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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### STATISTICS AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE

#### *Reflections on the Social Conflict in 2009 in Guadeloupe*

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**ABSTRACT:** In early 2009, Guadeloupe experienced a 44-day strike against the high cost of living and against the illegitimate profits some actors realise in the Island's economy. Some of these dominant actors being heirs of settlers families, high prices are the starting point for a radical political critique. This article analyses the links between violence and the use of numbers in the course of the conflict. The mobilisation was a time of violence, clashes, and intimidation; but the denunciation of abuse also ascribes a central role to quantification, in order to estimate profit. This article shows how the figures comprise an instrument of mediation being used as a substitute for, or in combination with, multifaceted violent actions. It also shows that the figures may be themselves coercive techniques, playing a part in violent relationships. Quantification can therefore be combined, in a plurality of ways, with the transition to violence, not only by avoiding or replacing it, but sometimes overlapping with it or being its instrument.

**KEYWORDS:**

Violence, high prices, sociology of quantification, political economy, social movements, Caribbean

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## 1. Introduction

The historic mobilization experienced by Guadeloupe in early 2009 resulted in a 44-day strike from 20 January to 4 March. The strike was led by the group called Lyannaj Kont' Pwofitasyon ('alliance against *pwofitasyon*' or LKP), and its watchword was the struggle against the high cost of living. The concept of *pwofitasyon* rests on one main idea: actors occupying dominant positions in markets or economic activities are making huge profits at the expense of Caribbean consumers. In addition, since some of these actors are the heirs of settler families who have shifted into the large-scale retail and import/export field, *pwofitasyon* is seen as the sign of a continuation of domination after the colonial period, a domination built on inequality in status and race. High prices are thus the starting point for a radical political critique. In this analysis, I am interested in the role played by calculation in the 2009 mobilization and more specifically the links between violence and the use of numbers.

The conflict of 2009 was a time of violence and clashes, in which methods of intimidation and coercion were deployed by the various parties. During the general strike, the island was completely paralysed by roadblocks manned by LKP activists, bringing economic activities to a standstill, particularly by cutting supply circuits. Moreover, the movement was accompanied by clashes with the police. The peak of the conflict was marked by the shooting to death of a union member at one roadblock, which happened as looting was spreading and firearms were being used increasingly in clashes. The violence of the 2009 conflict was also symbolic. Memories of violence from the colonial past lay at the heart of the *imaginaires* of struggle and the LKP regularly indulged in a war of words by drawing a direct comparison between the present political order and the colonial period with its slavery.<sup>1</sup>

Besides, the denunciation of *pwofitasyon* ascribes a central role to quantified assessment, in which estimates of profit and margins are a prerequisite for identifying and reporting abuse. The LKP put forward a precise reading of the economy. The collective brings together in a quite novel way trade union actors from different sectors of the economy, government officials, business leaders, policy makers, academics, consumer association representatives (Bonniol 2011, 92; Larcher 2009; Chivallon 2009). This allows it to be very trenchant in negotiations. Elie Domota, head of the LKP, secretary general of the main autonomist trade union in Guadeloupe – the Union générale des travailleurs guadeloupéens (UGTG)<sup>2</sup> – is deputy director of the National Employment Agency in Guadeloupe. Alain Plaisir, the collective's economist, is a customs officer with an extremely thorough knowledge of economic policies, especially the tax aspects. So the sparring to which the movement gives rise takes place mainly in the language of experts. The

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<sup>1</sup> The leader of the LKP, Elie Domota for example made a deep impression on the *département* in a notorious tirade on Télé-Guadeloupe in which, commenting the negotiations, he said: 'We will not let a bunch of *békés* restore slavery' and continued, 'either they apply the agreement, or they leave Guadeloupe' (Durand-Parenti 2009). A *béké* is a descendant of European settlers in the West Indies.

<sup>2</sup> The leading trade union in Guadeloupe, that emerged from the independence movements.

LKP collective uses calculation and statistics as a weapon to analyse, to negotiate, and to limit the dominant players.

Numbers and economic arguments thus constantly mingle in the space of violent struggle. In the following, I propose to analyse the different combinations between violence and statistical figures that emerge in the course of social conflict in 2009. Are competence and expertise mixed up with violence? Do they replace physical violence in the mediation of social conflict? In a first part, I will focus on how the figures comprise an instrument of mediation in what can be violent relationships, sometimes being used as a substitute for, or in combination with, violent actions. In a second part, I will then show that the figures may be themselves coercive techniques, playing a part in violent relationships.

This argument will also shed a light on another question: what is the role of numbers in the deployment of varied forms of intimidation, coercion, and violence? In the history of Guadeloupe the use of expert techniques and numbers was enmeshed with a multifaceted violence. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and until the beginning of the 1980s, the differential status of citizens and the slow equalisation of rights were managed and negotiated by the use of numbers<sup>3</sup>. Economic calculation and figures thus contributed to shape economic and social relations in the context of discriminatory and violent policies. They also triggered revolts, riots and strikes (Dumont 2010; Blerald 1986; Jalabert 2007; Mam Lam Fouck 2006). Since the 1950s, the workers strikes aiming to obtain social rights were very violent (Braflan Trobo 2007; Dumont 2010), sometimes leading to dramatic repression.<sup>4</sup> In such situations, technocracy and economic reasoning could be used as instruments to maintain public order or as mediation tool (Jalabert 2007; Blerald 1986). In the 1970's trade unions have also started to use know-how as a tool for struggle, making it possible for them to be inflexible in the negotiations and challenge relations of domination (Ruffin 2009; Verdol 2010). With such a historical background, one question is therefore which combinations between expertise and violence can be observed in the course of the 2009 conflict.

## 2. The denunciation of injustice: the logic of evidence, and intimidation

The social mobilization of 2009 arose from numerical analyses and expert studies. Investigative work on fuel prices conducted in 2008 revealed positions of rent and *pwofitasyon* that provoked a challenge.

<sup>3</sup> The abolition of slavery itself could only be obtained after a long debate around the compensations that would be given to the slave owners (Pétre-Grenouilleau, 2008)

<sup>4</sup> Like the 1967 strike for higher salaries that turned into a bloodbath, leaving more than 80 people dead (Gama and Sainton 1985).

