

ARTICLE

After the Colonial Past: Ambivalences of Assimilation in French Guiana from 1946 to the mid-1950s

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Focusing on the case of French Guiana from 1946 to the mid-1950s, this article aims to contribute to reflection on the controversial notion of assimilation. The author therefore pays attention to the trajectories of the *préfet*, i.e. from 1947 the highest civil representative of the state and Creole teachers, the latter providing the largest contingent of indigenous colonial officials. The article argues that, while assimilation is often perceived as a policy that aims to impose an order designed for the mainland through a universalist ideal that erases differences, in reality it did not produce uniformity and its ideal could be – and often was – negotiated under the constraints of a post-slavery society in which the elites were indeed Black.

In late August 1947, the Minister of Public Works and Transport Jules Moch paid his first visit to French Guiana, a South American colony that had been in French possession since the seventeenth century. At a time when cracks in the imperial structure were being felt around the globe, this unprecedented official trip sought to oversee the transfer of powers from Governor Jean Peset to *Préfet* Robert Vignon.¹ This was how Minister Moch came to claim in his official speech that, in entering 'the community of the ninety-four French departments', French Guiana was not opting for assimilation: the word, he said, 'dismayed and shocked [him] since assimilation had been a fact here for a long time'.² This concept had been first expressed at the Constituent Assembly by Aimé Césaire, the poet who championed the mid-1930s anti-assimilationist ideal.³ On 12 March 1946, now speaking as a communist MP, he defended the soundness of the law which would transform the four 'old colonies' into French departments. These included the Caribbean possessions of French Guiana, Guadeloupe and Martinique, on the one hand, and Réunion Island in the Indian Ocean on the other. Césaire thus declared that: 'the integration that we call for would not be an improvisation. It would represent the expected outcome of a historical process and the logical conclusion of a doctrine.'⁴

¹ Home Minister Edouard Depreux remained in Paris to vote for the Statute of Algeria. In force from 1947 to 1956, this statute established an Algerian assembly composed of 120 delegates elected equally by two colleges. However, the first college included the minority of French citizens of European descent from the three Algerian departments as well as a few thousand 'French Muslims'. The second college included all 'French Muslim' men who had not renounced their civil status to submit to the rule of the Civil Code.

² 'Discours de M. Jules Moch. Ministre des Travaux Publics et des Transports', *La Semaine en Guyane et dans le monde*, 9 Oct. 1947, Territorial Archives of French Guiana, Cayenne, TAFG, PER 92.

³ Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁴ Debates, National Constituent Assembly, *Journal officiel de la République française (JORF)*, 12 Mar. 1946, 660.

Adopted on 19 March 1946, the so-called departmentalisation law consisted of three brief articles that contrasted the seemingly simple and legitimate formality of ending more than three centuries of colonial rule in the oldest French possessions⁵ with the bloody wars of independence of Indochina, the Asian jewel of the French Empire, or Algeria, where extremely violent wars of decolonisation followed other examples in colonies of settlement.⁶ In the aftermath of the Second World War, along with the federal model, legislative assimilation represented both a possible and credible way of putting an end to the colonial system, and a way of safeguarding the imperial project.⁷ Ten years later, however, in a preface to a book that called for the decolonisation of the French Antilles, now understood as a process of access to independence, Césaire explained his new position as follows: ‘a terrible contradiction was growing within departmentalisation, a contradiction that could only be resolved by the negation of departmentalization.’⁸

This article set out to examine the concrete modalities of the incorporation of overseas departments (DOMs)⁹ into the French nation that led in less than a decade to the rejection of a French decolonisation solution that had been widely approved at its beginning. It outlines how this reversal could be attributed to the different realities of the principle of assimilation. While the old colonies agreed to define it as ‘an instrument of liberation from colonial domination’ in order to obtain equality ‘between the condition of Frenchmen in the colony and that of Frenchmen in [the] mainland’,¹⁰ the influential legal expert Arthur Girault, who trained generations of colonial administrators, indeed recalled that if assimilation can be considered as ‘the true policy of France . . . among its supporters, no two understand it in the same way’.¹¹ How did the legislative assimilation of the DOMs challenge the French republican ideal of universality and force the government to critically re-examine the colonial past? It is this main question that this article intends to answer by focusing on French Guiana.

This South American territory, the only one on the continent to have remained under the direct influence of its former coloniser, is the least known of the DOMs, which have not been the main focus in the renewed examination of the French imperial past.¹² This relative lack of attention might be the result of the territory’s low number of inhabitants that affected perceptions of its significance. With less than 40,000 individuals in 1946, French Guiana had a population almost eight times smaller than Guadeloupe’s, seven times smaller than Martinique’s and six times smaller than La Réunion’s.¹³ Another major peculiarity is that ‘Creoles’, the main socio-cultural group of the

⁵ Law 46–451, *JORF*, 20 Mar. 1946, 2294. For a synthetic approach, see Robert Deville and Nicolas Georges, *Les départements d’outre-mer. L’autre décolonisation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996); for a more recent and multidisciplinary approach, see Justin Daniel and Carine David, eds., *75 ans de départementalisation Outre-mer: bilan et perspectives: De l’uniformité à la différenciation* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2021).

⁶ Michael Collins, ‘Decolonization’, in John M. Mackenzie, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Empire*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 5–7.

⁷ For a revised comprehensive overview, see Robert Aldrich and John Connell, *The Ends of Empire: The Last Colonies Revisited* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); on the French Empire, see Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); Ed Naylor, ed., *France’s Modernising Mission: Citizenship, Welfare and the Ends of Empire* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); on the British Empire, see Sarah Stockwell, *The British End of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁸ Aimé Césaire, ‘Préface’ in Daniel Guérin, *Les Antilles décolonisées* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1956), 12.

⁹ The name given to them by the Fourth Republic’s 27 Oct. 1946 Constitution.

¹⁰ Serge Mam Lam Fouc, *Histoire de l’assimilation: Des vieilles colonies françaises aux départements d’outre-mer: La culture politique de l’assimilation en Guyane et aux Antilles françaises (XIX^e et XX^e siècles)*, (Matoury: Ibis Rouge, 2006), 9–10.

¹¹ Jean Frémigacci, ‘L’Etat colonial français, du discours mythique aux réalités (1880–1940)’, *Matériaux pour l’histoire de notre temps*, 32–3 (1993), 27.

¹² As an eloquent example, the DOMs occupy a negligible place in the publications focused on the notion of ‘colonial society’ which was placed, between 2012 and 2015, at the heart of the contemporary history programme for secondary school teacher recruitment exams. Among an abundant bibliography, see Isabelle Surun, ed., *Les sociétés coloniales à l’âge des Empires 1850–1960* (Paris: Atlande, 2012).

¹³ Supposedly, Guadeloupe had 304,500 inhabitants, Martinique 261,595, La Réunion 245,000 and French Guiana 38,537. ‘Les nouveaux départements français d’outre-mer. La Martinique, la Guadeloupe, la Guyane, la Réunion’, *Notes documentaires et Études, La Documentation française*, 930 (1948), 3.

