Césaire’s Federalism

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The centenary of Césaire’s birthday, in 2013, has been marked by the publication of an impressive Biobibliography of Aimé Césaire, completed, more recently, by the edition of his Political Writings, still in progress. These two publishing endeavors allow us to evaluate the public carrier of a man who was not only a very famous French poet but also a politician with an exceptional longevity. He was, without interruption, the mayor of Fort-de-France (Martinique) from 1945 to 2001, and French MP from 1945 to 1993. Indisputably a talented politician, but a statesman? A questionable assertion if we look at the present state of his island. Most recently, for instance, Serge Letchimy, the last president of the (French)”region” of Martinique, leader of the Cesairian party, the Progressist Party of Martinique (PPM), spent lavishly. He hired more employees for the region during the period when he had to prepare the merger of the “region” with the “department”, whereas this merger was intended to rationalize, i.e. to cut expenses. He failed to win the presidency of the new “Collectivité territoriale de Martinique” (CTM) thanks to an agreement between Alfred Marie-Jeanne, the head of the “Mouvement Indépendantiste Martiniquais” (MIM) and Yan Monplaisir, the head of the right, which always favors a close relationships with France. This unholy alliance, in spite of its electoral efficiency, doesn’t clarify the political situation in Martinique, even if the people clamoring for independence are in no hurry to get it and even if the right is now ready to accept a degree of political autonomy.

Thus, Césaire’s legacy is not as glorious as one might have believed following the extraordinary emotion shown by the people of Martinique when their old leader died in 2008. Césaire’s prestige may be explained, first of all, by his capacity to understand the wishes of his people. He was the MP who advocated, at the French National Assembly, in favor of the law of March 19th,1946, which transformed the old French colonies of Guadeloupe, Martinique, Guyane and la Réunion in “departments”. Césaire argued that the former colonies “never stop to integrate themselves more and more with the fatherland’s civilization” (EcPol 1, p. 31 & 27). Césaire, at that time, had nothing to say against the “assimilation” of these territories and their inhabitants.

“For those who would worry about the cultural future of the assimilated populations, we could tell them, after all, that what is called assimilation is just another form of mediation in history, and that the Gauls who were allowed to enter the city of Rome by the emperor Caracalla did not perform too badly in matters of civilization” (EcPol 1, p. 30).

In 1946, Césaire became a member of the PCF, the French Communist Party (he will remain in the party until 1956) and commended the assimilation of Martinique by France, an assimilation which, on his own mind, is, to tell the truth, more social than cultural. As a matter of fact, the big deal for which he was held accountable by the people of Martinique was to obtain the same social rights as the French of France (the “Metropolitans”). Speaking from the tribune of the National Assembly, on January 28th,1948, he said: “What matters for us is a “real” assimilation, i.e. identical quality...
of life and spending power” (EcPol 2, p. 145). The following year, in an article of Justice, the communist newspaper of Martinique, he issued this “solemn warning” to the French government: “If we are denied the social benefits [of the French “Metropole”], the people of Martinique will be forced to choose another direction for their aspirations” (p. 198). Reality was different: the progress towards the equality of treatment with the Metropole were real if not very fast. Césaire, however, kept moving away from the assimilation model towards a certain degree of autonomy for Martinique. In 1956, his judgment was unequivocal: “I consider this law [of “departmentalization”] as a circumstantial law, and it does not correspond any longer to the present situation” (p. 414). From this date on, he will not defend a program of independence, as there is “not one person in Martinique who takes it seriously” (April 11th, 1961, EcPol 3, p. 148), but, under various names, a goal of federalism, regionalism, autonomy or self-management.

“The department is not eternal; it is no more than a poor human compromise, perfectly relative and circumstantial, thus always revocable on request, according to the wishes of the commonalities which are concerned” (April 11th, 1961, EcPol 3, p. 148). Thus, it is now the opposite of the assimilationism which is advocated by Césaire. He quotes Benjamin Constant: “The nation itself is nothing if it is severed from the fractions which constitute it. One may not defend the rights of the entire nation without defending the rights of the fractions” (Dec. 15th 1982, EcPol 1, p. 246).