*The fuel standard: price auditing as the root of mobilization against pwofitasyon*

The protest movement of 2009 was triggered by an unexplained rise in fuel prices. The increase came at a time when the opacity of this sector had been severely criticized for several years. In the overseas *départements*, unlike the rest of France, fuel prices were under government control. The oil refining company Société Anonyme de Raffinerie des Antilles (SARA), of which the oil company Total was the majority shareholder, held a de facto monopoly, ensuring supply and on-site refining. But in 2005 an association of fishermen investigated the situation and, focussing on the 'formula' used by the administration to determine prices, denounced the opacity of the sector and the prices (France Antilles Guadeloupe 2006; Gircour and Rey 2010, 86). The strike they launched did not undermine the management methods of the sector, but a debate was started on the methods of calculating prices used by the local Directorate for competition policy, consumer affairs and fraud control (DDCCRF)<sup>5</sup>. In 2007, the case was taken up by one of the leading wholesale importers on the island<sup>6</sup>, a member of the local branch of the Movement of the Enterprises of France (MEDEF)<sup>7</sup> and member of the Regional Economic and Social Council, Didier Payen. He produced a study worthy of an audit firm, which showed that the calculation of the price at the pump did indeed present a sum of irregularities, sometimes gross.<sup>8</sup> Adopting the appearance of a diatribe against procurement policy, his figures showed that the monopoly of the SARA resulted in an additional cost of about a quarter of the price for Guadeloupean consumers.<sup>9</sup>

The social movement of 2009 emerged from this context. In the first half of 2008, international oil prices rose sky high, and of course so did prices at the pump. But while prices declined on international markets after July, the prices paid by consumers in Guadeloupe continued to rise for more than three months, until October.<sup>10</sup> This seemed to confirm the suspicion of abuse on the part of SARA, and provoked protests. It was a collective of entrepreneurs – the 'socio-professionals' – which resorted to protest first, calling for a strike as early as November. They were followed by the trade unions. The move immediately put great pressure on the administrative authorities, and the first roadblocks crippled the island at the beginning of December. Very quickly, the State decided to temporize by adopting transitional measures: on 11 December, fuel prices were frozen for 3 months and there was a decrease of 31 centimes per litre on

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<sup>5</sup> Laws passed in 1986 and 1988 authorize the regulation of wholesale and retail prices of fuel. One law of 2003 gives details of this provision (Bolliet, Bellec and de Chalvron 2009, 8; Autorité de la concurrence 2009, 4-5).

<sup>6</sup> Didier Payen is CEO of an import company, PHP Trading, which has a monopoly on the import of some of the biggest brands of consumer products (Danone, British American Tobacco, Johnson, etc.).

<sup>7</sup> I.e. the main organisation representing the heads of French businesses.

<sup>8</sup> He showed for example that certain taxes were being counted twice as in the case of the tax on waste oils (Payen 2009, 29).

<sup>9</sup> Mainly because of the high costs of local refining (Payen 2009, 33).

<sup>10</sup> Data obtained from the DDCCRF.

lead-free and 22 cents on diesel (*20 minutes* 2008). But on 5 December, the Lyannaj Kont' Pwofitasyon (LKP) was created at the request of the principal Guadeloupean trade union, the UGTG.<sup>11</sup> Taking a radical position, it was not satisfied with negotiation: the LKP called for a 50 centime immediate drop and, in particular, it refused to let the State finance lower prices by making compensatory transfers to the SARA, as provided in the agreement reached with the 'socio-professionals'. For the LKP, the rent situation of the SARA needed to be brought to an end. It was the legitimacy of the profits of the company that was in question, the *pwofitasyon*. So it refused to sign the agreement and on 16 December called for a general strike (Gircour and Rey 2010, 97).

Economic calculation, then, lay at the root of the dispute. Fuel prices analysis revealed a situation that exposed potential abuse and the extraction of huge profits, which led to a challenge.

*Seizing the initiative with facts and figures... and mass mobilization*

Calculation was also an instrument by which mobilization spread. The LKP called for a strike for 20 January, 2009. In order to ensure that there was large-scale mobilisation, it was decided in early December 2008 to develop a broad platform of protest.<sup>12</sup> The concept of *pwofitasyon*, long since highlighted by the UGTG (Ruffin 2009), naturally appeared as the unifying slogan. In the space of a month and a half, a list of 165 demands was drawn up (LKP 2009). The argument of *pwofitasyon* turned the question of prices into the framework for a wide swathe of political and social criticism. The LKP denounced the opacity of the prices of many other products in order to challenge the legitimacy of the political and economic order.

Suspicion was indeed cast on the prices of a wide range of products and services: so-called 'essential' products, transportation, water, rent, electricity, communications, etc. The price of public services was queried as much as the others. In face of this situation, several types of response were demanded. A first series of demands related to transparent pricing, including through statistical and audit programmes. A second series of demands aimed at influencing purchasing power, by reducing taxes, by limiting margins or by freezing certain prices (e.g. rents and fuel) or by higher wages and social minima.<sup>13</sup> The third series of demands aimed at implementing measures in favour of local producers to limit importers' margins.

The platform was thus based on a critique of the Guadeloupean economy which lay midway between political argument and expertise. This positioning allowed the LKP to embark on a technical stand-off with the government, while mobilizing Guadeloupean opinion. And on both fronts, success awaited.

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<sup>11</sup> There are 49 organisations within the LKP (Verdol 2010, 23-26; Gircour and Rey, 101).

<sup>12</sup> Interviews with officials from the movement, Guadeloupe, October-November 2010; see also (Gircour and Rey 2010, 97).

<sup>13</sup> These remain specific to the territory (Forgeot and Celma 2009).