DOMs, only include the descendants of both enslaved Africans who were emancipated in 1848 or freed earlier and immigrants who joined this initial group.¹⁴ Unlike the French Antilles and La Réunion, French Guiana's economy was no longer dominated by a white 'plantocracy' after the second abolition of slavery. Following the example of New Caledonia in the South Pacific, the presence of white convicts introduces yet a further nuance to the white-Black dichotomy and its effects of domination.¹⁵ In fact, French Guiana has never become the white settlement colony that Paris had dreamt it would be since the Seven Years' War (1756–63). Neither did it become a French 'California' capable of better exploiting the gold deposits discovered in the middle of the nineteenth century, nor a stronghold capable of resisting foreign covetousness, by the United States and Brazil, which was rekindled by the Second World War.¹⁶

Nonetheless, French Guiana shared the ills of other DOMs (structural unemployment, limited economic development, degraded healthcare system, insufficient or dilapidated equipment, etc.), which led a ministerial commission that visited the French Caribbean islands in November 1946 to consider the DOMs as 'proletariat countries'.¹⁷ This indisputable diagnosis strengthened the militant discourse on colonial domination that, from the mid-1950s onwards, applied Marxist theory to the realities of these new departments, while turning a blind eye to the political domination of the Black Creole bourgeoisie. This discourse became increasingly potent, manifesting itself through the idea that departmentalisation had been a false decolonisation, i.e. that legislative assimilation did not thwart European domination. In the wake of the emergence of historical research about the DOMs, as attested by initiatives such as the 1982 creation of the University of the West Indies–French Guiana, the publication of the first doctoral thesis in history that examined the transformation of French Guiana into a department¹⁸ provided scientific support for this vision. Similarly, anglophone literature¹⁹ and postcolonial studies²⁰ refused to acknowledge that the DOMs' status entailed a break from the past. These disciplines carried on considering these territories as postcolonies that remained dependent on the mainland and whose trajectories revealed the tension between two opposite conceptions of the idea of republican equality: 'the first founded on the republican universalism which intrinsically connects cultural and political assimilation (the unicity of the French people, the universality of rights and the indifferentiation of the Law), the second associating political autonomy and the respect of cultural diversity'.²¹

¹⁴ Marie-José Jolivet, *La question créole. Essai de sociologie sur la Guyane française* (Paris: ORSTOM, 1982).

¹⁵ Miranda Frances Spieler, *Empire and Underworld: Captivity in French Guiana* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); for a comparative study, see Isabelle Merle and Marine Coquet, 'The Penal World in the French Empire: A Comparative Study of French Transportation and Its Legacy in Guyana and New Caledonia', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 47, 2 (2019), 247–74.

¹⁶ Humberto García-Muñiz and Rebecca Campo, 'French and American Imperial Accommodation in the Caribbean during World War II: The Experience of Guyane and the Subaltern Roles of Puerto Rico', in Alfred W. McCoy and Francisco A. Scarino, eds., *Colonial Crucible: Empire in the Making of the Modern American State* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 441–51; Edenz Maurice, *Guyane, la promesse républicaine: Faire France outre-mer 1920–1980* (Paris: Les Indes savants, 2022), 146–54.

¹⁷ Sylvain Mary, *Décoloniser les Antilles? Une histoire de l'Etat post-colonial (1946–1982)* (Paris: Sorbonne Université Presses, 2021), 85.

¹⁸ Serge Mam-Lam-Fouck, *Histoire de la Guyane contemporaine 1940–1982. Les mutations économiques, sociales et politiques* (Paris: Éditions Caribéennes, 1992).

¹⁹ Robert Aldrich and John Connell, *France's Overseas Frontier: Départements et territoires d'outre-mer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Gert Oostindie and Inge Klinkers, *Decolonising the Caribbean. Dutch Policies in a Comparative Perspective* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003), 29–41; Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization and the Future of the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Kristen Stromberg Childers, *Seeking Imperialism's Embrace: National Identity, Decolonization, and Assimilation in the French Caribbean* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016).

²⁰ Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel and Françoise Vergès, *La République coloniale. Essai sur une utopie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2003); Françoise Vergès, "'Départements d'outre-mer": de quoi sont-ils le nom?', *Khiasma*, 5 (2014). Available at <http://www.khiasma.net/magazine/lundi-de-phantom-n11-de-pierre-michelon/> (last visited Apr. 2023).

²¹ Stéphanie Guyon, 'Trajectoires post-coloniales de l'assimilation', *Politix*, 116, 4 (2016), 11.

This article departs from this historiographical heritage. It builds upon recent work that formulates a different social and political history of each DOM by paying closer attention to the actors and spatial singularities of the territories under scrutiny.²² In so doing, it invites us to reconsider both the diversity of decolonisation processes throughout the French Empire²³ and the multiple post-colonial trajectories of the Caribbean.²⁴

The article combines an examination of parliamentary sources, administrative reports, local press and personal memoirs. It thus follows the actors, practices, technical arrangements and words that reflected or hindered the transition from colony to department from the March 1946 law to the mid-1950s, which were marked by the emergence of an autonomist Guianese Creole left. Through its focus on the relationship between state and society on the one hand and the permanent accommodations to which the state is forced on the other,²⁵ the article juxtaposes two types of personal trajectories, which are both complementary and competing. On the one hand, the study follows the *préfet*, a senior civil servant with wide-ranging prerogatives responsible since year VIII (1800) for implementing the action of the state in all the territories of the French Republic.²⁶ In the DOMs, the *préfet* thus represents a figure of authority now decried as much as it was celebrated when he was called upon to embody the change in status by replacing the governor.²⁷ On the other hand, the analysis looks at Creole teachers who had become one of the most important categories of civil servants at the end of the colonial regime. Simultaneously, they were regularly pitted against supposed or real European domination, to the point of acting as a kind of professional reserve that produced French Guiana's main political actors since the 1960s.²⁸

The article's first section describes the 1947–8 moment, which led to a concrete rupture with the colonial past. The second section explores the administrative measures and prefectural practices that drove the Guianese Creole teachers to quickly denounce the persistent colonial order. However, as the final section demonstrates, other persistent colonial mechanisms reveal the Guianese Creoles' agency to both thwart the prefects' desires for authoritarian domination and to reshape their own conception of republican integration. The article therefore argues that, while assimilation is often perceived as a policy that aims to impose an order designed for the mainland through a universalist ideal that erases differences, in reality it did not produce uniformity and its ideal could be – and often was – negotiated under the constraints of a post-slavery society in which the elites were indeed Black. The article further aims to contribute fully to integrating the DOMs in European history, both as a sometimes cumbersome heritage of European hegemony and, like many other territories that are now grouped in the European Union under the category of 'outermost regions', as an integral and often unrecognised actor in the process of European construction.

