G. Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Paul-Henri Bischoff
Department of Political and International Studies
Rhodes University
Grahamstown
South Africa

This book offers an analytic commentary on the living contradiction inherent in the notion of colonial humanism developed as a variant of French colonial policy in the inter-war years as well as on one of its intellectual responses, that of Negritude. Both, it is shown, eventually fed on each other and enabling a relationship of a special type – a variant of neo-colonialism – to develop and operate up to the mid-1990s. Its policy resonances however, seen in the current nature of Western development projects in Francophone Africa for instance, continue up to the present.

From a vantage point that is post-Marxian/structuralist/modern, Wilder's analysis is guided by 'the conviction that it is possible to identify structural features of colonial formations and their corresponding socioeconomic, political, and cultural logics while also attending to their contradictory and historically specific features' (p.79). He wants us to believe that contrary to those post-colonial scholars engrossed in post-national geopolitics that look for explanations and categories beyond the nation-state, post-modern explanations can (still) be sought for at the level of discourses found at the level of the state. 'Greater France as a spatially dispersed and multicultural political formation (and) Negritude's multiple commitments to republicanism, panafricanism and cosmopolitanism', to him can be explained at the level of the specific discourses and resultant policies in and around the nation-state. This is in order to explain something that is not altogether new (say, for students of Francophone African foreign policy), that colonial policy and Negritude did produce its own symbiosis (p.204), something that carried over into the Franco-African relations in the first decades after independence.

First and foremost though, the book sets out to challenge conventional interpretations of France's colonial role. Wilder wants to overcome the tension evident in conventional writing between the ideals of French republicanism and the grubby oppressiveness of imperial-colonialist exploitation, a tension most analysts, he finds, are unable to overcome. But he also intends something else. Using Marx as reference, a bottom-up view in explaining French history and sense of self is taken. Explaining the contours of the contradictory and unfinished nature of the French imperial-nation state is best done by starting from the colonies. This, with the intention of exposing the 'doubleness' and ambiguity of the history of French capitalist modernity. The intention is to

expose the crises and transformations, the ebbs and flows of political rationality (p.14) and the disjointed relationships engendered in and around the French imperial venture.

To Wilder the disjointedness and contradictoriness of the modernist project in the French colonies – a project which contains elements of liberalism, neo-liberalism and welfarism – helps us transcend the conventionally talked about 'tension' of a French republicanism, seemingly at odds with French imperialism. Instead, he takes a holistic view, explaining French behaviour in terms of the contradictions within the nation-state itself. The aim is to bring about an integrated treatment of universality and particularity as 'interrelated dimensions of republican, national and colonial policies' that have 'seen universalising practice have particularising effects' (p.15).

As such, the book gives the reader a sense of the intellectual discourse(s) in and around the state which informed colonial policy in the inter-war years. This discourse combined republican images of solidarity with integral nationalist images of organic community intended to build an imperial mentality in the metropole (p.32). All this, however, left the delicate problem of how to justify the exclusion of the colonial subjects and the denial of citizenship (p.33).

This was done by disassociating nationalism from citizenship. It was justified in terms of a patriarchal family model: the solidarity which existed within such a family and notions of 'tender' benevolent paternalism. All this, the author points out, excluded republican notions of fraternity (p.33). The debate was both imaginary and real – heterotopic or effectively enacted – in that it constructed a mental artifice amidst the reality of colonial networks of imperial circulation which bonded the empire that made possible the notion of an African France and raised the possibility of the colony becoming a province of France (p.34). With reference to Marx and Lefebvre and their explanations on the role of ideology that is not meant to unmask ideas or mediate lived reality, the open contradiction lived on: Colonies were included in an expanded national vision of imperial nationalism that included racialised colonial subjects who were also deemed irreconcilably different and excluded from the republican polity (pp.38, 39).

National-imperial tensions were palpably evident in the colonies. Colonial welfarist political rationality begins to be practised against the background of an overarching welfarism which emerged as a series of social and economic projects in a post-liberal age before and after World War One (p.49). With reference to Foucault's treatment of political rationality, the abandonment of liberalism for welfarism and the shift from colonialism as a 'civilising mission concerned with economic exploitation and individual behaviour to a colonial humanism oriented towards economic development, native welfare, and the management of indigenous populations' (p.50), are presented as evidence for 'the contradictory rationality of colonial rule' (p.43). It shows the state had

begun to concede that racial superiority and the idea of a civilising mission were no longer adequate grounds for colonial subjugation (p.51).