In fact, the LKP managed to mobilize massively behind its message. On 20 January 2009, a series of major demonstrations began (Calimia-Dinane 2009). On Saturday 24 and Sunday 25 January, more than 10% of the population of the island would be in the streets of Pointe-à-Pitre. Circumstances admittedly helped to achieve such a large-scale mobilization, since the carnival parade was also held on that day. But this is not very important. These gatherings gave new impetus to the movement: the political and administrative authorities were intimidated and decided quickly to open negotiations on the basis of the platform. The prefect also took a decision that he would be severely criticized for thereafter: he agreed that the negotiations would be televised.<sup>14</sup> From 24 to 28 January 2009, many Guadeloupeans watched, dumbfounded, as an unprecedented event took place: the members of the LKP faced the administrative authorities of the island and, defending tooth and nail every point of their platform, their mastery of the facts and figures allowed them to stand up to the leaders of the administration and the departments of the prefecture. A theatrical display of this kind was heavily symbolic. It all looked like a clash between the country's children and the representatives of the administrative apparatus of the mainland, responsible for the most questionable and unjust economic orders. Moreover, the fight was taking place on the ground and with the tools of the State, which the LKP used against it. Success was total: the negotiation was terminated before 28 January on orders from Paris. The Prefect Desforges read a message from Yves Jégo, Secretary of State for Overseas Territories, announcing this termination, and he denounced the 'tribunal' that the negotiations had turned into (Jégo 2009, 54). The Secretary of State decided to come personally to settle the question and steer the negotiations. In doing so, he recognized the ascendancy which the collective had won.

After such a resounding success, the LKP was praised for its ability and put on a pedestal for its 'competence' in handling facts and figures and dominating the administration, which was an historic achievement. To the contrary, the administration appeared weak and incapable of defending the states' policies. This was the prevailing discourse in Guadeloupe at the time, both in the activist population and in the administration, the circles of negotiators and the press. But while the fight had hitherto taken place in the field of expertise - acknowledging the 'statactivist' skills of the LKP - the subsequent events revealed that it was likely to find expression in a logic of confrontation, and even lead to physical violence.

*From activism through expertise to violence: the failure of negotiations on the wage agreement and the growing extremism of the social movement*

Obtaining a bonus of 200 euros for all employees below a certain level of salary was the symbolic issue at stake in the negotiations, and the point around which tensions were the most acute. The bonus of 200 euros was the movement's 'main appeal', the one which best embod-

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<sup>14</sup> According to Gircour and Rey (2010, 33), it was actually an idea of the regional president, Victorien Lurel, who thought that these negotiations would be favourable to him.

ied its struggle. This amount, representing 15 % of the minimum wage, more or less filled the gap in purchasing power with mainland France as far as low wages were concerned. The demand for a bonus was the spearhead of the struggle of the LKP for the restoration of social justice in terms of purchasing power. In addition, the movement took place shortly after the adoption of a social system in France, with the "active solidarity income" (RSA) paying this sum to all persons whose income was below the minimum wage. But the RSA was not yet applied outside mainland France (France Antilles Guadeloupe 2009), providing further evidence of the unequal treatment suffered by these *départements* within the Republic.

The negotiations on which the LKP engaged with social partners focused on the overall financial effort to which each party involved (region, the General Council, State, and businesses) could consent in order to pay a bonus. The total amount obtained would determine the salary threshold below which the bonus could be paid, and therefore the number of beneficiaries. The negotiations got off to a smooth start. Around 10 February, Yves Jégo was on the point of getting an agreement signed, having succeeded in forcing the hand of the MEDEF to accept that the bonus would apply to all employees earning less than 1.6 of the SMIC. So the LKP continued to preserve its ascendancy in the fight. However, a coup de théâtre took place on 9 February. Just before entering into the agreement, the Secretary of State was suddenly taken off the case and received government orders to abandon negotiations and leave the island. The reason was not clear, but according to Jégo himself, Guadeloupean employers had managed to use their influence at the Elysée and Matignon in order to discredit him. He was allegedly too receptive to demands of the collective, presumably at the expense of the State and the actors of the MEDEF (Jégo 2009, 11). Their intervention was very effective: the LKP was abruptly turned away, and at the meeting of 9-16 February, members of the collective who had not been forewarned found the gates of the Prefecture were locked (Gircour and Rey 2010, 37). Unable to make sufficient impact at the round-table negotiations, the MEDEF carried out a show of power through its ability to intervene thanks to its links with major government figures.

This volte-face was seen as an affront by the LKP and the episode was a turning point in the social movement. The halt in negotiations led to an extension of the strike and the blockading of the island for almost another 3 weeks. In addition, it caused a rise in extremism. While a new negotiating team was dispatched to Paris by the office of the Prime Minister, the demonstrations got out of hand. Night attacks spread: shopping malls were looted, there were clashes with the police force and nights of violence. This disorder culminated during the night of 18-19 February when the trade unionist Jacques Bino was shot dead near a roadblock (Gircour and Rey 2010, 123). His death has never been elucidated although the consensus is that he was killed by young men who thought they were shooting at police officers. These battles with police scared the fringes of the middle classes and executives who were an important part of the support for the collective, whose centre of gravity shifted to more radical youths.<sup>15</sup> The most

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<sup>15</sup> Analysis of the political commentator Julien Méron – interviews in Pointe-à-Pitre, October 2010; on the rise of extremists, see also (Gircour and Rey, 2010).

hard-line and clearly violent LKP methods started to be overtly deployed at this time, under the influence of some of the more radical fringes of the collective, such as Alex Lollia's GITL - 'groupes d'intervention des travailleurs en lutte' (Gircour and Rey 2010, 14): some shops were forcibly closed by brigades charged with the task of enforcing the general strike. The harshest roadblocks were also set up at that time. These violent tactics, contrasting with the euphoria of the beginning of the fight, put many Guadeloupeans off the movement and a real split occurred in the broad base of the LKP between 'moderates' and 'radicals'. Meanwhile, the LKP gradually found itself in a difficult position in the negotiations. The State benefitted from this fragmentation among LKP supporters and regained the upper hand: the day after the death of the union member, it launched a major bureaucratic initiative with the proposal to hold an Estates General of Overseas Territories ('Etats généraux de l'Outre-mer'). This announcement was perceived by the collective as a populist response aimed at defusing a situation that had become very tense<sup>16</sup>. The LKP announced its boycott straightaway, and the State managed to occupy the terrain (Gircour and Rey 2010, 137). The potentially violent dimension of the struggle thus became clear: the relation of forces established around the negotiating table was translated into games of intimidation and violence that took shape both as the discretionary ability to take action within the state, and as physical violence in the shape of demonstrations and strikes. Statistics were combined with violence, and for a while gave way to it.

