation. We want sovereignty but only if it comes with social transformation.

Gama's words trace the contours of an emergent nonsovereign political imagination. They signal on the one hand a profound disenchantment with the categories of western nationhood and sovereignty and an acute awareness of the failures of political independence across and beyond the Caribbean. However, despite being rooted in disenchantment, his words also index a hope that social change and political transformation *are* possible—even if it is under the French flag.

NOTES

1. The exact number of protestors is debated, but a phone survey conducted shortly after the conclusion of the strike found that 94 percent of the population felt the movement was justified, and 75 percent actively supported it (Qualistat 2009). I cite the figure of 100,000 because this number has itself become a symbol of the movement and is widely cited by activists and supporters.
2. The category of *Outre-mer*, though prominent in the French imagination for a long time, was first made legal in 1946 when France ratified its Fourth Republican Constitution and passed the *loi* no. 46-451, which transformed Martinique, Guadeloupe, Guyane, and Réunion into new political and administrative units of France known as DOMs (*Départements d'Outre-Mer*). The new constitution also recognized the existence within the Union Française of a series of TOMs (*Territoires d'Outre-Mer*) that were considered part of the Republic but were not fully assimilated into French law (Aldrich and Connell 1992). Over the years these formulas have continued to evolve. The DOMs are now also ROMs (*Région d'Outre-mer*) and are part of the *Ultra peripherie* (the outermost territories) of the European Union. In 2003 the category of TOM was replaced by the category COM (*Collectivité d'Outre-Mer*). Unlike the DOM, the TOM and COM are part of the French Republic but not of the European Union. They control certain aspects of their governance (such as trade and social security administration) but are subsumed under the French military defense system. On March 31, 2011, Mayotte passed a vote to become a new DOM. French Polynesia recently became a POM (*Pays d'Outre-mer*) and New Caledonia is currently a *Collectivité Sui Generis* and will have a vote in 2014 to decide on its future status.

3. The complete platform is available at <http://www.lkp-gwa.org/revendications.html> and has also been published (symbolically enough) in the form of a little red book (see LKP 2009).
4. <http://www.lefigaro.fr/economie/2009/02/11/04001-20090211ARTFIG00602-l-outre-mer-coute-pres-de-sept-milliards-a-l-etat-.php>.
5. See Williams ([1944] 1994) on how Caribbean plantation economies provided the capital necessary to fuel the industrial revolution, and Mintz (1985) on the role of Caribbean sugar in transforming the diets of industrial workers.
6. For more on labor flows from the nonsovereign Caribbean see Cervantez et al. (2009), Basch et al. (1994), and Freeman (2000). On the politics of the off-shore see Maurer (2001) and Weston (2006). On prison camps and military centers see Gregory (2006), Lutz (2009), and Vine (2009).
7. <http://www.nationofchange.org/blogs/bill-quigley/haiti-seven-places-where-earthquake-money-did-and-did-not-go-1326132524>.
8. See in particular Linden Lewis's chapter (Chapter 3) in this volume.
9. British-controlled areas—such as the Turks and Caicos, the British Virgin Islands, Anguilla, and the Cayman Islands—have had several major referendums in the last decade (see Corbin 2010; UN 2011). In Puerto Rico, the plebiscites of 1993 and 1998 and the Constitutional reforms of 2005 were influential for a 2007 Congressional Bill meant to reexamine the islands' ultimate political destiny (Corbin 2010). In 2004, the U.S. Virgin Islands enacted its fifth constitutional convention, and in 2009 submitted a new constitution to Congress that redefined its political and economic relationship with the federal government (Corbin 2010; UN 2010). For the French Antilles, important plebiscites were held in 2001, 2002, and 2003 to review the political and institutional status of both Martinique and Guadeloupe (Daniel 2009). Interestingly, these events seem to have reformed the current political and economic arrangements without any real devolution of power (Corbin 2010: 5). The only exception seems to be islands of the former Netherlands Antilles (Curaçao, Sint Maarten, Bonaire, Saba, and Sint Eustatius), which in October 2010, elected new statuses (BBC News 2010; Stabroek News 2010). Their new political relationships give them greater autonomy in some domains, but grant military control and certain judiciary powers to the Netherlands. (A stark reminder of the constrained independence offered to Cuba through the Platt Amendment of 1901.)
10. Alexandra Silver, "The World Gets Two New Countries! (Sort Of.)," <http://newsfeed.time.com/2010/10/11/the-world-gets-two-new-countries-sort-of/>.
11. The phrase *none of the above* refers to the winning option in the 1998 plebiscite in Puerto Rico. When confronted with the options of independence, statehood, or a revamped version of the current commonwealth status, the voting public opted for the ambiguous fourth column "*ninguna de las anteriores*" or none of the above.
12. Each of these movements took shape in response to the particular social and political context in which they were embedded. They were in contact with each other, but did not strategize or negotiate collectively.
13. "De fortes disparités économiques entre Guadeloupe et métropole" Last Modified October 2, 2009 <http://www.lepoint.fr/actualites-societe/de-fortes-disparites-economiques-entre-guadeloupe-et-metropole/920/0/315759>.
14. I am following here Jean Bernabé's proposed interperation of the creole term *sé* as "it is" rather than simply "is." He argues that this better represents Guadeloupean creole usage, and that it more properly captures the gesture of self-affirmation that the song represents (see Bernabé 2009).
15. The song is available widely on several sites on the Internet, including http://ugtg.org/article_789.html. Last modified July 24, 2009.

16. For more on provincializing European forms see Chakrabarty (2000).
17. At present over one thousand NGOs have affiliated status with the UN through the Department of Public Information, out of which over 600 also have consultative status with the Economic and Social Council. They do not have the same rights and duties as member states but are able to influence policy, serve as consultants and participate in the drafting of declarations. For more information see: <http://www.un.org/wcm/content/site/dpingorelations/home>.
18. See for example Ferguson (2006) and Ferguson and Gupta (2002).

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