In Chapter 3 Wilder talks of the ideological architects of a derivative of colonial welfarism, colonial humanism in both the pre- and post-war periods. He traces the media outlets and institutions such as the Ecole Coloniale and associated institutions that existed to elaborate on the outlines of colonial humanism and which mediated between science and government. As such, the intimate relationship between colonial ethnology, governing strategy and political authority (pp.52-75) is exposed. As a result, the author is able to conclude that 'colonial ethnology was at once an important relay in the circuit of political rationality and one of its most distilled products' that helped create a network of disparate elements including various institutions and a decentralised public to re-conceptualise the imperial order (p.75).

In the fourth chapter, colonial humanism which amounted to more than an ideology and was a strategy and method of rule, an instrument racialising native populations (p. 76, p. 78), is circumscribed. At this point in time the attempt was made to 'understand' custom and codify customary law without, however, creating general or fixed legal codes for natives (pp.105-107). The modernisation strategies and the developmentalism of the inter-war years in French West Africa intended to have an interventionist state fund a coherent economic policy that would rationalise and specialise colonial production. However, these attempts to expand production were bedevilled by conjunctural crises at a time of the Depression. More importantly, structural contradictions intervened. Here there were dual imperatives working against each other. There were those of the social conservation of the traditional collective, support for chiefs and what was anticipated to go with it, political stability versus those to do with promoting social evolution and the promotion of bourgeois family practices, property laws, formal education and individualism. These cross currents at work in colonial administration amounted to a form of government compelled to use both at the same time. As a result, preservation and transformation happened simultaneously and colonial reform was unevenly realised (p.117). All in all, the effect of 'development' was to exacerbate 'native' impoverishment and erode French authority at a time when socio-economic change bred resistance and agitation (pp. 92-5).

The subsequent chapter looks at nationality and citizenship against the background of the contradictoriness of colonial policy to both modernise and primitivise Africans, promote social evolution and prohibit civil society (p.119). Colonial education policy demonstrated the contradictory tendencies from the application of colonial humanism. Where schools on the one hand were to produce 'traditional' Africans, higher education on the other was meant to create "new natives" who were to act as "interpreters with regard to the masses…the educators of backward races"' (p.120-1). In the wake of nationalist opposition from newly educated elites, opposition was initially dismissed

as a manifestation of isolated malcontents or blamed on outside agitators (p.123). But the stereotyping of Africans as big children marked another phase in this process of racialisation, fixing differences by an insistence on customary civil status and allowing for arguments to deny Africans citizenship (p.126-7). At the same time, the periodic expansion and contraction of rights for the 'originaires' of Senegal who enjoyed nominal citizenship rights, indicated that citizenship was not so much shaped by law but by politics (p.129). Colonial citizenship as an issue therefore brings out the imperial nation-state's underlying tensions.

The colonial state's preoccupation with controlling an incipient civil society in order to demonstrate that an inclusive 'political immaturity' was now a permanent condition of African colonial existence (rather than the exclusive 'biological inferiority' as before) meant that two contradictory things were intended – to include Africans in the French nation on the one hand but at the same time to exclude them from the French polity (p.143). Paraded as proto-individuals, semi-nationals and subject citizens, Africans found themselves in an ambiguous and impossible situation of socio-political disorganisation in which they could not retreat into a pre-colonial past of cultural wholeness nor advance to fully fledged citizenship. This created openings for political dissent.

Following on from this, the sixth chapter looks at the possibilities for anti-racism in the metropole during the inter-war years. It pursues the question of how Africans could hope to take recourse in egalitarian republican values or to 'nativism' to overcome their state of limbo when republicanism politically excluded them and indigenous authenticity itself was a product of colonial valorisation (p.150) Here Negritude, as a cultural movement which rejects assimilation and engages with the issues raised by colonial humanism about the relationship between race, culture, nationality and citizenship is looked at. The social and educational backgrounds of some of its progenitors, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Leon-Gontran Damas and Aimé Cesaire and their 'palavers about Negritude' as colonial students at university in France (markedly influenced by Leo Frobenius' *History of African Civilisation*) that produced a self-conscious African community – including members of the African diaspora – is considered. Group discussions in and around citizenship, black patriotism, republicanism and humanism emanate both from the African community's participation in French metropolitan civil society and its marginalisation within it (p.158).

Discovering cultural specificity did, however, not mean precluding black people from participating in modern politics, nor did its formulation lead to a one-sided nativist primordial retreat that rejected the West. The focus on culture was an attempt to promote a new cultural politics (organised around journals and cultural salons involving translations of African-American writing, poetry readings and novel writing) for colonial elites of African

descent intended to create an alternative public sphere that was also to raise the levels of a transnational, pan-African consciousness (p.173-4) in order to transcend racial self-hatred and class divisions and push the project of identity politics within the black community to the point where race becomes a political not an ontological claim (p.187; p.191).