²² For the case of French Guiana, see Sarah Wood, 'Tensions of Development and Negotiations of Identity at the Periphery of France: Guyane Française since 1946', PhD Thesis, University of Manchester, 2015; Maurice, 'Guyane'.

²³ Marie Salaün and Benoît Trépied, 'Introduction. Des territoires oubliés de la décolonisation "à la française"?', *Outre-Mers. Revue d'histoire*, 406–7, 1 (2020), 7–23.

²⁴ Rosemarijn Hoefte, Peter Clegg and Matthew Louis Bishop, eds., *Post-Colonial Trajectories in the Caribbean: The Three Guianas* (London: Routledge, 2017); Sébastien Chauvin, Peter Clegg and Bruno Cousin, eds., *Euro-Caribbean Societies in the 21st Century: Offshore Finance, Local Elites and Contentious Politics* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018).

²⁵ Sarah Gensburger, 'Contributions au renouveau de la sociologie de l'État. Regards croisés franco-américains', *Revue française de sociologie*, 52, 3 (2011), 579–602. Frederick Cooper and Ann-Laura Stoler, 'Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda', in Frederick Cooper and Ann-Laura Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 1–56.

²⁶ For a recent study of the prefectural function in the long term and its equivalent in Europe, see Gildas Tanguy and Jean-Michel Eymeri-Douzans, eds., *Prefects, Governors and Commissioners: Territorial Representatives of the State in Europe* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021). For a transnational perspective focusing on the nineteenth century, see Pierre Karila-Cohen, ed., *Prefects and Governors in Nineteenth Century Europe: Towards a Comparative History of Provincial Senior Officials* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

²⁷ Edenz Maurice, 'Le préfet face aux enseignants autonomistes en Guyane de 1946 au tournant des années 1960: Une inédite rencontre administrative en contexte post-colonial', *Politix*, 116, 4 (2016), 53–79.

²⁸ Edenz Maurice, *Les enseignants et la politisation de la Guyane (1946–1970): L'émergence de la gauche guyanaise* (Matoury: Ibis Rouge éditions, 2014).

Assimilation to Break with the Colonial Past

The transformation of the colony into a department was part of a moment of imperial renewal that sought to expand the rights attached to French citizenship. This can be observed from 1947 onwards in the enthusiasm that accompanied the extension of the prefectural institution and in the implementation of socio-professional measures aiming to abolish inequalities between teachers.

From the Governor to the Préfet

The investiture of *Préfet* Vignon and of his counterparts in Martinique and Guadeloupe – Pierre Trouillé and Gilbert Philipson²⁹ – gave rise to enthusiastic demonstrations.³⁰ On 30 August 1947 at 6 pm, the ministerial delegation was warmly welcomed on the runway of Rochambeau airport. After the *Marseillaise* and a gun salute, an orchestra played popular dances called ‘Biguines’. Despite the falling darkness, *Préfet* Vignon and Minister Moch were escorted by a huge crowd while banners and French flags flew high in the streets of Cayenne.³¹ These should be seen in the context in which the 7 June 1947 decrees that established the prefectural system were in fact the first practical application of the extension of mainland legislation introduced by the 1946 law. Black Creole social and political elites had been waiting for this recognition ever since the late nineteenth century and it signalled the end of the governor’s centuries-old authority.

Thus, Home Minister Edouard Depreux deliberately chose to recruit his new *préfets* from the members of the prefectural body, ‘which included not only the *sous-préfets* but also the advisors working in the prefectures as well as the chiefs of staff.’³² ‘I do not wish people to say that I have dressed a governor up in a *préfet’s* clothes’, he declared to Christian Laigret, acting governor of New Caledonia.³³ Simultaneously, colonial administrators were in fact starting to devise strategies of integration into the prefectural body.³⁴

The new ‘overseas *préfets*’, as P. Trouillé dubbed them when he took stock of their action before the Association of the Prefectural body in 1951, were singularly lacking in experience. With the exception of Paul Demange, an emblematic figure of the ambivalent trajectories of senior officials in the prefectural administration during the Second World War,³⁵ who was assigned to La Réunion, their appointment represented indeed either a first (Philipson and Vignon) or a second posting in their careers, on the path towards a permanent position (Trouillé). Their youth was unusual. On average, the *préfets* of the Fourth Republic (1946–58) were forty-three years old.³⁶ The oldest of the overseas *préfets*, Demange, was appointed at forty-one; the youngest, Vignon, at thirty-seven.³⁷ *Préfet* Vignon did not try to hide this in his inaugural speech: ‘Gentlemen, I stand here before you with the ambitions or illusions my age allows.’³⁸

As the representative of an executive branch attentive to rebuilding the welfare state, Vignon wished to appear as the symbol and guardian of the overseas populations’ keen aspirations for the application of social laws, such as the eight-hour working day and the extension of insurance mechanisms protecting individuals against the risks of life:

²⁹ On sick leave, Jean Pougnet, the *préfet* appointed in Guadeloupe, was represented by his secretary general, Gilbert Philipson. Faced with Pougnet’s prolonged absence, the Home Office finally promoted Philipson to the rank of *Préfet* of Guadeloupe at the end of 1947.

³⁰ Jules Moch, *Une si longue vie* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1976), 255–7.

³¹ Discours de M. Jules Moch.

³² Luc Rouban, ‘Les Préfets de la République’, *Les Cahiers du CEVIPOF*, 26 (2000), 26.

³³ Christian Laigret, *Adieu Foulards!* (Paris: Editions Francex, 1958), 13–14.

³⁴ Véronique Dimier, ‘De la colonisation . . . à la décentralisation: Histoire de préfets “coloniaux”’, *Politix*, 53, 1 (2001), 203–25.

³⁵ Marc Olivier Baruch, ed., *Vichy et les préfets: Le corps préfectoral français pendant la Deuxième Guerre mondiale* (Paris: La Documentation française, 2021).

³⁶ Rouban, *Préfets*, 30–1.

³⁷ René Bargeton, *Dictionnaire biographique des préfets, septembre 1870 – mai 1982* (Paris: Archives nationales, 1994).

