"To assimilate, rather than be assimilated":
An analysis of Martinique's *decolonisation by departmentalisation*

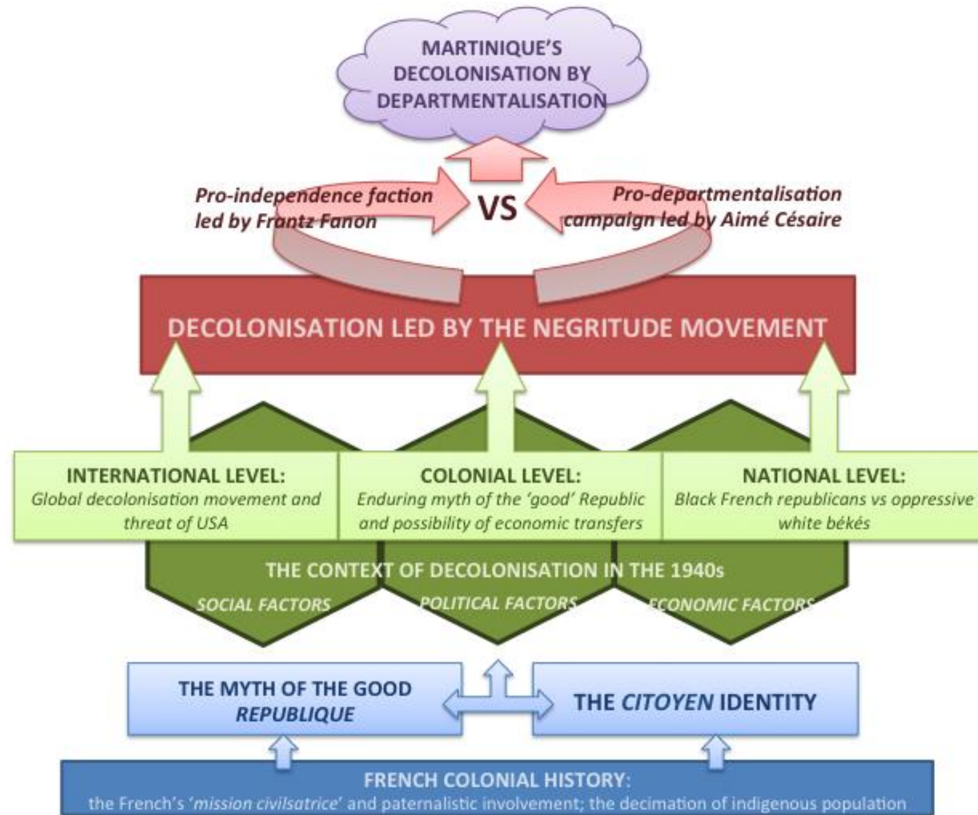
Arbie Baguios, Ynis Isimbi, David Yamron, July 2018

1. Introduction

Within the history of decolonisation, Martinique is among the few postcolonial societies that integrated to their colonial states instead of pursuing independence. On 13th October 1946, Martinicans voted in a referendum to become part of metropolitan France. But how did such a distinct decolonisation trajectory happen?

In this essay we argue that Martinique's *decolonisation by departmentalisaton* was ushered in by a social movement that emerged from a particular social, political and economic context, which had been shaped by the country's historical institutions. Ultimately, decolonisation by departementalisation was achieved by Aimé Césaire's *Négritude* movement, which was driven by black Martinicans' identity as French citizens and their desire to assimilate to the "good" French Republic against the backdrop of their oppression by the white *békés*.

In analysing how Martinique's decolonisation by departmentalisation happened, we will employ a case study approach (as opposed to comparative study, due to scope and limitation) and use concepts found in literature on advocacy, campaigns, and activism. We will be guided by a clear timeline of events and critical junctures (see *Appendix A*), as well as a Theory of Change shown below, which outlines our understanding of the change process (Valters, 2015):



2. Martinique's historical institutions

Institutions influence a society's social, political and economic context (Green, 2016). In postcolonial societies particularly, institutions are shaped by historical factors such as the identity of their coloniser (Lange *et al*., 2006). At the same time, historical factors have long-run effects on social movements which emerge out of them (Tilly & Wood, 2009).

In the case of Martinique, we argue that its distinct French colonial history deeply shaped the country's "normative" and "cultural-cognitive" institutions (Andrews, 2013), which in turn set the stage for its decolonisation context.

2.1. French colonial history

French colonialism was distinct from other European colonial powers, which largely explains the divergent historical trajectories among Caribbean postcolonial societies. The French, for instance, were driven by a "civilising mission" as opposed to other colonisers' more entrepreneurial ventures (Bishop, 2013). The French also had a "more paternalistic

involvement" with their colonies: for example, French slavery was governed by the *Code Noir* that guaranteed slaves' humane treatment, while the British did not have similar regulations (Browne, 2004).