It was in this toxic atmosphere that the second phase of negotiations over the wage agreement took place. This phase showed another combination of these two ways of influencing the social world – violence and the use of numerical arguments. The calculations that dominated negotiations played their part in a context of multifaceted violence, but they helped to build an agreement, even though the different positions seemed irreconcilable.

*Action through statistics as a substitute for violence?*

Calculations were thus caught up in an open and very radical conflict. The LKP absolutely refused to go below the level of 1.6 of the SMIC that it viewed as a *fait accompli*. But businesses were reluctant, and it was out of the question that the State would finance the entire bonus. Negotiation thus seemed hopeless from the start. This did not preclude, however, an agreement being reached through statistics that could serve as a place of mediation. As the tension reached its height, a third party played a crucial role in enabling dialogue between the parties: the regional department of the French national institute for statistics and economic studies (INSEE). When its concrete details are observed, the negotiation over the agreement actually appears as a construction made through calculations.

The regional department of the INSEE was indeed in direct links with the negotiators, as it provided both sides with the figures used in the discussion, particularly on employment and in-

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<sup>16</sup> Interviews with officials of the LKP, Guadeloupe, November 2010.

come distribution by branch of industry.<sup>17</sup> The manager of the INSEE department really did play a mediating role. On the LKP side, Alain Plaisir, the economist of the collective, and Secretary General of the Centrale des Travailleurs Unis (Confederation of United Workers or CTU) communicated with the INSEE via the representative of his union within the regional department. The delegation of negotiators from Paris made its requests internally to the administrative apparatus, either directly or via the Prefecture. In a sense, it had a foot in both camps. The parties turned to it when they felt overwhelmed by the enemy and wanted to refine their arguments to stay on top. Contacts were also made under the seal of confidence and often informally. On the CTU side, communication between the LKP team and statisticians was sometimes made by telephone from the corridors of the negotiation headquarters. The head of department also belonged to the State camp: apart from the requests addressed to him by administrative channels, he also attended, offstage, meetings between negotiators and the Prefecture, and took part in the development of their positions. The Prefecture also ensured that it was not openly exposed in the camp of the State departments, as this would undermine its role as shadow mediator, both internal and 'neutral'. Moreover, the head of department carried out his mission rigorously and without bias. By deciding to give exactly the same tables of numbers to both parties, in other words to deliver information to both sides that either side might have requested, he managed to avoid making any faux pas. This, then, was the technical foundation on which the ins and outs of a mutually acceptable solution were defined. After lengthy discussions, an agreement was reached on 26 February 2009: the establishment of the Revenu supplémentaire temporaire d'activité (temporary additional activity income, or RSTA) was finally scheduled for all employees earning less than 1.4 times the SMIC. The agreement was called the 'Bino Accord', in homage to the trade unionist killed on the barricades during the night of 18 to 19 February 2009.

The role of statistics in this process cannot be underestimated. It is not so much that the data managed to 'get the parties to agree', but rather that the formal agreement was, strictly speaking, *constructed* by statistics. It was cobbled together just to help find a way out of the crisis. But it was also fragile, and came with many uncertainties. While the agreement did for a time dampen down the standoff, the role of statistics would soon trigger new disputes. Indeed, the parties negotiated with very imprecise data. In particular, information on employment and wages was not available in the desired detail.<sup>18</sup> The calculations used were unclear, as was the whole agreement. It quickly appeared much less favourable to trade unionists than it had initially seemed. In particular, the calculations on taxes had been neglected, though they made the profits much lower than expected for the beneficiaries; also, the agreement did not mobilize any new money, and basically meant earmarking funds for eventually implementing the RSA in

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<sup>17</sup> Interviews with unionists and officials from the administration, Basse-Terre, in 2009 and between August and November 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Interviews, Basse-Terre, February 2009 and April 2010; see also (Jégo 2009).

Guadeloupe.<sup>19</sup> The unions seem to have been duped. Conversely, the negotiating team sent by Matignon appears to have been very cunning: it probably knew that the arrangement was much more favourable to the State than it seemed. Mediation through numbers, though it calmed things down for a while, was thus a source of resentment; immediately after symbolizing the victory of the unions, the disappointments of the agreement led to new calls for action from the LKP (France Antilles Guadeloupe 2010a). Numbers were also the vector of a logic of domination that led to the return of the spectre of violent action. The LKP had managed to extract from its social partners a wage bonus of 200 euros, and this was a real achievement.

So were statistics a tool of pacification or a cause of conflict? Both could be true. Violence could break out, or there could be peaceful coexistence. Above all, statistics played a mediating role. The negotiations and the use of numbers harboured relations of domination and formed the symbolic setting in which power relations were played out, where the contest could be fought. Despite the surprises, obtaining an agreement and extracting from its social partners a wage bonus was in itself a great symbolic victory for the LKP, even if it reflected only a transient moment.<sup>20</sup> In negotiating the bonus, the LKP managed for a while to seize the rudder and control the establishing of a public policy arrangement. It did so without having all the expertise at its disposal, but it showed that it could measure up to the situation, and that it was possible to challenge State power on its own terrain. Calculating, at such a time, meant measuring up to the dominant players.

Following these initial analyses of 'statactivist' situations, statistics appear as a tool for mediation which maintains plural and flexible links with the spectre of violence. I first showed that the balance of power in negotiation could operate through an ability to compete on technical data, revealing the possibility of shifting the conflict from a physical relationship to the negotiating table. Then it appeared that negotiation by statistics could be combined with acts of violence of various kinds which, at different times, opposed one another, supplemented one another, or were provoked by negotiation. The use of MEDEF leverage and the failure of the agreements showed that the games played by experts could lead to physical violence; the drawing up of the agreement shows, however, that statistics could temporarily pacify relations before rekindling resentment and triggering conflict. So statistics are a tool that can mediate in a set of social and political relations that are confrontational and potentially violent. Moreover, their intrinsic characteristics – their ability to reveal a situation, their properties, their fuzziness – have autonomous effects; they enter into the social construction of the conflict situation and its resolution.