³⁸ ‘Allocution de M. Robert Vignon, premier Préfet de la Guyane et de l’Inini’, *La Semaine en Guyane et dans le monde*, 9 Oct. 1947, TAFG, PER 92.

the execution in this territory of mainland legislation will without doubt create new rights for the inhabitants. It will naturally lead to more social justice. It used to be painful for the Guianese worker when, a voter and a taxpayer just like the mainland labourer, he would find himself helpless and unprotected against the vagaries of ill health and old age.³⁹

Another major task was to respond both to growing anti-colonial protests and supposed or real attempts to force France out of the Americas. In April 1948, a motion adopted by the International Conference of American States in Bogota that condemned the ‘occupation of American territories by extra-continental countries’ was a reminder of how the French presence was still perceived as an intolerable external interference.⁴⁰ In this context, as Eric Jennings argues, departmentalisation could be analysed as much as a ‘proof that France keeps its promises of emancipation’, in the words of Martinique’s communist deputy Léopold Bissol,⁴¹ as ‘a measure intended to “cut short all foreign covetousness”’.⁴² *Préfet* Trouillé thus shared this same conviction with his colleagues in 1951: ‘it was therefore necessary to demonstrate, by a gesture expressing opportunity and justice, the absurdity of foreign criticism, and to truly extend the borders of an indivisible France to its extreme limits overseas.’⁴³

The first overseas *préfets* also shared the same desire for immediate changes that were supposed to mark a break with the inertia of the colonial administration. In La Réunion, P. Demange placed at the top of his list of priorities the fight against the island’s poverty, which was accentuated by the devastating cyclone of 26 January 1948 that left 165 people dead and 40,000 in need of help.⁴⁴ During this same month, in Guadeloupe, G. Philipson deemed it necessary to increase the minimum wage of seasonal agricultural workers at the beginning of the ‘sugar campaign’, i.e. the cane harvest.⁴⁵ R. Vignon, for his part, had a more ambitious vision. As early as 1948, he asked his superiors for ‘ten years to make . . . French Guiana one of the richest territories in the French Union’.⁴⁶ As an eloquent example of this unprecedented aspiration for French Guiana, in his memoirs published in 1985, thirty years after leaving office, he emphasised that his goal for the Cayenne high school, which until 1968 offered the highest level of education in French Guiana due to the absence of higher education institutions,⁴⁷ was to forge a reputation throughout South America that would enable it to compete with American universities thanks to an ‘army of elite teachers’.⁴⁸ Strongly perceived as a moment that marked the end of the colonial system, the *préfet*’s arrival in the French departments of the Americas nurtured hopes in a promising future.

Guianese Creole Teachers: Confident in the Promise of Equal Rights

Like most of the population, Guianese Creole teachers, who made up two-thirds of the ninety-nine members of the teaching body before the Second World War, adhered to this conception of departmentalisation.

³⁹ ‘Allocution de M. Robert Vignon’, 9 Oct. 1947, TAFG, PER 92.

⁴⁰ E. Soleillant, ‘L’administration préfectorale dans les départements français d’Amérique. Bilan critique et perspectives’, *La Revue administrative*, 22 (1951), 368.

⁴¹ Debates, National Constituent Assembly, *JORF*, 12 Mar. 1946, 664.

⁴² Éric T. Jennings, ‘La dissidence aux Antilles (1940–1943)’, *Vingtième siècle. Revue d’histoire*, 68, (2000), 71.

⁴³ Pierre Trouillé, ‘31 août 1947. L’“intégration” improprement appelée “assimilation” est-elle un succès?’, *Parallèle* 5, Sept. 1951, TAFG, PER 431.

⁴⁴ André Blanchet, ‘L’île de La Réunion, colonie déshéritée, département abandonné’, *Le Monde*, 24 Jan. 1949. See also Yvan Combeau, *Histoire de La Réunion* (Paris: Que sais-je?, 2022), 83–8.

⁴⁵ Maël Lavenaire, ‘Décolonisation et changement social aux Antilles françaises. De l’assimilation à la “Départementalisation”; socio-histoire d’une construction paradoxale (1946–1961)’, PhD Thesis, University of the West Indies, 2017, 62–70.

⁴⁶ Information mission report by the General Inspection for the administration on *Préfet* Vignon to the Home Minister, 26 Oct. 1954, TAFG, WP 2026.

⁴⁷ Hélène Charton and Marc Michel, eds., ‘Enseignement supérieur et universités dans les espaces coloniaux’, *Outre-Mers. Revue d’histoire*, 1 (2017), 394–5.

⁴⁸ Robert Vignon, *Gran Man Baka* (Sorrel Moussel: Davol, 1985), 282.

This popular adherence can be the result of three factors. First, the 1946 law involved the transfer of educational competencies from the Ministry of the Colonies to the Ministry of Education. It provided a legal framework supposed to ensure the disappearance of one of the most egregious divides of the colonial order opposing *cadres métropolitains* and *cadres locaux*. The former were often European civil servants from the Ministry of Education on secondment to the Ministry of the Colonies who enjoyed a great many professional advantages that included the conditions of postings, stipend and leave. Since they were few in number, these European transplantees mostly taught at the Cayenne high school. In 1945, there were only three of them among the twenty teachers posted at this school. The others, or the *cadres locaux*, were mainly Creoles. Trained in the colony, they fervently defended the republican school and the French ‘civilizing mission’,⁴⁹ so much so that they prided themselves on their perfect cultural assimilation to European customs and were convinced that ‘to speak of “colonization” in relation to French Guiana [was] an insult and foolishness’.⁵⁰ By means of endogamous matrimonial alliances and professional promotions, the oldest Creole teachers had become members of the middle class in the 1930s and acquired enviable positions. Nonetheless, many aspects of the career of all the *cadres locaux* – such as recruitment, promotions, transfers and leave – were contingent on the governor’s discretionary power. On 6 October 1947, a circular signalled that, as of 1 January 1948, the integration of the *cadres locaux* into the *cadres métropolitains* was to become ‘automatic’ for all those who had passed the competitive examination required in European France.⁵¹ This date also symbolised rupture with the colonial past, coinciding as it did with the celebration of the centenary of the second abolition of slavery.

Secondly, the administrative integration of local teachers into the national civil service allowed them to claim the same advantages and job security as their mainland colleagues. For example, they could ask for a transfer to European France or another overseas department without losing their seniority. It quickly became routine for Creole Guyanese teachers to exercise this new right. Ms. Plénet, one of the rare female Creole Guyanese secondary school teachers, successfully applied in 1952 to the girls’ grammar school in Vitry-le-François (Marne). The following year, she obtained a new transfer to the girls’ high school in La Réunion.⁵² Specific financial measures also incited local teachers to visit mainland France to improve their mastery of their subject and its pedagogy, their knowledge of official instructions and, for the many contract teachers, to prepare the competitive examinations necessary to join the ranks of the civil service. Among the first to seize this opportunity were primary school teachers on secondment to secondary school.⁵³ In other words, Creoles’ careers were no longer restricted by the colony’s borders.

Thirdly, the first years of departmentalisation saw local teachers enter politics. Convinced that they were the best suited to the new rules of the political sphere, they applied to the most prominent local and national roles. Women’s access to full voting rights and their mobilisation also favoured this new self-perception and the resulting renewal of political personnel.⁵⁴ In November 1948, the elections sent Jules Patient, one of the most senior primary school teachers of the defunct *cadre local*, to represent French Guiana at the Senate. This was the first time the territory had ever had a senator of its own. The 1953 municipal elections ensured teachers an unprecedented success in Cayenne. Three of them sat in

⁴⁹ Alice Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895–1939* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

⁵⁰ ‘Libérez ces deux hommes’, *La Guyane*, 3 June 1928, Archives of the *Fondation nationale des sciences politiques*, Paris, GM 14. Similarly, before departmentalisation, La Réunion thought of itself ‘as a second metropolis in the Indian Ocean’, a ‘colonising colony’ of Madagascar. Yvan Combeau, ‘La départementalisation. Le cas de l’île de La Réunion’ in Pascal Cauchy, Yvan Combeau and Jean-François Sirinelli, eds., *La Quatrième République et l’Outre-mer français* (Paris: Publications de la Société française d’histoire d’outre-mer, 2009), 41.

