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*Le Serein*

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*di volta in volta*

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## Notes for a Veranda

### A Colonial Postcard

In an article published by the online media outlet Arrêt sur Image, journalist Pauline Bock analyzes France 2's coverage of the protests against the high cost of living in Martinique<sup>1</sup>. She highlights how the television channel quickly sidelined the demonstrators' demands in favor of focusing on "urban violence" through the lens of law enforcement, while minimizing the economic, political, and social context against the "fairy-tale" backdrop of the island's scenery.

The article cites a comment from a Guadeloupean reader appalled by this "postcard reminiscent of the worst colonial era." It also mentions a report by Envoyé Spécial that is seemingly more factual, addressing the 40% disparity in food prices between mainland France and Martinique through the perspectives of consumers and demonstrators<sup>2</sup>. The report even raises questions about the control exerted by major Béké families over the distribution system. However, it does not delve into France's colonial history in Martinique as deeply as the article suggests, lamenting its absence in France 2's newscasts.

The report merely conveys the statement of a protester denouncing this control as a continuation of the colonial order, briefly noting that the Béké families are descendants of settlers. It lists the main groups controlling the distribution system but fails to mention, for instance, that the Bernard Hayot Group—the largest among them—was founded in 1960 by descendants of settlers who arrived on the island in 1680, made their fortune exploiting sugar through slavery, and received state compensation in 1849 following abolition<sup>3</sup>.

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1 Bock, Pauline, *Mobilisations en Martinique, pluie de clichés aux JT de France 2*, Arrêt sur images, published on 01/11/2024, [online], <https://www.arretsurimages.net/articles/mobilisations-en-martinique-pluie-de-cliches-aux-jt-de-france-2>; France 2 is a French public national television channel.

2 Orosemane, Laura, Desbois, Laurent, Horocks, Harold, *Vie chère : colère sous les tropiques*, Envoyé Spécial, France TV, published on 26/09/2024, [online], <https://www.france.tv/france-2/envoye-special/6548531-vie-chere-colere-sous-les-tropiques.html#section-about>

3 Domiclo, Camille, « *Vie chère* » en Martinique : derrière la misère coloniale, les profits du groupe Bernard Hayot, Révolution Permanente, published on 10/09/24, [online], <https://www.revolutionpermanente.fr/Vie-chere-en-Martinique-derriere-la-misere-coloniale-les-profits-du-groupe-Bernard-Hayot>

If France 2 were to address this connection more explicitly, would it prompt a reflection on its own media treatment in relation to colonial history? According to Samora, a streamer and podcaster from the show *Le Mwakast*, who appeared on the program *Paroles d'Honneurs* in an episode dedicated to the political, economic, and social context of the mobilizations in Martinique<sup>4</sup>, the clichés dominating depictions of "urban violence" and "postcards" themselves stem from this history. The protesters' demands, both past and present, are not taken seriously by mainstream media because Antilleans are perceived as "not full citizens but fully apart," echoing Aimé Césaire's famous words.

The analysis of France 2's media coverage of the high cost of living protests in Martinique thus reveals the colonial blind spots of the public broadcaster. The state's repression of the movement, including the violent arrests of RPPRAC<sup>5</sup> activists, the sentencing of its spokesperson Rodrigue Petitot ("R") to ten months in prison, the deployment of a special CRS unit to the island for the first time since the bloody riots of 1959 (the same unit dispatched to Mayotte during the "Wambushu" operations in 2023 and 2024, and more recently in Kanaky), and the imposition of a curfew, all point to a broader strategy to suppress dissent. Can this media coverage be read as part of this counterinsurgency strategy?

## A Model of Counterinsurgency

To consider this hypothesis, we must examine the theory of counterinsurgency itself. According to historians Jérémy Rubenstein and Patrick Weil in a recent article for the think tank Groupe d'études Géopolitiques<sup>6</sup>, the purpose of counterinsurgency strategy is to "mobilize and transform society so that subversive and revolutionary elements cannot develop and are isolated." Counterinsurgency employs methods of "extensive and often brutal social engineering," with the distinctive characteristic of "viewing the population both as the objective of the war and its primary weapon."

