

book review

Freedom Time

Rethinking Federal Democracy for a Postcolonial World

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Gary Wilder

Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization and the Future of The World

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Gary Wilder's *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization and the Future of The World* considers the problem of freedom after the end of Empire by re-examining neglected possibilities for decolonisation. Specifically, the author traces political propositions put forward by Léopold Sedar Senghor and Aimé Césaire, both leading Black (Francophone) intellectuals, poets and political leaders, that the emancipation of French colonised populations on the African continent and in the Caribbean might

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be best effected, not by national independence, but by the creation of a federal system of equals within a radically altered, truly democratic French Republic.

While others would promote the cause of colonial independence, Senghor invoked universalist values and the spirit of the 1789 revolution to challenge ‘the assumption that the republic necessarily belonged to white metropolitans’. If Senghor ‘deracialized the very concept of filiation’, (144) Césaire opted for departmentalisation as a means towards full citizenship for Antilleans and ‘saw in a federal republic an opportunity to share equally in state sovereignty while also enjoying local self government, to denationalize self-determination and to transform France into a plural democracy’. Both men proposed a democratic socialism, a humanist hybrid encompassing Marx and local cultural values, as the best means of operationalising republican ideals. In Wilder’s analysis, theirs was a visionary cosmopolitanism founded on the prescient realization of “the contraction of our planet” and a new “interdependence of people” such that “the struggle of any one of them is that of all the others”. (150)

In his opening chapter Wilder lays out his central thesis before situating the seeds of Césaire and Senghor’s political thought in their activist literary work and overlapping cultural roots (chapters 2 and 3). He then proposes that the period of the Liberation (1944–1947) constituted a brief window of opportunity for the idea of self-determination without state sovereignty. Traceable to Mazarini and Proudhon’s nineteenth-century attempts to ‘fashion political forms through which to reconcile self-government and human solidarity’, Césaire and Senghor’s notion of federal democracy was presented as a viable alternative to the nationalistic creation of independent states. (105) Though it drew contemporary support from Arendt and Camus, federal democracy would prove a road not followed. Wilder thus reads postwar French politics as a set of tragically missed opportunities, due to the parochialism of the left and the oppressive forces of reaction that came to govern France and its colonial administration. Subsequent chapters (5 to 8) follow the evolution of Senghor and Césaire’s notion of federalism—and its ultimate forestalling—in parallel with the concept’s tangled genealogy in the racialised discourses of slavery and emancipation, though perhaps the Derridean term hauntology (*hantologie*) might be a more apt term. Citing abolitionist Victor Schoelcher and Haitian revolutionary Toussaint Louverture as key antecedents,

Wilder demonstrates the deep, republican roots of Senghor and Césaire's federalist vision, situating them as direct heirs of a centuries long struggle to institute revolutionary socialist values. Chapter 9 considers the causes and consequences of the non-implementation of the federal solution, contrasting the rabid neocolonialism and exclusion that plagued newly independent African states with gradual moves towards autonomy in Martinique. Wilder concludes by arguing for the continued relevance of the federal concept in the contemporary post-millennium context which he conceives as a transitional moment akin to the postwar opening.

Wilder's objective of thinking *with* Césaire and Senghor necessitates both extensive knowledge of and judicious recourse to their literary oeuvres as well as their more trenchant political writings. Wilder skilfully interweaves his discussion with well-chosen extracts from both, admirably demonstrating the inseparability of poesis and politics for two poet-politicians for whom human development meant creative activity in the broadest sense of the word.

