This paper aims at critically examining the nature and determinants of labour voices in enhancing citizenship in the French Pacific Territories, i.e. New Caledonia and Polynesia. Although under the same colonial ruler, both regions have shaped their own path to autonomy in quite distinctive ways; between independence and dependencies and in the management of economic, geo-political and ethnic interdependences. We will thus insist on the need to provide a ‘contextualised comparison’: ‘The Curse of Wealth’ (New Caledonia) and ‘The Cage of Beauty’ (Polynesia). Further, we will discuss the complex duality of colonial and anti-colonial voices within the labour movement, with a focus on indigenous trade unions. This is a highly contested terrain, in New Caledonia particularly where French Authorities have been engaging in a far ranging program of reconciliation and social partnership – the ‘Common Destiny’ (Graff 2012a). We will conclude by identifying the major challenges lying ahead and, finally, by raising a set of research avenues.

A brief account of the research background
Too ‘exotic’ to matter? A random search of English-speaking industrial relations journals shows no hit on either New Caledonia or French Polynesia. There are indeed valuable academic accounts of labour relations in the South Pacific – Samoa, Tonga, the Cook Islands, Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and the Fiji Islands (Prasad & al. 2003; see also Bamber & al. 2000), but with the notable omission of the French speaking Pacific world. Beyond government and union websites, albeit a few rare exceptions, there is not much specifically

---

1 Both authors are affiliated to TransOeanik, LAS, CNRS/EHESS/Collège de France in association with the Cairns Institute, JCU Australia.
dealing with labour issues on the French speaking side either, and certainly not in mainstream French metropolitan industrial relations.

Our research program (still in progress) aimed at addressing this knowledge gap. The primary fieldwork was conducted in 2011 in both New Caledonia and Polynesia, where interviews were conducted with major trade unions, including (anti-colonial) indigenous trade unions – USTKE (Kanak and Exploited Workers Unions) and O Oe To Oe Rima respectively –, and employer associations (MEDEF). Further data were collected with regional government agencies, Chambers of Commerce and similar organisations. Further research is underway examining the legal and socio-political forces and narratives at play in the lead-up to the forthcoming referendum on the roadmap to decolonisation in New Caledonia (Graff 2012b)

The geo-political context

New Caledonia and Polynesia are French overseas ‘Territories’ (Territoires d’Outre-Mer, TOM), which distinguishes them from other French colonies such as La Reunion in the Indian Ocean and La Martinique or La Guadeloupe in the Caribbean seas, all listed as French Overseas ‘Departments’ (Départements d’Outre-Mer, DOM). DOMs are fully integrated into the French administrative, legal and political apparatus like any other French metropolitan region without distinction, whereas New Caledonia and Polynesia being granted with some degree of political sovereignty and autonomous powers of jurisdiction, especially the so-called ‘loi du pays’ which is a legal disposition allowing them to legislate Territorial affairs. This is of significance as for example both Territories have used this particular dispositive in view of sheltering local employment. It must be noted that New Caledonia and more recently Polynesia have both registered themselves onto the UN list of countries to be decolonised, New Caledonia leading the way since the Accords de Matignon in the late 1980s, and is up to conduct a referendum on the path towards further independence; the issue being otherwise of high contention in Polynesia, to be mostly explained by Polynesia’s heavy dependence on French financial support and by the multi-cultural character of its social fabric. Yet, both Territories are benefiting from a considerable level of assistance from France in relation to social (health care, education, police, justice, etc.) and broader infrastructure, which

---

2 New Caledonia is approximately 1500 km off the Australian East coast, while Tahiti is further afield at 5700 km from Sydney and 3900 km from Auckland. The area of New Caledonia is 19,000m² while the French Polynesian territory covers an area of over 5,000,000m² (mostly oceanic). Tahiti is the economic and administrative centre of French Polynesia. Tahiti and surrounding islands (îles du vent) have a population of around 205,000 people out of a total population of 275,000, hence approximately three quarters of the French Polynesian population (www.ispf.pf). New Caledonia is host to around a 250,000 people, 45% of which are native Melanesians. Most of the population is to be found around the urban region of Nouméa.
differentiates them significantly from other self-reliant Pacific nations, and which may also to some extent explain that they usually disappear from the radar when it comes down to Pacific studies, notably in regards to employment relations, for being assimilated to France.