⁵¹ *Bulletin officiel de l’Éducation nationale (BOEN)*, 31 (1947), 1081.

⁵² C. Plénet’s career file. National archives, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, F¹⁷ 28555.

⁵³ R. Aubertie’s career file, NA, F17 27058.

⁵⁴ Maurice, *Guyane*, 184–7; Clara Palmiste, ‘Le vote féminin et la transformation des colonies françaises d’Amérique en départements en 1946’, *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos*, 5 June 2014. Available at: <http://journals.openedition.org/nuevo-mundo/66842> (last visited Apr. 2023).

the elected majority, including Justin Catayée, who was to become the first teacher to be elected as an MP five years later.⁵⁵ All of a sudden, with eight elected members, teachers became the most represented socio-professional group on the General Council, the highest local deliberative assembly.⁵⁶

To sum up, the legislative incorporation of an 'old colony' to the national body took place with France and French Guiana's consent. This process was the expected outcome of an age-old occupation and a tradition born of 1789 and 1848, as well as a geopolitical imperative. France then delegated a *préfet*, a government official historically responsible for rallying the population to the regime in place.⁵⁷ The move was considered by the Guianese Creole as an opportunity 'to consecrate once and for all the equality of [all] before the law!',⁵⁸ according to Gaston Monnerville, the most eminent Guianese political figure and one of the major crafters of the 1946 law.⁵⁹

Persistence of Colonial Traits

However, Guianese Creole teachers quickly came to associate the departmentalisation process with fraudulent decolonisation, as some of the administrative measures on the ground embodied the perpetuation of a discredited colonial system. The powers attributed to the *préfet*, as well as his attitudes and practices, reinforced this perception of a misused assimilation.

The Métropolitain, Symbol of the Empty Hopes of Equality

Guianese Creole teachers considered themselves the first to become aware of the empty promises made. In fact, the new decrees that provided the material basis for their integration process into the *cadre métropolitain* crushed their expectations that inequalities that persisted from the structures of colonial domination would truly come to an end. One such example was the December 1947 decree that offered a series of administrative and financial advantages, such as a six-month leave and a distance indemnity which amounted to 40 per cent of their stipend. Yet it only applied to those civil servants who had resided more than 3,000 kilometres away from French Guiana before their appointment in the department.⁶⁰ In March 1948, a new decree allocated a relocation indemnity to these same civil servants.⁶¹ The local teachers were even more upset as their administrative integration into the *cadre métropolitain*, carried out by commissions placed under the authority of the *préfet*, was not as 'automatic' as they had previously assumed. In this vein, they were entitled to neither the same social benefits nor the same family allowances as their mainland colleagues.

Let us take the case of J. Catayée. As soon as he was appointed in September 1949 to a teaching position at the Cayenne high school, he wrote over and over again to the Ministry of Education in order to obtain his integration into the *cadre métropolitain*. In one of his letters, dated May 1951, he went so far as to demand 'special measures' allowing him to be redeployed, following the example, he said, of one of his colleagues who 'met fewer conditions'.⁶² Catayée finally obtained his integration on 1 October 1951. The feeling of injustice that ensued, however, was not limited to the Creole teachers or to French Guiana. In Guadeloupe, local police officers had come to see these redeployment difficulties as evidence of the permissibility of 'racial discrimination'.⁶³

⁵⁵ Maurice, *Les enseignants*, 89–93.

⁵⁶ Rodolphe Alexandre, 'Le Conseil général de la Guyane française (1945–1977)', Master's Thesis, Bordeaux III University, 1977, 109–14.

⁵⁷ Pierre Karila-Cohen, *Monsieur le Préfet: Incarner l'Etat dans la France du XIX^e siècle* (Paris: Champ Vallon, 2021).

⁵⁸ Debates, National Constituent Assembly, *JORF*, 14 Mar. 1946, 754.

⁵⁹ Rodolphe Alexandre, *Gaston Monnerville et la Guyane. 1897–1948* (Petit-Bourg: Ibis Rouge, 1999); Jean-Paul Brunet, *Gaston Monnerville (1897–1991): Un destin d'exception* (Matoury: Ibis Rouge, 2013).

⁶⁰ 47–2412 Decree of 31 Dec. 1947, *JORF*, 1 Jan. 1948, 18.

⁶¹ 48–637 Decree of 31 Mar. 1948, *JORF*, 7 Apr. 1948, 3420.

⁶² Letter by J. Catayée to the Minister of Education, 1 May 1951, J. Catayée career file, NA, F¹⁷ 27939.

⁶³ Mary, *Décoloniser*, 78–9.

Like the United Kingdom, which paid compensations to British officers in order to fill posts in many territories that remained under British control,⁶⁴ the French government's position was that the advantages bestowed on mainland civil servants were aimed at inciting them to ask for their transfer to the DOMs, as tenured staff was scarce. European French civil servants were not attracted to the new department. Those who did come rarely stayed long. In 1955, secondary education was in dire straits in French Guiana, as only two out of twenty-seven tenured posts were filled.⁶⁵ French Guiana's general lack of allure could still be explained by difficult living conditions and isolation. In this context, the term '*métropolitain*' gradually took over from 'European' to refer to whites appointed to French Guiana and considered as civil servants with an enviable social status, inconvenient rivals, or agents of a state that had remained colonial.

The so-called *métropolitains* not only enjoyed socio-professional advantages but also retained control of the school system, at the top of which was the vice-rector. Because of the small size of the school-aged population and thus also the administrative bodies required to keep the school system afloat, the vice-rector was also, until 1970, the headmaster of Cayenne's secondary school. As in the other three DOMs, the *métropolitains* remained at the head of almost all departmental services and thwarted the Black Creoles' hopes for social advancement. 'No head of department is Guianese and if there were, before 1946, civil servants occupying a high rank in the administrative hierarchy, it was in the colonial administration and, preferably, in service outside of French Guiana', acknowledged *Préfet* René Érignac in the early 1960s,⁶⁶ the first in French Guiana with prior experience in this position in the DOMs.⁶⁷

The French authorities did not get the measure of the growing tension between *métropolitains* and Creoles in French Guiana as in the three other DOMs. In particular, the former conflict between *cadres métropolitains* and *cadres locaux* was reappearing ever more acutely under a new guise in the field of education. The demise of the colonial status in March 1946 had fostered heady hopes which swiftly turned to bitter disappointment.