Nevertheless, it is possible to go further and highlight situations where statistics act directly as an instrument through which violence occurs, and not an instrument of mediation in a situa-

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<sup>19</sup> Yves Jégo states that this was a strategy on the part of Raymond Soubie, advisor to Nicolas Sarkozy (2010, 121); this has also been claimed by several of those who were close to the negotiations. On the idea of the 'state's triumph' (Réno 2012).

<sup>20</sup> Interviews, between August and November 2010, including with Alain Plaisir, one of the LKP leaders.

tion that may be violent. This is shown by another series of arrangements and negotiations: those on the levels of prices and margins.

### 3. The power of numbers to coerce and intimidate

The social movement of 2009 occurred at a time when very few economic and statistical studies had been carried out to study the problematics of purchasing power and price formation. The social movement then found expression in an outburst of quantitative work meant to monitor and analyse prices or audit the conditions of competition. Statistics were used to reveal a situation and even, if possible, make it transparent. However, the disclosure did not act only as an argumentative resource in the course of negotiation, either provoking violent reactions or calming the situation. Sometimes, the analyses could themselves be tools that allowed intimidation, control or even the exercise of coercion. So the situation was not only that of a 'controversy' over an argument based on statistics, one where the spectre of violence could arise (Lemieux 2007). Statistics were a weapon that allowed direct coercion to be exerted. This is what shows the negotiation held to determine price reductions for the 100 products known as 'necessities'.

#### *From quantifying margins to coercion*

The principle of a 'voluntary reduction' in the price of necessities was officially recorded by the various parties, as acknowledged in the memorandum of agreement to end conflict of 4 March 2009. From March to May 2009, the collective faced the big retailers. The discussions took place in a more peaceful ambience than the Bino Accord: the strike had already come to an end, and an agreement was already signed, ending the conflict. A hundred categories of products were included and a set of products selected. Each brand maker spoke with the LKP and each time the products were reviewed one by one.<sup>21</sup> During these negotiations, that lasted well into the night, the LKP faced the most powerful businessmen on the islands, including the well-known *békés*, the old masters of the islands (Sainton 2009; Bonniol 1992). Bernard Hayot in particular came in person to handle negotiations for his group, the most important in the field of large-scale retail in the West Indies.<sup>22</sup> The DDCCRF and the Prefecture supervised all the discussions, facilitating dialogue and acting as guarantor for its continuation.

<sup>21</sup> Interviews with various parties who were present at the negotiations; Guadeloupe, August, October and November 2010.

<sup>22</sup> The Bernard Hayot group is at the head of many of the most important brands in the West Indies, from Carrefour to Décathlon via M. Bricolage. This group was founded with capital from the plantations. Bernard Hayot is one of the 150 richest people in France.

The LKP carried out on this occasion what one might call a 'revolt by the numbers'. Its strategy consisted in presenting calculations aimed to prove that the margins of traders were too high, in order to force them to lower prices. However, at the time of the negotiations, no reliable information existed on the formation of trade margins. Such information can only be produced through audits of competition, which are very demanding exercises, and when the conflict broke out, the DDCCRF did not conduct any such studies. So the LKP prepared for negotiations with the means available.<sup>23</sup> Under the aegis of its economist, Alain Plaisir, teams drew up listings of prices in mainland France, from the Carrefour website. Then, for each product, a fixed percentage of 10% was added to account for transport costs, taxes and other logistical costs. The amounts thus obtained were then treated as 'theoretical prices' serving as markers for what a fair price should be. They were thus compared to those found in the island's supermarkets, and the differences provided the LKP with what it considered to be potentially 'illegitimate margins' that went to businesses (see Table 1).

The LKP then drew on these calculations to negotiate: it asked the supermarkets to admit to the excessive margins it had identified, and demanded that, if necessary, they should lower their prices. There was obviously an inherent tension here: as its calculations were quite unverifiable, the arguments it put forward were at best based on common sense or intuition... and at worst on arbitrary accusation. But by pretending that these figures 'unveiled' the real, the LKP's approach actually blurred the boundary between the logic of the 'evidence', which assumes that the object is being 'described' with some claim to accuracy, and a logic that based a relation of force on random calculations. Such a situation is really ambiguous. The members of the LKP are well-known to be experts on the economy, and their efforts in collecting data and interpreting them with discernment, though crude, are perfectly real. Moreover, as Mary Morgan and Margaret Morrisson have shown, in any scientific investigation the margin of quantitative error and the sequence of revisions is part of the trial and error of all research, which can begin with very improbable hypotheses before refining its findings (1999). Such is the case of the LKP, which 'moves on to the figures' in virgin territory. So its approach to quantification is not absurd. On the other hand, however, the LKP uses figures as a tool for making accusations: it immediately inserts them into the relation of force with the retailers, and gives them the status of evidence. In this sense, the discussion of figures primarily reflects the current status of the power relationship, while being set out in terms of the economic argument.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the negotiations boiled down to interactions where different parties based their tactics on statistics: the LKP wanted at all costs to obtain the expected price decreases by tipping the relation of force in its favour; the retailers tried instead to resort to subterfuge, to cope as best they could with the more or less realistic accusations of the LKP. And there was a great risk that the discussion would become a simple fool's game where each party behaved *as if* the figures had a meaning, but actually deployed all their energy on

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<sup>23</sup> Thanks to Alain Plaisir, Secretary General of the CTU for his information on this subject: I have drawn on his remarks in this passage.

manoeuvring to shift the balance of power in their favour, using a mixture of cunning and coercion by statistics. This is actually largely what happened, in accordance with Michel de Certeau's description of the many tactics and tricks that surround the use of economic tools and techniques (de Certeau 1990).

Table 1: Excerpt of table used by the LKP in negotiating the price of necessities.