Deferre’s law on decentralization was voted on March 2nd, 1982. It created a new level of local government, the region, which included several departments... except for the overseas departments transformed in “mono-departmental regions”! Césaire fought in vain against the “absurdity” of this institutional entanglement: “You are going to create two assemblies for one territory with almost the same powers, the same competencies. They will exert these competencies in the same field of action” (July 27th, 1981, EcPol 1, p. 234)!

However, Césaire’s protest against French centralization was more ancient, as we did notice, than the creation of the regions, which gave to him at least partial satisfaction. Already in 1958, in his report before the constitutive congress of the PPM (which he had created after he broke with the communists), he relied on Proudhon to explain that “Martinique’s malaise [was] the malaise of a people who feels that he is no longer responsible for his own destiny, and that he is but a stooge of a drama in which he should be the protagonist” (EcPol 3, p. 21), before concluding that “the PPM could ask for the transformation of the overseas departments in federal regions?” (p. 28).

“In centralized governments, the attributes of the supreme power multiply, enlarge themselves and lend immediacy to themselves. They take over the affairs of provinces, municipalities, corporations and private individuals [...] Hence this crushing of every liberty, not only communal and commercial, but even individual and national” (P.-J. Proudhon, The Federalist Principle, 1863).

1958 was the year when general de Gaulle was elected president of France. During the discussions about the new constitution, Césaire spoke in favor of the transformation of the French Union (including the colonies) in a federation: “Who would deny that in our French Union, constantly dealing with the nationalism of reborn people and the local sense of identities, the conditions exist to take a step forward, the only decisive one, i.e. the federative republic?” (EcPol 3, p. 60).

Two years later, Martinique’s leader contemplated the idea of a big region
comprising the French Antilles and French Guyana, associated with France through federal links. By so doing, he intended to counter the objection according to which Martinique alone would be too small to conduct independent politics.

“As far as I am concerned, I do not see why the building of a French-speaking West Indies-Guyanese complex should be against the best interests of France. I see very well, on the contrary, that our problems (industrialization, planning, demography) which cannot be solved at the Martinique level only, would become much more tractable if they were raised at the level of a bigger ensemble, whose existence seems to be in the natural order of things” (EcPol 3, p. 135).

Such a French-speaking federative entity, according to Césaire, should not enter a big Caribbean federation. He feared that it could become a dependency of the United States of America. In 1956, in the preface of Daniel Guérin’s book, Les Antilles décolonisées, he explained that only a “confederation of Caribbean States” was conceivable and this, only in the very long run (EcPol 2, p. 341). He elaborated on this position ten years later: at this time, he favors neither independence for Martinique nor its inclusion in a big Caribbean Federation, “because all these islands are competing and because, being of English or Spanish culture, their traditions are different, whereas the economies of French Guyana and of the French West Indies are complementary” (Biobib, p. 398).

Federalism, regionalism, autonomy, self-government, decentralization: in Césaire’s writings they mean more or less the same thing. The idea is to empower the people of Martinique with the right of decision when they are concerned, as their needs are not similar to the French Metropolitans. This, with a functional link with France, strong enough to ensure the maintenance of national solidarity to the benefit of poorer Martinique. Specificity on one side, solidarity on the other: by invoking autonomy, Césaire’s Martinique asks for the right to dispose freely of the public funds coming from France or Europe. In its most caricatured manifestation, the autonomy wanted by the people of Martinique is nothing else than the principle: “He who decides is not the one who pays”. Of course, reality is more complex: most grants or credits are conditional; the Martinique region has to pay its part of the deal, i.e. to finance on its own resources a more or less important portion of the cost of any project which it intends to realize. The main difficulty concerning Martinique consists in the difference of its standards of living with the Metropole. Existing federations may tolerate a significant heterogeneity between the federated entities, as political autonomy and financial autonomy go normally hand in hand. But a component of a federation cannot, in principle, rely as much on the solidarity of the community as the simple subdivision of a centralized State: automatic stabilizers are less effective. In view of the discrepancy between Martinique and the Metropole, the incoming transfers from Metropole are especially important. And the risk is that they will diminish if Martinique decides to become more emancipated.