In Practice, a Préfet-Governor

The veiled perpetuation of the colonial order did not, it must be noted, spare the very head of the department. *Préfet* Vignon's methods testify to this.

Inevitable teething problems of an unprecedented process for some, irrefutable proof of resistance for others, the extension of mainland legislation was adjourned several times, until 1 April 1948. The overseas *préfet's* duties 'became, simultaneously and unavoidably, [those] of the Governor', explained Trouillé in 1951.⁶⁸ The 7 June 1947 decree already bestowed on the overseas *préfets* powers that had formerly belonged to the governors of the colonies. Like their predecessors, the *préfets* wielded utter control over civil servants in their departments. Furthermore, they had the powers to temporarily suspend any of them, except judges.

In French Guiana, this troubling juxtaposition of a *préfet's* republican powers and a governor's colonial attributions was particularly conspicuous: Vignon was the only *préfet* to also be, until 1951, a governor – of the Inini territory, a colonial entity that accounted for more than 90 per cent of the total area of French Guiana, which had been created in 1930 in order to manage the huge forested hinterland. The Inini became a major instrument of his power. When *Préfet* Vignon 'needed to spend without any oversight, he could delve into the budget of the Inini', according to Jacques

⁶⁴ Sarah Stockwell, 'Colonial after Empires: Overseas Service and the Administration of Britain's Dependent Territories', paper presented at 'Les préfets en outre-mer depuis 1946', conference held at University of Picardie-Jules Verne, 15 Oct. 2021.

⁶⁵ 'Le problème de l'enseignement et de la rémunération des fonctionnaires en Guyane', *La Voix de la Guyane*, Jan.–Feb. 1955, TAFG, PER 55.

⁶⁶ The *préfet* of French Guiana to the Home Minister, 26 June 1962, NA, 19940180.215.

⁶⁷ Born in 1909, he was appointed in 1947 Chief of Staff to the first *préfet* of Guadeloupe. Two years later, he became Head of the Sub-prefecture of Pointe-à-Pitre and in 1960, *Préfet* of French Guiana. Bargeton, *Dictionnaire*, 224.

⁶⁸ Trouillé, '31 août 1947', Sept. 1951, TAFG, PER 431.

Bardon, Inspector General of the administration (IGAME) on extraordinary mission to the DOMs, when he wrote his report on the work accomplished by Vignon after the latter's eight years in office, the longest any overseas *préfet* ever served. As an example of a looser control of prefectural action in the DOMs, Inspector Bardon added that, if these personal forms of administrative practices 'had taken place in any department of continental France', they would be 'difficult to defend'.⁶⁹

The physical distance from the central corridors of power in Paris had another major consequence. 'A fighter, a tenacious, stubborn overseas *préfet* does what he likes', writes Inspector Bardon:

After several months of all sorts of formalities, Mr. Vignon manages to obtain the credits he was originally denied. His tutelary authorities first refuse, then give in to him generally through sheer weariness, always on the condition – this goes without saying – that it 'will remain absolutely exceptional'.⁷⁰

In his autobiography, Vignon asserted that he often used that ploy: 'on your failing to respond before such and such a date, I will consider that my proposal has your agreement and will henceforth carry it out', his reports invariably concluded.⁷¹ If these idiosyncratic modes of administrative practice 'had cropped up in any department whatsoever in mainland France', they 'would have been reprehensible' and 'difficult to defend', Bardon deems. Vignon's work, he says, was carried out regardless of 'any human or political prudence and hopelessly indifferent to legal procedure or financial considerations'.⁷² According to *Préfet* Trouillé, this remark could apply to all overseas *préfets*: 'since the *préfets* had not obtained the arsenal of legislation they needed to act, they would be empirical and use – always respecting the departmental status – all the texts at their disposal including the gubernatorial decrees, which remained applicable in the absence of new provisions.'⁷³

From the government's point of view, an overseas *préfet* was more than the representative of the state. He was the representative of France. France was perceived and judged in the Caribbean through him.⁷⁴ So, like his counterparts in the Antilles, the *Préfet* of French Guiana lived in the former governor's palace until the late 1960s. His white uniform, a symbol of authority which he donned for all official events, was very similar to that of the governor's. Besides, the Home Office was no longer averse to recruiting its overseas *préfets* from its pool of former colonial administrators. Reflecting the low attractiveness of the DOMs, C. Laigret became *Préfet* of Martinique in 1949, only two years after his first application to an overseas post was rejected. In French Guiana, Pierre Malvy was to succeed Vignon in June 1955. Born in Wahrān (Algeria) in 1909, Malvy had never been a *préfet* before. It was doubtless his long career with the *Préfet* of Algiers – which led him in 1954 to become Chief of Staff for the Home Minister François Mitterrand – that explains one of his first questions on his arrival in Cayenne: 'How come . . . there isn't here, like in Algeria, a European town, and a medina for the natives?' related Vignon.⁷⁵ It should not come as a surprise, therefore, that less than a decade after its enactment, departmentalisation had more and more critics, among whom were the Guianese Creole teachers involved in politics counted as the most vocal.

Colonial Continuities and Departmental Reconfigurations

Nonetheless, the colonial past cannot be reduced to this binary narrative. Under the colonial system, the Guianese Creole elites had ample resources at their disposal to challenge European domination in

⁶⁹ Report, 26 Oct. 1954, TAFG, WP 2026.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Vignon, *Gran Man*, 56.

⁷² Report, 26 Oct. 1954, TAFG, WP 2026.

⁷³ Trouillé, '31 août 1947', Sept. 1951, TAFG, PER 431.

⁷⁴ Jean-Émile Vié, 'Le corps préfectoral dans les départements d'outre-mer de 1947 à 1984', *Administration*, 126 (1984), 103.

⁷⁵ Vignon, *Gran Man*, 302–3.

the fields of politics, administration and education, which they promptly used to assert their own conception of republican integration.

Dealing with the Local Black Elites

In 1961, Vignon left the prefectural administration and chose to embrace a political career in French Guiana. He was first elected as a Gaullist general councillor, a position in which he remained until 1971. He served as senator between 1962 and 1971, and finally mayor between 1969 and 1976. This trajectory thus led him to reflect in his memoirs: 'I should have been a *préfet* when I was a senator, and a senator when I was a *préfet*. Under General de Gaulle (1958–69), a *préfet* would never have been transferred on the whim of an MP. And I had one unredeemable flaw: I was white.'⁷⁶

It is true that *Préfet* Vignon had wielded extensive powers. But he had to acknowledge the place and role of local representatives. As early as 1947, G. Monnerville reminded him of this, informing him that 'he got along very well with Governor Peset' and that 'he was insisting that the latter be appointed a *préfet*'.⁷⁷ His relationship with Edouard Gaumont, the Gaullist and Guianese Creole MP elected in 1951, was not much more congenial. Inspector Bardon's report was the result of an investigation ordered by the Home Minister on none other than Gaumont's request. In 1954, the latter also attempted to obtain the constitution of a parliamentary commission tasked with examining the good order of the prefectural administration of his department. At this stage, Bardon actually advised *Préfet* Vignon to leave Cayenne 'with dignity, not summarily', in other words 'not booted out by [his] own MP'.⁷⁸