At this point, a few words on translation. First, it is a little disappointing to see published English versions of Césaire and Senghor without the French-language originals. Perhaps an editorial choice beyond the author's control, the absence of the original texts is nonetheless frustrating for French speakers, who will undoubtedly form a good percentage of the book's target audience. Wilder appears sensitive to potential problems arising from reliance on translation and in several instances provides useful glosses in text or endnotes where the polysemy of original French terms, culturally specific references or syntax resist economical rendering in English. A notable exception, however, is the key reference to time, the centrality of which is reflected in Wilder's title. Taken from Césaire's *Sommation / Summons*, 'Time Time oh creel without venison summoning me' (132) is a literal translation which reads oddly to an English ear, to say the least. Admittedly the original French—'*le temps le temps ô claie sans venaison qui m'appelle*'—is devilishly hard to translate. Césaire's poem lends time a lyrical quality that is liberating and triumphant but crucially guileless as opposed to the trap of space. This poetic distinction between time and space, which also has political consequence, is quite lost in the literal translation. Compared with the poetic use of the French '*claie sans venaison*', which mythically evokes an empty potential via the image of a yet-to-be-filled fishing or hunting basket, the prosaic 'creel without venison' creates

unintended bathos that sadly robs the poem of much of its multilayered gravitas. While Wilder is not the author of the translation, he would have rendered his readers (not to mention Césaire) a service by providing a gloss or proposing a more elegant alternative. This minor quibble aside, the translation dimension has been well handled throughout.

Wilder's theoretical approach is eclectic, his references are impressively wide-ranging and his mobilisation of sources keenly and constructively critical. When citing Derrida and Levinas and their 'commitment to hospitality', (14) for example, Wilder does not hesitate to critique the paternalistic cultural assumptions hidden in their supposedly anti-imperialist ethics, arguing that they risk reducing 'the suffering other to a passive object of concern and intervention'. (71) Wilder then demonstrates how Senghor's re-envisioning of the gift as exchange can transform Derridean unconditional ethics into a working politics of reciprocity.

Freedom Time is a welcome rethinking of Césaire and Senghor that goes beyond facile earlier readings of both as complacent servants of French Empire. Wilder deftly addresses the trenchant critiques of negritude and its founders by African anti-colonialist leaders, most notably Fanon. Far from being a neocolonialist project, Senghor's proposed federal reconfiguration of France as an 'equal Union of French Socialist Republics' (145) is demonstrated to be a radical emancipatory vision. While not negating the importance of Fanon and other pro-independence activists, Wilder argues convincingly that the insistence on national independence rendered many unable or unwilling to recognise alternative pathways towards emancipation—including full participation in a multicultural French nation achieved via departmentalisation or federation—as valid forms of decolonisation.

In terms of its structure, the book is made reader-friendly thanks to a useful array of endmatter with extensive notes, a forty-page reference list and detailed index, all of which will be useful to non-Francophile scholars. Wilder also includes a detailed chronology covering more than two centuries of world history apprehended through an expanded French perspective from Toussaint Louverture's role in the 1791 Haitian Revolution through to the commemoration of Césaire in the Panthéon in 2011. The preface both contextualises and personalises Wilder's work, revealing an authorial voice that is at once erudite and playfully engaging. Wilder's voice strengthens as the book unfolds. He writes with clarity and a lyricism which at

times matches that of his poet-subjects. Though his energy and interest in the legacy of French postcolonialism never flags in over 260 pages, one additional question I would have liked answered is that of the specific cultural and ethnic place from which he speaks and a mention of the act of cultural translation that he is necessarily engaged in. Wilder's integrity is not in doubt, but for this Indigenous reader, who writes from what might easily have been yet another French colony in the Pacific, his *mana* (authority) would have been further strengthened had he situated his analysis in this way.

Freedom Time is an impressive, inspiring, necessary work. Its timeliness is indexed to the violent failure of so many democratic experiments in 'liberated' ex-colonies and the growing need for transnational, global solidarity. In this context we can begin to fully appreciate the potentially transformative stance of visionary thinkers like Senghor and Césaire. Wilder's lucid, sensitively textured and impressively well-researched book allows us to rethink the meaning of decolonisation and the conceptual nexus surrounding it. In what for many will be a conceptual about-turn, a much abused term like 'universality' is revealed as not antithetical but central to the emancipation of previously colonised peoples and their colonisers. The idea of emancipation without national sovereignty has far-reaching implications for Francophone and postcolonial studies as well as the burgeoning fields of cosmopolitan and global studies. *Freedom Time* is a 'wild card' in the most dynamic sense of the term. It is a must read for students and researchers in any and all of the above fields.

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