Jean-Claude William, Fred Reno & Fabienne Alvarez (eds.)

*Mobilisations sociales aux Antilles: Les événements de 2009 dans tous leurs sens.*

*Mobilisations sociales aux Antilles* represents an important contribution to the literature on the social protest movements that shook the French Antilles in 2009. As the editors note in their introduction, analyses of the protests written during or just after the events tended to stress the revolutionary nature of the movement. Three years later, however, the initial enthusiasm has subsided on the islands and scholars are better able to gauge what was accomplished.

This book brings together the insights of scholars of Guadeloupe, Martinique, and the French Pacific. The contributors take a variety of approaches, ranging from historical (Jacques Dumont) to anthropological (Yarimar Bonilla) to linguistic (Bernard Phipps), but focusing on perspectives from political science (Éric Nabajoth, Julien Mérion, Fred Reno, Boris Samuel, Jean-Claude William, Paméla Obertan, Nathalie Mrgudovic). The book’s goal, as stated in the introduction, is to understand the meanings that the events had for the people involved. Chapters cover the events in both Martinique and Guadeloupe, with only brief mention of the parallel protests in French Guiana at the same time. The result is arguably the most in-depth and wide-ranging analysis of these events to date.

While each chapter has its own focus, several themes appear across the volume. One is that the movements emerged in response to processes associated with neoliberal global capitalism (e.g., the chapters by Obertan and Alvarez). Several chapters also bring out the differences between the movements in Martinique and Guadeloupe. Edmond Mondésir and Danielle Laport highlight that in Martinique a collaboration of labor unions had been preparing the movement since 2007, but coming together in 2009 as the February 5 Collective (K5F), they focused on issues of the moment. More chapters deal with Guadeloupe, where a collective including labor unions and cultural and environmental associations organized a movement to fight against exploitation and the local effects of neoliberal globalization, with a wide-ranging set of demands that envisioned revolutionizing Guadeloupean society over time. In Guadeloupe, unlike in Martinique, a charismatic leader, Élie Domota, emerged as the spokesman for the collective, the LKP (*Lyannaj Kont Pwofitasyon*, “alliance against profiteering”).

Several chapters address the role of different types of media in the movements themselves. Dumont suggests that one reason the events of 2009 stand out from other movements on the two islands is that they were presented on location and often live via the media. Olivier Pulvar discusses the Martinican
Télé Otonom Mawon (Autonomous Maroon Television) that reported from the streets of Fort-de-France on a local television station and on the Internet. Phipps studies the language used in the 2009 mobilization in Guadeloupe, noting how individuals such as Domotadeftly played on the symbolism of using French vs. Creole in televised speeches and negotiations that took place.

Another dominant theme running through the chapters is the relationship to the state, at both the national and local levels. In their introduction, Reno, William, and Alvarez argue that one of the unintended consequences of the mobilizations was a reinforcement of the role of the state in local affairs (p. 7). Mérion and Reno discuss how the movements failed to translate into political change. Mérion stresses that social protest in Guadeloupe since Abolition has focused on a demand for equality, with a call for the recognition of a distinctive identity emerging more recently. Nabajoroth contends that the movement of 2009 may be viewed as the end of the independence movement in Guadeloupe, since it called for recognition of Guadeloupean identity without demanding independence. As Reno and Mérion observe, the results of local elections in Guadeloupe in 2010 contradicted the opinions expressed during the mobilization of 2009, as a primary target of criticism of the LKP, Victorin Lurel, obtained a resounding victory as president of the Regional Council in the first round of voting.

The connection between the events of 2009 and Antillean history is also a recurring theme. Dumont links the events of 2009 to earlier struggles on the islands and examines how local historians and cultural militants have mobilized Guadeloupean history. Bonilla explores how the UGTF labor union, which played a central role in the LKP, draws on the image of the maroon in understanding the meaning of their actions. Several contributors (William, Mondésir, Alvarez, Reno) discuss how the two movements foregrounded the fact that the descendants of the planter class today hold the economic reigns on both islands, which means that criticism of the status quo was often interpreted as racism (see also the chapter by Mrugudovic). The movements also made reference to the islands’ colonial past, problematizing their current relationship with France (see the essays by Phipps and Alvarez).

This volume’s strengths lie in the diversity of perspectives presented and in the level of detail included. Scholars in political science, history, anthropology and Caribbean Studies more generally who are interested in the specific details of the 2009 movements and in statistics about French West Indian politics, economics, and society would do well to refer to Mobilisations sociales aux Antilles. Nabajoroth’s chapter stands out for its history of the Guadeloupean nationalist movement. The main weakness of the book is that, with a few notable exceptions, it fails to make clear why these movements would be
relevant to scholars of other societies. Obertan, however, does situate them with respect to social movements like the anti-globalization movement. Given the role of the 2009 movements in the ongoing debate about the administrative status of the overseas departments, this volume should prove invaluable to scholars for years to come.

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