Unlike conventional warfare, which "opposes armed forces and aims at territorial conquest," counterinsurgency responds to the type of war waged by insurgents, particularly by seeking the support of the population.

From infiltrating activist groups and forming "loyalist" organizations to developing economic, social, and educational programs, population displacement, and more violent measures, counterinsurgency techniques are highly varied and rely heavily on psychological warfare, especially propaganda and manipulation. The colonies of Western empires (France, England) were prime testing grounds for these methods, which proliferated globally after the Algerian War to combat communism.

One of the main theorists of this unconventional warfare was French military officer David Galula (1919–1967). He developed his theories during the 1950s in the context of the Algerian War, later refining them as a researcher at Harvard in the United States, where they were adopted during the Iraq War in the 2000s under General David Petraeus, then the commander of U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan and later CIA director.

According to Galula's theory<sup>7</sup>, the population is divided into three groups: a passive majority, a hostile minority, and a supportive minority. Counterinsurgency operations aim to distinguish among these groups or

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4 *LA PERM : GUERRE AU LIBAN + Gouvernement + LUTTE EN MARTINIQUE + Ni Chaîne Ni Maître*, Paroles d'Honneur, streamed on 23/09/2024, [online], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?>

5 The *Rassemblement pour la Protection des Peuples et des Ressources Afro Caribéennes* (RPPRAC) is a citizen collective leading the protests against the high cost of living in Martinique since September 2024.

6 Rubenstein, Jérémy, Weil, Patrick, *The Missing Link: Galula's Geopolitics of the Cold War*, Groupe d'études géopolitiques, published on 18/10/2024, [online], <https://geopolitique.eu/en/2024/10/18/the-missing-link-galulas-geopolitics-for-the-cold-war/>

7 Galula, David, *Contre-insurrection, Théorie et pratique*, Economica, 2008; The main aspects of this theory were presented and discussed during a talk by artist Fabian Ginsberg, a member of the collective Strategien der Aufstandsbekämpfung (SDA), as part of Program 23 hosted by *di volta in volta* on May 30, 2024. See <https://divoltainvolta.com/program-23-sda-strategien-der-aufstandsbekampfung-counterinsurgency-strategies/>

tactically align them—for example, influencing the passive majority against the hostile minority through communication and propaganda. This secures the support of the favorable minority while leveraging its influence within the passive majority to isolate and delegitimize the hostile minority.

Returning to France 2's newscasts, one could map these categories onto the perspectives discussed in Pauline Bock's article in *Arrêt sur Image*: vacationers disrupted by canceled or rerouted flights (passive majority), business owners whose shops were looted or destroyed (favorable minority), and violent protesters and rioters (hostile minority).

Using this analytical framework, France 2's media coverage of the high cost of living protests in Martinique aligns closely with a counterinsurgency strategy. The goal is to sway the majority of the population against the movement, isolating its key advocates and containing the spread of their demands, both on the island and in mainland France, using mass media during prime time.

In this light, the state's negotiations with major distributors could be seen as an additional containment tool, while the RPPRAC's rejection of the agreement to lower prices and its call to continue mobilizations could be interpreted as an effort to resist imposed division. Similarly, the announcement by Fort-de-France dockworkers' inter-unions on December 5 to suspend port activities in support of Rodrigue Petitot could signal a failure of this counterinsurgency strategy<sup>8</sup>.

Jean Bourgois

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8 Tresident-Ranguin, Inès, *Les dockers du port de Fort-de-France suspendent "toute réception et livraison de conteneurs ce jeudi" en guise de soutien à Rodrigue Petitot*, France Infos, Martinique, published on 04/12/2024, [online], <https://la1ere.francetvinfo.fr/martinique/les-dockers-du-port-de-fort-de-france-suspendent-toute-reception-et-livraison-de-conteneurs-ce-jeudi-en-guise-de-soutien-a-rodrigue-petitot-1542574.html>