

French Caribbean migrations: from transatlantic space to transnational space.

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As citizens of the French republic, Martinicains and Guadeloupeans who move to mainland France are considered internal migrants. It is principally for this reason that academic research on immigration to France has rarely included Caribbean migration. At the same time, studies on internal migration have focussed solely on movements within metropolitan France. Yet, as specific studies have shown, the dynamics of emigration from the French Caribbean display similarities with both internal movements and post-colonial labour immigration (Domenach and Picouet, 1992). Furthermore, several authors have stressed the relevance of this migration within the history of post-1945 labour migration to France (Anselin, 1979; Constant, 1987; Condon and Ogden, 1991). The national context within which the movements have taken place – and continue today – explains some of the differences in relation to Caribbean migration to Britain or the Netherlands (Brock; 1987; Cross and Entzinger, 1988; Byron and Condon, 1996, 2008), although numerous similarities result from the broader socio-cultural and economic contexts of emigration from this region.

The migration cycle – emigration and return – has been shown to be increasingly inappropriate for understanding much of Caribbean migration as movements between the Europe and the Caribbean are frequent and of a varied nature (Thomas-Hope, 1986; Nicolas, 2001; Marie and Rallu, 2004). Indeed, the social and economic context of migration and the return decision in the late 1990s and early 2000s is radically different from that prevailing in the 1950s and 1960s. Mass unemployment in the French Caribbean is still seemingly impossible to diminish, but unemployment also is high in certain sectors and for certain age groups in metropolitan France. Meanwhile, transport and telephone costs are constantly decreasing and internet communication plays an increasing role in forging and maintaining links between mainland France and the French Caribbean. Migration decisions thus are taken in a rapidly changing technological context in which social fields can be consolidated via new forms of communication. Retirement migration strategies are undertaken with more knowledge about opportunities and drawbacks. Many skilled young people try out both metropolitan and island labour markets before settling for a longer period. Even when they are unemployed, other life events – or the decisions of offspring or other close relatives - may lead some people to choose one place over the other. Migrants at all stages of the life course evaluate the usefulness of their individual skills or of their network relations before moving from one place to the other in the hope of improving their living standards and quality of life.

The first aim of this paper is to discuss the extent to which thousands of people born in the islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique and having migrated to France live out their lives in a transatlantic space (Condon, 1996). The relationship to the Caribbean is also explored for their metropolitan descendants. Their multiple attachments, involving the circulation of individuals and goods, bear similarities to the dynamics of the much discussed Caribbean transnational experience (Basch et al., 1994; Goulbourne and Chamberlain, 2001; Grasmuck and Pessar, 1991; Olwig, 2003; Sutton, 1987). Given the absence of national boundaries, one could hypothesise a greater intensity and fluidity of mobility, return and circulation, as well as of information flows. Nonetheless, various brakes on movement do exist and a host of factors

related to gender, socio-economic position, family attachments and obligations, health and personal biographies come into play.

Up until recently, this absence of national boundary meant that the term 'transnationality' was inappropriate. A second aim of the paper is to examine new trends which bring French Caribbeans into the context of transnational migration and circulation. For most of the period from 1920s to 1980s, migration from Guadeloupe and Martinique was directed to the French metropole. This was the result of a combination of the French state's policies of assimilation and emigration and of language barriers. Now increasing numbers of French Caribbeans, either born in the Caribbean or metropolitan-born descendants of migrants, move to work in London or elsewhere in Europe.

This paper highlights the importance of systematising a gender perspective in the study of Caribbean migration, as well as migration generally. In the French case, the state used representations of gender roles to recruit women and men and direct them initially to particular sections of the labour market. Such processes have a bearing on labour market positions of the descendants of these migrants and on the options they see available to them. Transnational migration experience is related to these. Another aspect of gender relations is revealed in the variety of transnational experiences of women and men migrants, as shown by the different forms of attachment to the Caribbean and factors working towards or against the desire to return permanently.

A major challenge for such work is the scarcity of data. For no 'ethnic' identification of individuals in census or other survey data is available. Whereas migrants from Guadeloupe and Martinique (the islands constituting two French *départements* or sub-regions) can be identified using region of birth, their metropolitan descendants become lost within a mass of other French nationals. Several research strategies are used in order to gain as much knowledge of these populations as possible (for example, analysis of Caribbean migrants by age group enables us to examine the characteristics of people having migrated with their parents during childhood). Research results used in this paper thus are based on a variety of sources including census data, written archives and qualitative interviews.

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