The Negritude movement functioned in two ways, as an alternative public engaged in a discourse on national-imperial politics and as a 'counterpublic that insisted on political equality as culturally distinct Negro-Africans' (p.197). During the inter-war years however, there also emerged a Pan-Africanist and black internationalist movement – centred around the Ligue de Defense de la Negre (LDRN) and later the Union des Travailleurs Negres (UTN) – struggling to organise colonial workers, overturn colonialism and support world communist revolution through entertaining relations with the Comintern and the Parti Communiste Francaise (PCF) (pp.180-1). Members of the Negritude movement and colonial students organisations were, however, unwilling to engage in any political activity with the black militant Left as this might also threaten their government scholarships (p.183).On the other hand, as the PCF put its anti-colonial stamp on anti-colonial black metropolitan politics, it in turn, was unwilling to recognise black nationalism as an autonomous radical movement and to collaborate with black radicals and race conscious black reformers (p.184). The relationship remained a tense one. However, all colonial groups fed into a broad anti-fascist, anti-colonial and Pan African movement which in pragmatic and strategic ways sought to make colonial grievances known to the metropole, and, backed by the Popular Front, advocated a new imperial federalism which linked black cultural nationalism with social democratic humanism (p.194).

With reference to Senghor and Damas's writing, Chapter 7 engages with cultural politics and cultural nationalism in its engagement with colonial humanism. The author finds that Negritude is not to be seen as radical and in some ways complicit with the colonial order it contested (p.202). 'Negritude writers became implicated in the elaboration of colonial humanism even as they formulated an alternative black humanism' (p.203). But he finds, contrary to post-colonial scholars engrossed in post-national geopolitics that look for explanations and categories beyond the nation-state, when looked at on the scale of 'Greater France as a spatially dispersed and multicultural political formation, Negritude's multiple commitments to republicanism, Panafricanism and cosmopolitanism' can be explained at the level of the specifics of the nation-state and can be seen not to have been contradictory (p.204).

Therefore, when it comes to this form of cultural nationalism, Damas's critique of Republican colonialism traces a cultural-political vision that avoids the alternatives of humanist universalism and nativist particularism (p.229). Senghor in turn is shown to imagine an alternative Greater French nation where

Africans, without being culturally assimilated, are politically fully integrated. Senghor wished for a Greater France, an imperial federation, that was to be cognisant of a novel cultural formation that was 'Afro-French' and 'international' and an outcome of colonialism (p.236) but also an example of black culture with its universally important contribution to aesthetics that gives space to a hybrid African humanism. This humanism is one where the person (rather than an individual) is empowered by being in unison with the universe and has his/her roots in a (mythical) black society that is inherently democratic and socialist (p.247).

The last substantive chapter looks at the critical and poetic writings that confront colonial rationality and engages with the rationalist impasse faced by Negritude when confronted by racial logic and unreason. In its writings and poetry, Negritude can be seen to link a liberal discourse with a post-liberal discourse grounded in racial alterity and irrationality positing a site of engagement of the self-critical, real, utopian, romantic, dreaming, rational and irrational African intellectual. As such, examples of Cesaire and Damas' poetry and writings and their imagery and responses to them by commentators such as Sartre are analysed in some detail, since all are an attempt to 'transform the imperial-space time in which they were nevertheless rooted' (p.293).

The author who expresses a number of intentions at the beginning of the text does not fully pursue these to the end of the book. His most constant theme, that of exposing the living contradiction that is French colonial rationality, its mythology as opposed to French colonial practice and control, however, remains the most constant, developed and useful. The book exposes much of the official and unofficial socio-political-literary discourses within and next to the French colonial-imperial state, unravelling much in the sociology of the imperial project that was France before and after the formative inter-war years. As such, sociologists, social theorists and historians of colonialism interested in the political-philosophical underpinnings of its French variant in Africa, as well as students of International Studies interested in explaining the mental, mutual and often complementary nature of the special relationship between France and Francophone Africa up to the mid-1990s (after which it begins to rupture) or those interested in explaining the discourse in and around citizenship and identity, will all find their pickings in this publication. At the present time, when the world finds itself in a post-Westphalian phase and grapples with the need for a dialogue between Western universalising precepts and the South's (or Africa's) need for recognition of its social values and voice, the book provides a illuminating insight into the earlier complex (rather than the later) writings of Negritude engaged in a cultural/political project in another time and place of expanding the boundaries of the French imperial state. However, the exercise of 'linking republicanism and Pan Africanism, humanism and culturalism, cosmopolitanism and nativism, vanguardism and populism, political engagement and cultural production' (p.253), its expansive

creativity and utopianism also provides a starting point for looking at the notion of a inter-civilisational dialogue on how African culture can inform an alternative universalism, an emergent world polity or world citizenship.