Fam	Libellé	Prix Moy Fr	Maj 10%	1 Destrellan			2 Cora			3 Milenis		
				Prix	Diff	Ecart	Prix	Diff	Ecart	Prix	Diff	Ecart
Lait	LAIT CONCENT SUCRE NESTLE 397G	1,65	1,82	1,85	0,04	2%	1,89	0,08	4%	1,96	0,15	8%
	LAIT NIDO 28% 400G		0,00	5,31			5,4			5,3		
	LAIT POUVRE LAICRAN 900G	6,90	7,59	8,05	0,46	6%	8,79	1,20	16%	7,99	0,40	5%
	LAIT CROISSANCE CANDIA BRK 1L	1,85	2,04	1,69	-0,45	-22%	2,20	0,17	8%	1,85	-0,19	-9%
	LAIT 1/2 ECREME VIVA CANDIA 1L	0,90	0,99	1,1	0,11	11%	1,35	0,36	36%	1,1	0,11	11%
	GLORIA LCNS 3X410G	3,60	3,96	4,73	0,77	19%	4,59	0,63	16%	4,73	0,77	19%
	LAIT MELA DEMI ECREME BRICK 1LITRE											
	LA BELLE HOLLANDAISE LAIT SUC 397G											
	lait ppx 1 L	0,59	0,65	0,79	0,14	22%	0,75	0,10	16%	0,8	0,15	23%
	LAIT UHT 1/2 ECREME BOGAGE											
	LAIT ECREME REGILAIT BTE 300G	1,88	2,07									
	LAIT 1/2 ECREME UHT BRK 1L											
B	ST HUBERT 41 250 G	1,90	2,09				2,19	0,10	5%			
E	BEURRE PLAQUETTE BOGAGE 250GR											
U	BEURRIER BRIDEL D/S 250G	2,05	2,26	2,36	0,11	5%	2,59	0,34	15%	2,35	0,10	4%
R	BEURRE DX 250G PRESIDENT	1,49	1,64	2,29	0,65	40%	2,65	1,01	62%	2,4	0,76	46%
R	BEURRE MOULE DEMI SEL U	1,55	1,71									
E	BEURRE DOUX 250G MAITRE LAITIER	1,49	1,64									
MARGARINE	MARGARINE ASTRA 500G	1,40	1,54	2,37	0,83	54%	2,39	0,85	55%	2,35	0,81	53%
	FRUIT D'OR VITALITE ALLEGE 250GRS	1,27	1,40	1,77	0,37	27%	1,79	0,39	28%	1,78	0,38	27%
	MARG TOURNESOL ALLEG No1 500G	0,76	0,84	1,15	0,31	38%				1,65	0,81	97%
	MARGARINE à frire winny 1kg	1,95	2,15				3,33	1,19	55%	3,33	1,19	55%
CREME	S.EPA 4% UHT BRIDELIGHT 2	1,18	1,30									
	CREME EPAIS.LEG.E&V 33CL+15%MG	1,47	1,62	2,04	0,42	26%	2,05	0,43	27%	1,99	0,37	23%
E FR	CR.UHT FLUID.LEG.12% BRID (Qia)		0,00									
Fromage	YOPI CHOCO 4X100G	0,98	1,08	1,7	0,62	58%	1,7	0,62	58%	1,69	0,61	57%
	BRIE ROITELET POINTE 200GR	1,75	1,93	2,48	0,56	29%	2,45	0,53	27%	2,59	0,67	35%
	VACHE QUI RIT 8 PORTIONS 128G	1,35	1,49	1,58	0,1	6%	1,59	0,11	7%	1,59	0,11	7%
	EMMENTAL RAPE 100G ENTREMONT	1,24	1,36									
	CAMEMBÉRT 45%MG 250GR BRIDEL	1,70	1,87	2,78	0,91	49%	3,19	1,32	71%	2,79	0,92	49%
	EMMENTAL PLAQ PDT 220G	2,35	2,59				2,89	0,31	12%			
	EMMENTAL RAPE 3X70G +1 GT PRESIDENT	2,70	2,97	3,21	0,24	8%	3,25	0,28	9%	3,15	0,18	6%

Source: LKP / Alain Plaisir.

On most products, the discussion went by without incident. And with good reason: there were so many ways of bypassing retailers that the commitments were not very onerous for them. Retailers announced at the outset that they would offset the lower prices on the hundred products by raising other prices. In addition, negotiations focused on products with specified brands and packaging. In other words, it was enough to remove from the shelves the specific products covered by the agreements, or to choose another brand or other packaging, for the lower prices to cease to be a problem. And the supermarkets did not hesitate to do this. Finally, the protocol dictated only temporary measures, as the lower prices had to end on 31 December 2009; so these were very short-term agreements. In short, small-scale variations on the agreements were frequent. As a result, retailers could agree to the wishes of the LKP with no great consequence; the LKP therefore came out on top overall, and at no great expense.

However, negotiations could turn into a rat race. On some products, the statistics seemed to be instruments to force retailers to lower their prices and margins. One anecdote makes this clear.<sup>24</sup> One evening, the LKP tried to force the hand of a retailer so as to obtain a price drop. The retailer argued that he was being forced to sell at a loss and tempers flared as the LKP, secure in its calculations, refused to revise its arguments for a price drop. When the exchange became tense, indicating the retailer's good faith, the DDCCRF decided it should intervene to prevent this use of force<sup>25</sup>. But the Prefect opposed any intervention, as he felt that the logic of dialogue and negotiation must remain a priority. The LKP thus won its case by intimidation, assigning the prices that seemed appropriate and refusing to question the validity of its calculations, even though they appeared improbable. Here, the use of statistics appears to be an act of authority. Such an action is far from trivial: it lies at the heart of the approach adopted by the collective. The objective of the LKP in this negotiation was precisely to influence by force the sharing of profits and eliminate *pwofitasyon* (Verdol 2010). The LKP was however often heavily mistaken in its calculations and gradually learned this to its cost: faced with recurrent resistance from retailers, it became obvious that its calculations were wrong. As was confirmed to me by various officials of the collective, the LKP teams became particularly aware during the negotiations that they had greatly overestimated the role of supermarkets in price formation. Many other intermediaries, such as importers, are equally important. Nevertheless, statistics appear as a means of exerting coercion. They are a means of applying pressure just as much as is physical strength, achieving what violence could also bring about, but by a seemingly civilized argument based on figures.