Contrary to what Vignon concluded in retrospect, the outcome of this confrontation was in no way special to the workings of the Fourth Republic. Throughout the early twentieth century, the colony's politics were marked by near permanent conflict between the representative of state power and the Guianese Creole luminaries, whose power was derived from local elections. Coming from the colonial civil service, the world of merchants or the circle of liberal professionals, the most influential members of these Guianese notabilities could in fact moderate the action of the more autocratic governors and even obtain their transfer. As a result, no fewer than forty-seven governors succeeded each other in French Guiana between 1893 and 1944: on average, one governor a year: something no public authority, indeed, could ever do without contending with the local powers.⁷⁹

The departmental system changed nothing in this respect. Admittedly, Vignon remained in office for eight years, the longest period of overseas service of any prefect to date. But, in June 1956, only one year after his arrival in Cayenne, Vignon's successor Malvy asked his friend *Préfet* Roger Ricard, then IGAME for the DOMs, to use his influence in order to obtain an Algerian prefecture for him.⁸⁰ Malvy finally left South America the following year . . . to head the Lorraine department of the Meuse. Thereafter, the *préfets* placed at the head of French Guiana only stayed for an average of twenty-eight months.⁸¹

However, this reality was not a simple reproduction of the colonial past. As we have said, departmentalisation accelerated the renewal of Guianese Creole elites by encouraging the entry of teachers into the political arena, where they became major players from the mid-1950s onwards. Prominent among these teachers was J. Catayée, whose political involvement explained his active role in the creation of a Guianese federation of the French Section of the Workers' International (*Section française de l'Internationale ouvrière federation*) in October 1951. Five years later, proclaiming the 'incompatibility

⁷⁶ Ibid., 326.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁷⁸ Report, 26 Oct. 1954, TAFG, WP 2026.

⁷⁹ Maurice, *Guyane*, 45–57. For British Empire, see Roger Louis and Ronald Robinson, 'The Imperialism of Decolonization', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 22, 3 (1994), 462–511.

⁸⁰ IGAME for the DOMs to the *préfet* of French Guiana, 5 June 1956, NA, 19940180.93.

⁸¹ List of French Guiana's *préfets* since 1947, updated on 8 Mar. 2021. Available at: <https://www.guyane.gouv.fr/Services-de-l-Etat/Prefecture-et-Sous-prefecture/Le-Prefet/Liste-des-prefets-de-la-Guyane-depuis-1947> (last visited Apr. 2023).

of defending Guianese interests in a party of French essence',⁸² he founded the Guianese Socialist Party, which soon became the first and 'only truly organised party in Guiana'.⁸³ He contributed to the emergence of a Guianese left whose watchword was the Creole/*Métropolitain* opposition, gradually overlapped by the autonomy/department tension. In the midst of the anti-colonial upheaval, he constantly promoted a 'special status' which called for the establishment of a Guianese region governed by an elected president with increased powers, including that of coinage. His autonomist project also claimed the *guyanisation* of middle managers, or a mechanism to promote the access of Guianese Creoles to administrative responsibility.⁸⁴ On this new political playing field, the *préfet* became autonomist teachers' 'favourite scapegoat', the man suspected of 'the blackest and most devious designs',⁸⁵ such as helping the *métropolitains* to keep control of the department. According to *Préfet Érignac*, these teachers were ultimately 'the most aggressive and dangerous elements' of the political stage.⁸⁶

Creole Teachers Mobilise

Creole teachers had had historical access to various corporative resources. As early as 1925, a Guianese branch of the National Trade Union of Primary School Teachers of France and the Colonies (*Syndicat national des Insituteurs et Institutrices de France et des Colonies*: SNI), the most powerful union for primary school teachers, was set up. A Circle of the Cayenne Middle School Teachers was founded in 1933. Let us note here that teachers were the initiators of the first and only professional trade union in French Guiana in the 1920s.⁸⁷ They also took advantage of the extended freedom of the press, emblematic of the Third Republic (1870–1940), to violently criticise the governor and his head of staff. By any measure, this was an extraordinary occurrence in a colonial context. Nor did they shy away from using their right to legal recourse, including before the Council of State, the highest French administrative jurisdiction, against any decision they considered an abuse of power.⁸⁸

Confronted with the administrative measures that followed departmentalisation, tending to benefit *métropolitain* civil servants, the Guianese Creole teachers fought back with all the weapons in their arsenal in order to obtain equality, concerning both treatment and pay. Most tellingly, on 7 February 1950, for the first time in local history, they organised a strike with the rest of the department's civil servants. Together with their Antillais colleagues, they called for better pay, for suppression of the installation indemnity, for the right to a four-month long administrative leave every three years, the same rates for family allowances and the same social security system as in mainland France. Still in 'solidarity with their Antillais colleagues', they announced in March the beginning of an open-ended strike.⁸⁹

The mobilisation was all the more massive as it was organised by the General Union of the Civil Service Federations (*Union générale des fédérations de fonctionnaires*). Affiliated to the General Confederation of Labour (*Confédération générale des travailleurs*), this union had close ties to the French Communist Party and a new Cartel of Public Services (*Cartel des services publics*), whose secretary-general was a primary school teacher, a member of the SNI. The strike ended a month later, with the 3 April 1950 law. The teachers obtained the suppression of the relocation indemnity, a pay rise of 25 per cent, a residence indemnity to compensate for the high cost of living, and alignment of the social security system and family allowance rates with those on the mainland.⁹⁰

⁸² *Debout Guyane*, 13 Oct. 1962, TAFG, PER 115.

⁸³ *The préfet* of French Guiana to the Home Minister, Aug. 1961, NA, 19940180.215.

⁸⁴ Maurice, *Guyane*, 228–31.

⁸⁵ Jean-Pierre Worms, 'Le préfet et ses notables', *Sociologie du travail*, 8, 3 (1966), 252.

⁸⁶ *The préfet* of French Guiana to the Home Minister, June 1963, NA, 19940180.216.

⁸⁷ Workers' union representation was acquired in 1936 thanks to the extension of social rights implemented by the Popular Front government.

⁸⁸ Maurice, *Guyane*, 78–81.

⁸⁹ 'La grève des fonctionnaires', *Parallèle* 5, 2 Apr. 1950, TAFG, PER 431.

⁹⁰ The 50–407 Law of 3 Apr. 1950, *JORF*, 6 Apr. 1950, 3707.