Crucially, it was not uncommon for the French to parent children with slave concubines, which remained taboo for the British (Browne, 2004). This had a far-reaching impact: mulatto children were born free, could inherit property, and "contributed to the 'whitening' of the population" (Browne, 2004). This, in turn, suppressed revolutionary sentiments unlike in other more deeply divided, predominantly black Caribbean societies (Browne, 2004).

Under French colonialism, the indigenous population was decimated due to the harsh conditions they suffered in sugar plantations (Browne, 2004). In other French colonies where a strong pre-colonial society existed, such as in North Africa or Indochina, the conflict between French and native populations could later on only be overcome by these societies' independence (Lewis, 1962).

2.2 The myth of the good *République*

French colonialism brought with it two opposing sides of the same coin: on the one hand, the oppressive monarchy which endorsed slavery, and on the other, the republican ideals of *liberté, egalité* and *fraternité* (Bishop, 2013). The struggle for power between French royalists and republicans continued throughout the 19th century, but the republican ideals of freedom, equality, and camaraderie became entrenched values within contemporary French territories, particularly in Martinique (Bishop, 2013).

The slave and black population of Martinique, in turn, rallied behind such ideals. After all, while the monarchy at various points sought to marginalise and strip the rights of slave and black populations, it was the Republic that finally abolished slavery and guaranteed the rights of the *gens de couleur* ("citizens of colour"), which put Martinique on track towards full assimilation (Bishop, 2013).

2.3. The *citoyen* identity

The French colonial regime also allowed for the possibility to become a *nouveau citoyen*. The opportunity to receive manumission over time led to the growth of a new demographic – the *gens de couleur*, who were not quite equal to Frenchmen, but enjoyed more privileges than slaves (Dubois, 1998). The *gens de couleur* were eventually granted the status of *nouveaux citoyens* in large part as a strategic response by the Republic to consolidate allies against the threats it faced: the possibility of a slave revolt, just as had occurred in St Domingue; a re-emerging royalist faction; and potential English invasion (Dubois, 1998).

The transition of *gens de couleur* to full-fledged *nouveaux citoyens* was a movement in itself, characterised by the struggle of the new citizens to prove themselves worthy of their status. They did this through endeavouring to differentiate themselves from slaves (for instance, by changing their names), or through violent opposition to royalists (Dubois, 1998). The Republic, however, eventually abolished slavery and the distinction between citizens and *nouveaux citoyens*, which united black Martinicans under their new French citizen identity (Dubois, 1998).

3. The decolonisation context

After over 300 years of French colonisation, Martinique found itself voting for departmentalisation in the 1946 referendum (Bishop, 2013). To understand how this happened, we will analyse the Martinican decolonisation context in the 1940s as a complex system in which "change results from the interplay of many diverse and apparently unrelated factors" (Green, 2016) – including the social, political and economic factors that arose from Martinique's historical institutions.

We will demonstrate that these factors at the international, colonial, and national levels led to the emergence of a social movement that would ultimately usher decolonisation by departmentalisation.

3.1. International level

At the international level, the two most salient factors are the global decolonisation movement and the threat of the United States.

After World War II, it became clear that Europe would have to accommodate the increasingly loud calls for independence from its colonies. The devastation of the war "shattered all imperial illusions", particularly for France: it had failed to protect its territories, and its fall to the Nazis sowed disillusion within its empire (Betts, 1991; Bishop, 2013).

The US, which became the most powerful nation after Europe's demise, was skeptical of the declining empires and threw its support to decolonisation. US President Franklin Roosevelt "conveyed considerable sympathy with the plight of the colonised peoples of the 'Third World'" (Bishop, 2013). This push for decolonisation was perhaps most acute in the Caribbean, which the US saw as within its sphere of influence (Bishop, 2013).

The French government, in turn, was deeply suspicious of American attempts to establish hegemony in the Caribbean. As Childers (2006) writes, "[the US] was keenly interested in political developments in Martinique, principally because voters returned an entire Communist slate in the first elections following the war." In the context of global decolonisation, France began to see departmentalisation as the only way to retain influence in the region.

Martinican political leaders like Aimé Césaire, meanwhile, saw the US as a symbol of segregation and racism, and deeply feared the prospect of falling under the American sphere of influence (Childers, 2006). And so for them and other Martinicans, "departmentalisation would safeguard the island from the designs of a new postwar colonial power they associated with racism and the *békés*: the United States" (Childers, 2006).

3.2. Colonial level

During decolonisation, the relationship between Martinique and France was governed by two forces: the enduring myth of the good Republic, and the possibility of economic benefits under departmentalisation.

