

The Departments of the French Antilles

by Justin Daniel

After 1946, the process of "decolonization by assimilation" ensured that the French Antilles remained part of France. The departmental framework, seen as the source of all the rights associated with citizenship, had a profound influence on Antillean politics and society.

Reviewed: Sylvain Mary, *Décoloniser les Antilles ? Une histoire de l'État post-colonial (1946-1982)*, Paris, Sorbonne Université Presses, 2021. 450 pp., €28.

The fruit of a thesis defended in 2018 at Sorbonne University, Sylvain Mary's book *Décoloniser les Antilles ?* ("Decolonizing the French Antilles? A history of the post-colonial state") is a detailed, well-documented analysis of the unique historical trajectory of Guadeloupe and Martinique.

Despite the winds of independence that swept through France's former colonies in the second half of the twentieth century, in 1946 these two islands—which, along with French Guiana and Reunion Island, were part of the "four old" colonies—chose, on the initiative of their elected representatives, an unorthodox path to decolonization: integration into the French Republic.

Aspiring to equality

The question mark that punctuates the book's title is a reminder not only of this singularity, but also of the complex situation created by the sometimes chaotic transition from colony to department. Simple alignment with French norms and institutions—decolonization through assimilation—has by no means completely settled the colonial question. Nor has it resolved the recurring issue of the political status of these territories, which are characterized by a strong identity while being governed by an external and distant center.

The process of departmentalization has undoubtedly reshaped island societies, impacting on all levels of their social organization. However, it has also fueled a number of questions, and even a certain disenchantment with the French state and its actions in island societies steeped in republican values, particularly the principle of equality. In short, it is "part of a contradictory history of the republican ideal in the French Antilles, at the crossroads of the aspirations for equality of a local elite and a state policy with a mixed record"(p. 25).

Sylvain Mary's decision to write a history of the post-colonial state, focusing on its interactions with island societies, is therefore pertinent. The book distances itself from any one-sided approach that would cast the state as an omnipotent being. Instead, it highlights the challenges of analytically addressing realities that are somewhat resistant to the usual categorizations and, from a political and administrative standpoint, to the traditional classifications that structure state action, despite the stated voluntarism and strategy of maintaining the Antilles as part of the "national heritage".

This explains the uncertainties, anxieties and hesitations that sometimes beset the senior civil servants who served the French government locally or in Paris, as well as the discrepancies and dissonances with island societies. The backdrop of the Cold War, geographical proximity to Cuba and the decolonization processes underway around the world, including the Algerian War, created a zoom effect that put the action of the Antillean anti-colonial movement under a magnifying glass, and led to disproportionate responses on the part of the French state and its representatives, as illustrated by the 1959 urban rebellion in Fort-de-France.

"Departmental order"

One of the book's key contributions is the emphasis it places on the international angle, thanks to the cross-referencing of French and US diplomatic archives, when studying the departmentalization process, whether as a shield against international protest at the time of its inception (Chapter 1) or as a geopolitical issue in the context of the "global cold war" (Chapter 6).

Very few publications on the recent history of the French Antilles have provided such a detailed analysis of the debates and strategies that motivated the actors at the time, particularly the positioning of the United States and the Gaullist republic. And there has also been little analysis of the effects of these debates on the future of the French Antilles' status as an overseas department: it would appear, however, that this status was temporarily frozen by the international rivalries of the era, and by a convergence of interests between France and the United States designed to crush any hint of change.

In line with these geopolitical and international concerns, the French government's actions in these island territories followed a chronology that lends the book a structure particularly well suited to analysis. In 1946, the government hastily embarked on a process of "decolonization by assimilation", with little regard for the long-term effects or the resources required to meet the expectations that were continually rising locally. This was followed in 1959 by the Gaullist attempt to impose a "departmental order" in response to the tensions that had arisen in the region.

Underpinned by the unquestionable voluntarism of the state apparatus and, in some cases, by repressive measures, this order was primarily geared towards combating separatism and promoting the "catch-up" paradigm as a real normative theory of public action. However, from the 1970s onwards, it was partially overturned by political changes at national level, in particular the election of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing as president of France in 1974.

A continuing history

Partially overturned, indeed: the action begun by Giscard d'Estaing remained largely anchored in continuity, and the adjustments it made were unable to challenge a logic that had been in place, from a socio-economic point of view, since the 1960s.

The same was true of the changes introduced in 1981, when the Socialists came to power in France: decentralization policy certainly marked a break with the past in institutional terms, but in all other areas the expected changes remained rather scattered. They did little to dispel the impression of a continuing history, even though the islands' political landscape was gradually being reshaped, and there was a desire for a new approach focusing in particular on tackling inequalities and the inevitable goal of catching up.

The history of the post-colonial state, when seen through the interplay, discourses and sociography of its actors rather than as an inseparable block acting as a single entity, has the merit of focusing on the differing options that can emerge at various times.

In this respect, the book is full of interesting and sometimes surprising insights. For example, we learn how the "adapted regionalization" project put forward in 1971 by the minister of state Pierre Mesmer—which planned to surround the prefect with an "administrative council" made up of a few elected representatives from the general councils, and to grant delegations of power to the general councils enabling them to adapt legislative and regulatory texts from metropolitan France themselves—was in fact thwarted by local elected representatives from the Antilles.

From the Antilles to Mayotte

This attitude can be explained by a tendency to sacralize the departmental institutional framework as the ultimate source of all the rights associated with citizenship, a mindset that the people of the Antilles were slow to shake off.

This shows the profound impact that departmentalization, perceived as both an achievement and an unfinished process, had on the collective imagination. In many respects, it transcended this framework, as a result of the logic underpinning it. Over

time, these rationales exploited political and administrative categories—"adapted departmentalization", "economic departmentalization", "adapted regionalization", etc.—in order to better absorb them, survive successive reforms and impose an indisputable continuity, over and above institutional issues.

This can be seen in the government action deployed in the French Antilles from the 1960s onwards, since then extended by EEC and EU policy. These interventions struggled to redress structural socio-economic imbalances, revealing the partial failure of the measures and mechanisms used.

On the whole, Sylvain Mary's book offers a precise and useful historical analysis of an unusual decolonization process. It provides a valuable tool and important insights for better understanding the realities of the Antilles, past and present, which are often overlooked in academic literature, and are often perceived primarily through media coverage of the tensions that periodically beset them.

It is also a timely initiative, as all overseas territories, regardless of their respective status, are seeking to revisit their relationship with the French state, while Mayotte is also experimenting with the difficult path to departmentalization.

First published in laviedesidees.fr, April 24, 2023. Translated by Susannah Dale, with the support of Cairn.info. Published in booksandideas.net, 17 December, 2024