Even though this was not a complete victory for the Creole teachers, it still demonstrated that their unions were efficient. On the one hand, the mobilisation took place before the 7 July 1950 Dehaene Decision by the Council of State. The latter posited that, in accordance with the right to strike enshrined in the 1946 Constitution and for want of a specific law for civil servants, it was up to department heads to regulate the aforementioned right.⁹¹ On the other hand, the mobilisation borrowed from the workers' movement and from its most classic repertoire. Initially meant to be short, the strike took on a strong symbolic significance as the action, through its unprecedentedness, 'acquired the dimension of an "initiator rupture"' for the local teaching body, the prefectural authorities and public opinion. In one month, this inaugural gesture became a general strike, a 'rare animal in the teaching corporation'.⁹²

That is because, from the start, the movement extended beyond the educational field. Supported by the press and those local representatives who came from the teaching profession, the conflict took on a political and 'overseas' dimension, as the prolonged strike unfolded simultaneously in all the DOMs. In so doing, the teachers' struggle became a fight for the application of their historical conception of the principle of assimilation.⁹³ To quote from the works of William Gamson, the perception of a feeling of injustice drove the Guianese Creole teachers to identify with a Guianese and Creole 'us' in opposition to a *Métropolitain* and white 'them', who were felt to be the only group to have profited from the 1946 statutory change.⁹⁴ Ironically, these Guianese Creole 'us', generated by specific socio-professional claims to reassess the status of Guianese Creole teachers along the same lines as their mainland counterparts, pressured the government to create an 'overseas teaching body' within the civil service that was favoured with a salary supplemented by specific allowances and a special leave system. In other words, in the name of 'equality for the overseas',⁹⁵ these local teachers gained special career treatment inspired by the apparatus of the colonial handling of difference.

After a second mobilisation in the mid-1950s, supported by the Sixteenth Congress of General Council Presidents and the Association of French Mayors, they obtained a 40 per cent pay rise, a six-month administrative leave every five years and a privileged system of family allowances. The protest once again mobilised all the indigenous civil servants behind the teachers and was extended to other DOMs.⁹⁶ Concerning the similar case of teachers from Martinique, the former Vice-Rector of Martinique declared: 'Who could blame them for having defended their cause so well?'⁹⁷ In French Guiana, as in the three other DOMs, the local teachers successfully imposed on the state their own perception of the terms and conditions of their integration within the Republic, founded on the right to enjoy all the material and symbolic advantages of the former *cadres métropolitains*.

This article produces three series of conclusions. First, embodied in the extension of the prefectural institution from the summer of 1947, the transition of one of the oldest French possessions from colony to department was experienced by most of the contemporaneous actors as a process of decolonisation. The legacy of more than three centuries of colonisation, 'the past of a country which has been, if I may say so, moulded, formed in the crucible of French culture', as G. Monnerville said in 1946,⁹⁸ contributed to this path, so radically different to those taken in Algeria and Indochina during the same period. This element should prompt, on the one hand, a re-examination of studies that underestimate

⁹¹ Ruling n°01645 of the Council of State, 7 July 1950.

⁹² André D. Robert and Jeffrey Tyssens, 'Pour une approche sociohistorique de la grève enseignante', *Education et sociétés*, 20, 2 (2007), 12.

⁹³ Mam Lam Fouck, *Assimilation*, 9–10.

⁹⁴ William Gamson, *Talking Politics* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

⁹⁵ Jean-Paul Pastorel, 'Le principe d'égalité en outre-mer', *Les Nouveaux Cahiers du Conseil constitutionnel*, 35, 2 (2012), 73–93.

⁹⁶ Raoul Lucas, 'La Grève générale et illimitée des instituteurs à l'Île de La Réunion en 1953', *Education et sociétés*, 20, 2 (2007), 47–59.

⁹⁷ Alain Plenel, 'Libération nationale et assimilation à la Martinique et à la Guadeloupe', *Les Temps Modernes*, 205, 1 (1963), 2227.

⁹⁸ Debates, National Constituent Assembly, *JORF*, 14 Mar. 1946, 754.

the scope of this original exit from colonial domination which was only taken by France in the aftermath of the Second World War.⁹⁹ On the other hand, it necessitates going beyond a still dominant vision of decolonisation as a period clearly delimited by the creation of a sovereign nation-state.

Secondly, the DOMs provide an example for the creation of an opaque colonial civil service status system conferring on the highest state representatives, such as the *préfet* or the vice-rector, powers vastly superior to those of their mainland counterparts. However, thanks to the agency to challenge colonial bureaucratic domination that the Creoles had long exercised and their ability to produce political and social mobilisations that could reconfigure state intervention, this overseas civil service benefited every agent posted to the new departments. For example, stipends became the same for all civil servants from 1957, as they all earned 40 per cent more than their mainland counterparts. Similarly, civil servants inherited from the colonial period a privileged leave system that remained in force until the late 1970s. It is through observation of individual trajectories and concrete technical arrangements that one may best understand the transition from the colonial past to a departmental present and avoid reducing the post-colonial trajectories of the DOMs to an historical anomaly.

Thirdly, the ideal of assimilation has indeed been a doctrine for these colonies to obtain the application of the same republican law. But it always went hand in hand with a project of integration through differentiation, or a 'differentiated assimilation'.¹⁰⁰ In other words, in a territory such as French Guiana that had experienced all the vicissitudes of national history for more than three centuries, attachment to legislative identity and claims legitimising the exceptional nature of the overseas situation are but two faces of the same coin. Black Creole elites have always expected that reform would satisfy egalitarian and differentiated aspirations, and have never seen these two expectations as contradictory. In educational terms, this has meant improving the access of Guianese Creoles to positions of responsibility. Differentiated assimilation also included promoting the teaching of a Guianese Creole history, geography and language. The example of specific legislation for the departments of Alsace and Moselle recovered after the First World War was often used in the 1920s and 1930s to defend the republican character of this form of integration. In the minds of its promoters, Guiana's particularism was never seen as a challenge to national unity.

The highest representatives of the state have recently come to support this different conception of equality. In 2018, presenting the adaptation of laws as a 'cornerstone of Overseas law', *Préfet* Emmanuel Berthier, Overseas Ministry Director General, explained: 'to adapt laws and regulations is . . . not only a faculty, it also is . . . an imperative as long as the Republic acknowledges, within the French people, the Overseas populations in a common ideal of liberty, equality, and fraternity'.¹⁰¹ It is undeniable that this post-imperial moment contributed to the legal consecration of a greater diversity within the French nation and to securing a space for an overseas component in the national psyche.

Acknowledgements. I am very grateful to Simone Montin for her crucial help in translating this article into English and to Itay Lotem for his insightful comments and suggestions. I also warmly thank Michael Collins and Sarah Stockwell for their valuable advice.

⁹⁹ Robert Aldrich and John Connell, *The Last Colonies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 25.

¹⁰⁰ Maurice, *Guyane*, 98–102.

¹⁰¹ Emmanuel Berthier, 'L'adaptation du droit. La clé de voûte du droit des Outre-mer', *Administration. Revue de l'administration territoriale de l'Etat*, 256 (2018), 61–2.