The myth of the good Republic endured in Martinican society, especially against the backdrop of oppressive *békés*, the island's white minority. While black Martinicans maintained a stronghold in politics and government, slavery and the plantation economy

had long-run social and economic ramifications that handed a disproportionate amount of power to the *békés*. Many black Martinicans, therefore, saw departmentalisation under the care of the "good" French Republic – who gave them freedom from slavery and the status of citizenship – as a bulwark against the *békés* attempt to consolidate their power. This will be further explored in the next section.

The possibility of economic integration and transfers from France, which had begun to expand its welfare state, was also a major consideration when Martinique voted for departmentalisation. "The desire to participate in the new social security system set up in France" was in the minds of Martinicans voting in the referendum" (Childers, 2006). However, this promise competed against the idea supported by many Martinican political leaders and citizens that independence was economically not feasible because of Martinique's small size (Murch, 1968).

3.3. National level

Ultimately, Martinique's decolonisation was largely driven at the national level by the conflict between black Martinicans and the oppressive *békés*.

A relic of slavery and the plantation economy, the *béké* minority dominated economic life on the island and continued to inspire "almost pathological fear" among the black majority population (Bishop, 2013). Antagonism against the *békés* was compounded by the black Martinicans' experience of the brutal Vichy governor and Nazi collaborator, Admiral Robert, who oppressed the population with broad support from the white minority (Childers, 2006). "The France to which Martinicans felt one hundred percent allegiance," as Childers (2006) writes, "was the France of Victor Schoelcher and the liberating principles of the Republic, in stark contrast to the France of a white minority that continued to exert power on the island."

Against this backdrop arose leaders like Aimé Césaire, who was "determined to raise his fellow citizens' consciousness about race and class issues … based on the fact that the wealth of the island is concentrated in hands of whites" (Childers, 2006). Césaire, along with his peers not just in the Caribbean but in other French colonies too, led a movement they hoped would usher black empowerment: *Négritude*.

4. The social movement

Social movements are defined as "networks of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in political or cultural conflicts, on the basis of shared collective identities" (Diani, 1992: 1). And social movements are perhaps the most important factor in achieving social change (Green, 2016).

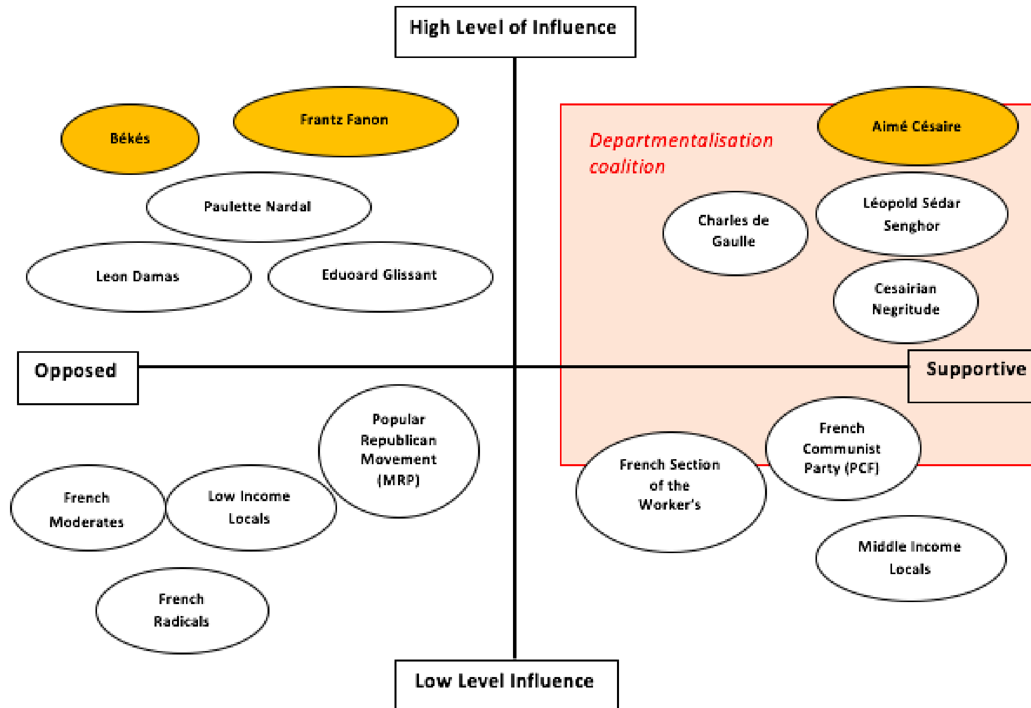
In this section, we will analyse the *Négritude* movement in general and Aimé Césaire's pro-departmentalisation campaign in particular as social movements, which successfully achieved decolonisation by departmentalisation.