We can go further: sometimes coercion can be established at the heart of computational methods, and the balance of power and the spectre of coercion or violence can express themselves in the very technical stages of the production of figures.

#### *Mixing calculation and intimidation*

The agreements ending the conflict resulted in a sum of procedures for auditing and monitoring the prices. Retail brands for example must include price reductions on posters at the entrance to their stores, and it is the DDCCRF's job to check this. New tools for statistical monitoring of prices have also been introduced to check commercial margins.

The 'typical shopping trolley', for example, is set out in the agreements of 4 March 4 2009 and is one of the central features of the transparency policy adopted following the conflict. It is supposed to be technically supervised by the DDCCRF and aims to monitor the price changes of a shopping trolley of common consumer goods in the retail sector, ensuring for instance that the Price Observatory, hitherto inactive, has enough information to fulfil its missions (Favorinus

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<sup>24</sup> This anecdote was related to me by several of the participants at the negotiation.

<sup>25</sup> The DDCCRF even had to do so, because selling at a loss is prohibited.

2009). Pursuant to the agreements, the first survey was conducted in early March 2009, and the results were originally published every fortnight on the website of the Prefecture. However, very soon, a series of obstacles arose. Besides the typical trolley, the DDCCRF also had the task of monitoring the effectiveness of the lower prices of the hundred necessities, besides its normal duties. It sometimes had to send inspection teams to the same store up to three times a week. But this triggered protest, and retailers gradually refused to submit to controls. In the words of one executive, there was there a real 'therapeutic obstinacy'<sup>26</sup> at work here, and the DDCCRF was forced to backtrack. A few months after the conflict, it decided to space out the controls, that were now made only once per month. Then, in December 2009, it was the turn of the Prefecture to put up some resistance: as prices started to rise again in the supermarkets, State officials feared that the publication of statistical information might trigger renewed protest action. As a result, it decided unilaterally to take a firm action. As of December 2009, the website of the Prefecture then stopped publishing the information collected on the typical shopping trolley. The implementation of one of the central measures of the policy of transparency was thus interrupted at the discretion of the Prefect, because he judged it necessary to preserve public order.

These events were not isolated. Following the conflict, the figures were seen as a threat because they laid bare the actions of the protagonists in the conflict, which carried potentially provocative messages, and because they were afraid of possible outbreaks of violence. Power relations take place at the very heart of the measurement tools.

#### *Statistical information, a disturbance of public order?*

If we need any further evidence, it can be found in the fate that was reserved for one key measure of the transparency policy, the conduct of a study meant to measure price differences between Guadeloupe and mainland France. This work, known as the 'spatial price comparison', was carried out by the INSEE (Berthier, Lhéritier and Petit 2010). No such work had been conducted since the early 1990s, and was greatly anticipated. But the results of this study were actively censored in the name of the preservation of public order.

The INSEE knew from the start that carrying out this study might generate controversy. The *imaginaires* of a high cost of living are based on the prices of common imported goods (food, household products, and so on), which are often sold in supermarkets in Guadeloupe for double the price found in mainland France. But the INSEE survey covered the entirety of household consumption, including rents, insurance and water rates, where the price gap with the mainland was much lower or non-existent. As a result, it presented an indicator that rose to around 15% while the *imaginaires* of the high cost of living and *pwofitasyon* were based on bigger differences, 50% or more. There is a technical explanation for this difference. But this technical justification did not prevent possible misunderstandings and misuse after publication: the work of

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<sup>26</sup> Interviews with officials from the DDCCRF, Guadeloupe, October 2010.

the INSEE did indeed run the risk of being interpreted as an attempt by the State to undermine the historical social gains of the overseas *départements*, for example by questioning the justification for bonuses to civil servants (known as *sur-rémunérations*, and reaching 40 % in Guadeloupe). This is exactly what happened in 1997 on the island of Réunion, where the publication of a study of spatial price comparisons triggered a ‘revolt of the civil servants’ (Conan 1997). The regional department of the INSEE took precautions and carefully prepared its report before its publication, scheduled for July 2010.<sup>27</sup> In particular it intended to explain the method and the interesting results detailed in the study, which showed for example the very sharp rise in differentials in food prices. But this turned out to be a waste of time: prior to this ardently awaited press conference, the INSEE was placed under pressure. Publication coincided with the end of the agreement on fuel prices (the price ‘thaw’) and the Prefecture of Basse-Terre and the Ministry of Overseas Territories felt that the publication of the study would be untimely in such a context. They feared that the statistics would have explosive results and that the publication of a figure showing the price increases might trigger new protests. First, the conference was postponed at their request. Then the offices of the Directorate General of the INSEE in Paris and the Ministry of Overseas Territories went further: they conveyed to the regional units of the INSEE the order simply to cancel the press conference. Yet the solution chosen by the Parisian authorities was even more awkward. While the study was not given any media coverage, in an as yet mysterious way, on 9 August a dispatch from Agence France Presse came out on the subject, and drew a parallel between the measure taken by the INSEE and the questioning of the bonuses to civil servants. Interviewed by phone while he was in Canada, the president of the local branch of the MEDEF in Guadeloupe, Willy Angèle, drove the point home, more or less involuntarily,<sup>28</sup> saying that the issue of the over-remuneration of officials would, sooner or another, be subject to further debate (France Antilles Guadeloupe 2010b; Drella 2010; Bellance and Coste 2010). It did not take long for the president of the region, Victorin Lurel, to accuse the INSEE of bringing out studies ‘on the sly’ to pave the way for an undermining of social gains. Many reactions were then expressed, for or against a re-examination of over-remuneration. The Martinique Communist Party, denouncing a dispatch that was ‘politically oriented from Agence France Presse’ warned against ‘a gross manipulation’, justifying ‘a new reactionary offensive’ against social policies (Erichot 2010). One of the highlights of transparency, and a key measure of the agreements ending the conflict, thus found itself getting caught up in confrontations on the political scene. Indeed, this time, contrary to the expectations of the State authorities, physical violence from the trade unions did not take over, as the organizations had clearly grasped the situation. But the statistical system had been subject to a State intervention guided by a logic of policing, and numbers had been diverted and altered by the spectre of violence and the fear of revolt.