The inhabitants of Martinique, like the ones of the other overseas departments, are fully aware of that. That is why they constantly refuse any statutory reform involving a significant autonomy. In 2010, the populations of the overseas departments have been consulted over the possible evolution of the said departments from the regime of Article 73 of the French constitution (on the overseas departments) towards Article 74 (on the other overseas territories): the answer was unanimously no. The fear of the neglect by the Metropole was stronger than the desire
of autonomy. Today, autonomy is more a wish of the French government and of the local political elites than one of the populations themselves. Their opinion is ambivalent: the people want to remain part of a country which they simultaneously resent. Their rancor is nourished by many local politicians who remind them unceasingly of the slavery era. Césaire himself was first to play this tune as it is apparent in many discourses republished in his Political Writings. This is the key of the bargain with the Metropole: social peace against a growing assistance, a bargain which is meant to last. Thus, autonomy may rank first in the political programs of the local parties, but its real importance is secondary. Henceforth, the French government is ready to satisfy a demand for autonomy, and even to preempt it in the hope that overseas territories will become more and more able to solve themselves their problems.

In 2003, a first constitutional revision had diminished the difference between the territories governed under Articles 73 or 74 of the constitution by extending to the overseas departments the benefit of legislative capacity in a certain number of matters. In 2008, a second revision introduced the possibility for the mono-departmental regions to melt two entities in a single “Collectivité unique” with a single assembly. Such was the case for the peoples of Martinique and French Guyana as previously indicated, without enthusiastic assent, in spite of the quasi unanimity of the political staff favoring the change, because the attachment to the departmental system obtained in 1946 is still strong in the population.

When Césaire decided in favor of autonomy, he sincerely believed that it would bring a real progress to his island, according to the principle that there is no better government than self-government. It appears now that his hope was not fulfilled. The local politicians did not push much to enlarge their power of decision in economic matters. In Martinique, as elsewhere in the overseas territories, purchasing power is still dependent on public aid, i.e. the grants from the Metropole which are too many and too complex to be exactly measured. As a matter of fact, the local politicians have now well understood that the difficulties of Martinique are structural (overpopulation, too high level of life and labor cost leading to a society “consuming without producing”, wages assimilable to a new slavery, unemployment). These structural obstacles will not disappear through simple institutional reforms.

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1 We thank Esprit for the permission to reprint this article published on issue No. 424 June 2016.
4 The “department” of the Bouches du-Rhône, for instance, has Marseille as its main city.
5 The inhabitants of Martinique and Guadeloupe have been asked in 2003 if they were in favor of a single authority uniting the competencies of the department and the region plus some other competencies; they rejected the proposal. The inhabitants of Martinique and French Guyana, but not of Guadeloupe, accepted it actually in 2010 (cf. infra).
6 The equality of remuneration between the public servants of local or metropolitan origins working in the West Indies is something different which has also been granted. As a result, all public servants working overseas are now in a better financial condition than their counterparts working in the Metropole.
7 Federated regions, properly speaking.
8 The unemployment insurance for instance. In a centralized state, the more dynamic regions with low unemployment pay more to the insurance system than they receive; the contrary is true for the regions with high unemployment. In a federation of states, if the unemployment insurance is organized at the state level, such redistribution does not exist between the states.
9 The average income of the inhabitant of Martinique is 70% of the average income in the Metropole.
10 Except the Island of La Réunion which did not want to participate to the vote.
11 New-Caledonia has a special regime since the constitutional revision of July 20th 1998.
13 The “yes” won by 68% of the votes but by only 25% of registered voters.
14 The reference here is still the Discours antillais by Édouard Glissant (1979).