4.1. Négritude movement

The *Négritude* movement aimed to empower the black population in French colonies by reconciling their dual French and African heritage, and celebrating their lost African-ness (Bishop, 2013). Using Rowlands' (1997) *four power* model, empowerment in this context means harnessing the black population's *power with* their fellow colonial citizens; *power to* collectively claim their rights from the French republic; and *power over* their oppressors (such as the békés). It also included *power within* to overcome internalised oppression (Lukes, 2007), as *Négritude* argues that the French had "colonised the minds" of their black citizens (Bishop, 2013).

Out of the *Négritude* movement in Martinique, two competing factions arose: those who favoured independence led by Frantz Fanon, and those who campaigned for departmentalisation led by Aimé Césaire.

This stakeholder map – especially highlighting Fanon, the *békés*, and Césaire – show which actors have a high or low level of influence, and whether they are supportive or opposed to departmentalisation.



4.2. Pro-independence

The pro-independence campaign was led by the Martinican writer Frantz Fanon. Influenced by existentialism, Fanon saw colonialism "as a 'Manichean world' which was established violently and could only be eradicated through violence" (Bishop 2013). This view garnered supporters within Martinique (including artists like Edouard Glissant and Paulette Nardal), and in other French colonies (such as Leon Damas in French Guiana) (Galoustian, 2012).

But while Fanon's ideas of radical revolution resonated with poorer citizens, it was not favoured by the new black middle class, who – having studied and lived in metropolitan France – largely saw themselves as French (Galoustian, 2012). Ultimately, "Fanon was a radical theorist with little purchase in the French Caribbean" (Bishop, 2013).

The *békés* favoured independence because this would consolidate their power in the island. While not publicly opposing departmentalisation, Wilder (2015) describes their use of "hidden power" (Lukes, 2005), where they conducted secret meetings to subvert the pro-departmentalisation movement. Finally, there were also French political actors

who opposed departmentalisation such as the Popular Republican Movement comprised mostly by French moderates who wanted to get rid of the colonies (North, 1988).

4.3. Pro-departmentalisation

The pro-departmentalisation campaign was led by the revered poet Aimé Césaire. At the heart of Césaire's ideology was a belief that being "French" did not necessarily mean being of European ethnicity, and that Martinicans could be black *and* French (Wilder, 2015). He envisioned a broader transformation of French society, where ethnic classifications of French identity were non-existent, and where black Martinicans could be proud citizens of the *métropole* (Wilder, 2015).

Césaire, along with peers from other French colonies such as the Senegalese writer Léopold Senghor, called for the social, political and economic inclusion of French citizens outside the *métropole*. He argued this allowed citizens of the colonies to make economic claims "on a metropolitan society their resources and labour had helped to create" (Wilder, 2015: 2). Cesaire's vision took the form of *decolonisation by integration*: "to assimilate," Césaire wrote, "rather than be assimilated" (Bishop, 2013). Césaire also did not want Martinique to end up like its neighbour, Haiti which found itself worse off after independence (Wilder, 2015).

In pursuit of this goal, Césaire and the Communist Party used a variety of tactics, which today are recognised as good practice for activists. They spoke the language of his adversaries (Alinsky, 1971), using "'refined' behavior and 'educated' speech [as] weapons against color prejudice (Wilders, 2006). They also exploited the pro-independence *békés'* legacy of slavery despite the fact that black Martinicans also owned slaves, effectively tapping the resentment many felt at the colonial system that had dominated Martinique for the past three hundred years" (Wilders, 2006).

Like many social movements, the pro-departmentalisation faction benefitted from an effective leader who was able to organise people and resources and overcome collective action problems (de Ver, 2009). "Much of the Communists' appeal on the island was not ideological," Wilder (2006) writes, "but due to Césaire's charismatic leadership."

By building a "coalition of interests" (de Ver 2009) including the French President Charles de Gaulle, as well as through internal pressure (including lobbying in the General Assembly) and external pressure (by urging the public to vote in his favour in the 1946 referendum), Césaire and the pro-departmentalisation movement successfully achieved their vision of decolonisation by integration.

5. Conclusion

In this essay we looked at Martinique as a case study and used a wide range of literature on advocacy, campaigning, and activism to explain the country's unique decolonisation trajectory. We argued that Martinique's decolonisation was led by a social movement that emerged from a particular social, political, and economic context, which had been shaped by the country's historical institutions. Ultimately, decolonisation by departmentalisation was achieved by Aimé Césaire's *Négritude* movement, driven by black Martinicans' identity as French citizens and their desire to assimilate to the "good" French Republic set against their struggle with the oppressive *békés.*

Appendix A: Timeline and critical junctures

1789	French revolution
1791	Slave revolution in St Domingue/Haiti
1848	Final abolition of slavery in Martinique
1871	Final reinstatement of citizenship for black Martinicans
1941-1945	World War II
1946	Referendum and, eventually, *Loi de departmentalisation*

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