<sup>27</sup> Interviews, Guadeloupe, August 2010.

<sup>28</sup> He was apparently caught off guard by the interview: interviews, Guadeloupe, November 2009.

### *Statistics and police function*

One final example may be useful evidence of the link that unites public order, coercion and statistics. One of the demands of the LKP in the negotiations was that it should be given the means to carry out analyses and surveys of prices through a 'Bureau of Labour Studies' (BEO). In accordance with the paragraph 22 of the Memorandum of Agreement, the BEO obtained government grants and came into existence in April 2011.<sup>29</sup> The main mission of BEO would be to make available to consumers reliable information on prices, so that every citizen could shop at the cheapest stores. The LKP intended to make available information to help regulate economic life. But that was not all: according to its main instigator, Alain Plaisir, the LKP also at one time considered the establishment of 'price brigades'. The idea of these brigades was that unionists would combine the price survey with the conducting of checks on compliance with the agreements. In other words, statistical statements could coincide with acts of surveillance that trade unionists would carry out themselves. This involved neither more nor less than envisaging that the LKP would help to control large retailers, and assume a public order mission by sending in its own troops. Of course, there is nothing of this in the final work programme of the BEO (such a programme would never have been validated in the negotiations with the government) but this was the LKP's main idea. It even had an opportunity to clarify this intention: so when brands bypassed agreements on lower prices, and given the neglect of the DDCCRF departments that faced resistance from the stores, the LKP suggested to the Prefect that these 'brigades' be put in place. The Prefect of course declined, but these methods did not seem totally out of place at the time of the social movement. LKP brigades had indeed forced stores to close their doors during the general strike. The spectre of coercion may therefore arise at the very heart of the concrete measures of statistical monitoring, which thus appears as a security issue, something close to a police function.

## **4. Conclusion**

The following main conclusions can be drawn from the case studies that I have presented:

While the most classical works of sociology of quantification show that statistics are a tool of government - either because they contribute to the social construction of the action of the State (Desrosières 2003; Porter 1995), or because they impose a foucauldian discipline on the political subjects (Miller and Rose 1990) - the cases-studies I have presented have shown that violence can be observed at the very heart of the devices of quantification. The steps involved in quantification indeed sometimes bring together expert methods and calculation on the one hand with surveillance and coercion on the other.

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<sup>29</sup> After a long fight led by the LKP economist, Alain Plaisir (Calimia-Dinane 2011).

In the same direction, numbers are also related to public order and a policing function: it is not only possible to maintain order by figures, but figures are also an issue for public order. When they are a threat, they can be censored, or be the object of security measures to counter the potential for revolt that such numbers contain (including in contemporary France).

However, such a violent logic is not only a State matter: the Guadeloupe unions aim to exercise control and coercion through their use of numbers:

- First, this is possible because quantification helps build situations of social tension, by revealing and creating feelings of social injustice. It leads thereby to triggering protest actions against the methods of 'government by numbers', and motivates the start of confrontation with the State and the dominant players, with the prospect of a shift to violence.

- Second, quantification is sometimes used as a weapon in social conflict. The logic of evidence can be used to influence the balance of power and allow non-State actors to rebel against the State. Combined with a logic of accusation, it can even serve as an instrument of pressure or coercion. Indeed, claims that seem legitimate thanks to quantified arguments can justify the use of constraint. This means that the ability to persuade by figures may be a way of exerting violence: a mixture of intimidation and evidence may justify the use of violence. The legitimacy of calculation is then sometimes akin to arbitrariness.

Therefore, the notion of Statactivism can help describing the roles played by numbers. They are indeed a tool for struggle and a way for activist to denounce the power of the State and powerful economic agents. But they are also a way to exert power and violence. The main lesson of what I have presented here is that the transition to figures can be combined, in a plurality of ways, with the transition to violence, not only by avoiding or replacing it, but sometimes overlapping with it or being its instrument. The use of violence may be a natural extension and an inherent part of formal and bureaucratic devices, combining technical know-how with the skilled exercise of physical violence.<sup>30</sup> Numerical figures act not only as an argument, but also serve to accuse and judge; they are not just a tool of persuasion, but also a means of threat or coercion; they are not just a tool providing evidence, but also a place of concealment and deceit, which can trigger protest and violent action. In short, the technical moves that comprise government by numbers can be coupled with forms of violent action. Thus, if "activism" is understood as opening the way to coercive action and physical violence, then "Stat-activism" may be the right word to refer to the use of statistics in Guadeloupe in 2009. This, in turn, may help revisiting the existing works dealing with the articulation between statistics (or technocracy) and violence (Tooze 2001; Blum and Mespoulet 2003; Hibou 2011). My analysis raises a disturbing question: while it is expected that the use of numbers and expertise indicate a redeployment of the modes of coercion and intimidation, away from physical violence and closer to the exercise of power at-a-distance (Miller and Rose 1990), should it be considered that the limit between physical violence, direct coercion and bureaucratic activities is, in the end, quite blurred?

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<sup>30</sup> As pointed out for example in a recent work by Gilles Favarel-Garrigues on Russia (forthcoming).

Such an interpretation is necessary to make sense of the place of numbers in the multifaceted violence that occurred in the 2009 social movement. While being the classical bureaucratic production of statisticians that generates public debates and deliberations, some figures could successively be used by the different parties to take an advantage in the relations of force during the negotiations, then trigger uprising and riots, or be the means by which political control and constraint is exerted (and challenged), making numbers an issue for public order. Such a finding engages analysts and researchers to pay a close attention to the various forms of violence that may be linked with the use statistics. In each singular situation where numbers are mobilised, physical violence can be a looming threat, coercion or intimidation may be the natural extensions of the logic of the 'statistical evidence', and the production of numbers may itself encompass acts of violence and constraint. Furthermore, some popular notions, like *pwofitasyon*, appear to be anchored in the *imaginaires* of struggle and revolt as well as in economic analysis, expertise and measurement.

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