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Non-Sovereign Futures: French Caribbean Politics in the Wake of Disenchantment.
Yarimar Bonilla.

In 1794 slavery was abolished in Guadeloupe by French Revolutionary Victor Hugues who hoped this would help him export revolution across the Caribbean and defeat the British presence there. In 1802 slavery was brutally reinstated by Napoleon. In 2009 a mass strike action broke out in Guadeloupe. The dispute centred on the rising cost of living and low government salaries and soon spread to neighbouring Francophone island, Martinique. As Yarimar Bonilla shows, at no point between these dates has Guadeloupe, which remains to this day a department of France, experienced anything that could be called 'sovereignty'. Despite the expectations of the 1950s and 60s that after colonialism the Caribbean would become an archipelago of nation states, this simply has not happened, nor can it any longer be expected. These are the 'non-sovereign futures' that Bonilla refers to in the title of her book. The point is well-made in the first pages of the book by a list of islands and their political forms: not only are most societies in the Caribbean 'non-sovereign', most use the Euro, the U.S. Dollar or Sterling as their currency.

The significant question that Bonilla sets herself is what kind of politics runs with these facts, since awareness of 'non-sovereignty' as the enduring and perhaps necessary future of these societies can often accompany very strong anti-colonial sentiment. The author of this book grew up in Puerto Rico, so she is familiar with the dynamics of a society where subjects 'routinely vote against political independence even while asserting a wish to see their island "free and sovereign"' (page xiv). In the small island of Guadeloupe, home to one of the most significant thinkers of the French colonial situation, Aimé Césaire, a comparable dynamic has brought about the growth of mass labour movements and organised dissent that builds on a long history of local politicisation against mainland France. Here Bonilla shows how Césaire's brand of anti-colonialism never advocated independence but rather promoted further integration with France and, indeed, departmentalisation, in tune with the fullest potential of French revolutionary universalism. Césaire's icon of anti-colonialism was the 'neg mawon' the escaped slave or maroon who fought for independence within the framework of colonial slavery, but the utopian aim of political struggle was not national independence, but equal rights within the greater French state.

Bonilla's ethnography limits itself to her discussions with activists during the events immediately leading up to the 2009 strike (the period of her fieldwork in the island). She draws on her informants' historical understandings productively to explore the meaning of the unfolding situation. For local union organisers the key historical events that never led to a full local seizure of power weigh heavily on their thinking as counterfactuals. These include iconically the violent suppression of freedom in 1802, the second abolition of slavery in 1848 and, in 1967, a massacre by police of demonstrators during a strike that created mass unrest. Each of these continues to be understood in terms of unresolved demands for 'liberty and emancipation' (page 146). This aspect of her research is well told and well explicated. Since the 2009 strikes some new political idioms have come into play, but the central tension—marronage and/versus universal rights—remains in place.

This book gives, then, a number of useful pointers for understanding how politics continues to unfold in this complicated region. From this perspective the theme of 'non-sovereignty' could have engaged advantageously with the larger regional work on Caribbean transnationalism, political-economic deterritorialization and cosmopolitanism. At the same time the social lives of the people Bonilla spoke to in writing this book remain opaque: we hear words from 'Jackie, an active union delegate' or similarly from 'Lukas' or 'Corinne', but who these people are outside their situation as workers and strikers is never substantiated. Not a thoroughgoing Guadeloupean ethnography then, but a useful delimited case study of a particular kind of 'entangled' and perhaps unresolvable politics in action.