**Socio-economic divides between and within Territories**

New Caledonia is by far the most developed Pacific economy, thanks principally to its large nickel mining sector – an estimated 25% of the world reserve of nickel are to be found on the main island which recently attracted up to US$7 billion of FDI. As a result, New Caledonia’s GDP per capita is higher than New Zealand and almost same as France itself\(^3\). In contrast, Polynesia is in economic disarray, artificially maintained on a lifeline by French subsidies. The economic downfall started in the 1990s when the French government decided to withdraw its nuclear operations and deepened in the aftermath of the 2009 GFC heavily impacting on tourism, the principal source of revenue. Consequently, unemployment has almost doubled in 5 years, from 11.7% in 2007 to 21.8% in 2012\(^4\). In addition, since the early 2010s France has imposed a regime of budget stringency on Polynesia (Bolliet report), further impacting on public jobs and investments.

While New Caledonia and Polynesia economic situation differs sharply, they share a common problem of wealth distribution which is a major cause of social discrimination, coupled with a low participation to the labour market overall, and particularly among the indigenous population. Both Territories thus display a relatively high *gini* coefficient: .40 and .43 for Polynesia and New Caledonia respectively\(^5\); or the difference between the 10% richest and 10% poorest households in Polynesia (remote islands excluded) is six-fold in Polynesia and up to seven-fold in New Caledonia. It is estimated that almost 30% of the population live below the poverty level in Polynesia (based on living conditions); estimates are up to a third in New Caledonia\(^6\) (based on the median revenue of Nouméa regional area). It is commonly acknowledged in both contexts that access to employment is the key factor in explaining and addressing social inequalities, although both Territories have a social welfare system in place. Indeed, labour market statistics are to be taken with some caution: while participation rates are estimated at around 60% and 55% in New Caledonia and Polynesia respectively, in each

---

\(^3\) *Business Advantage, Nouvelle Calédonie New Caledonia 2010-2011,*

http://www.businessadvantagenewcaledonia.com/

\(^4\) www.ispf.pf

\(^5\) http://www.ispf.pf/themes/EmploiRevenus/NiveauVie.aspx

\(^6\) *Le pouvoir d’achat des Calédoniens – La Nouvelle-Calédonie face à ses inégalités,* Rapport Syndex, Octobre 2010, p.73.
context, the number ‘other inactive’ people (students and retirees aside) surpasses by far those unemployed.

In both contexts, we find a spatial, racial and politico-administrative segmentation of the labour market. To the exception of tourism hubs like Bora Bora or mining sites across New Caledonia, the vast majority of jobs are concentrated in the main urban centres, Papeete in Tahiti and Nouméa in New Caledonia. The further away from those centres and the more prevalent is the informal economy usually based on collective (tribal or kinship) mode of self-subsistence, and as a rule among the indigenous population. Indeed, in establishing their agenda to address social inequalities, the USOENC (dominant trade union in New Caledonia) actually stated that ‘there is not one but two or more New Caledonia’ in reference to this spatial (*ipso facto* racial) divide; likewise in Polynesia. This segmentation of the labour market and unequal capacity to access a decent job is compounded with lesser investments in infrastructure and uneven access to either social services or education and training in regional areas.

The third labour market segmentation stems from the political-administrative stratus, which further entrenched existing social segregation. This feature is not exclusive to New Caledonia and Polynesia and is also commonly found in French DOMs. French expatriates working for the colonial administration benefit from a generous wage package including a pay indexation and fiscal exemptions plus other fringe benefits – an indexed revenue that is usually matched to some extent by Territorial administrations. For instance in Polynesia, wages in the public sector are 60% higher than in the private sector. As a result, the colonial and Territorial administrations altogether quasi constitute a class in itself, a core component of the upper class that drives inflationary pressures on housing and consumer goods – notwithstanding potentially being a ground for corruption and nepotism. This has led to ongoing social protests and unions’ common fronts across French DOMs and TOMs since the 2010s onwards: a campaign geared on the ‘cost of life’ (*campagne contre la vie chère*) and based on rather holistic revindications around economic governance and social inequalities, and also targeting fiscal reforms in favour of low revenue households, even claims for a direct tax on mining extraction in New Caledonia?7. USOENC and CSTNC (Confédération Syndicale des Travailleurs de Nouvelle-Calédonie) 2014 Labour day joint declaration read ‘*chaque coup de pioche dans le sous-sol doit apporter quelque chose à la nation*’.

---

7 $0.5 per pound of nickel extracted to generate funding for future generations and sustainable development. *Propositions de l’USOENC pour lutter contre la vie chère et contre les inégalités*, Fintemps, October 2010.
Industrial relations and legal provisions on employment

Although technically territorially bound, the labour legislation in either context is moulded into or derived from the French labour law, hence fairly comprehensive and consistent in terms of EEO, OHS and other provisions (parental leave, unfair dismissal) with what would be found in France, thus matching standards expected in advanced socio-democratic economies. Some discrepancies are to be found in specific fields (e.g. retirement, tax and social benefits), however, as the results of amendments through the Territorial jurisdictional powers (Loi du pays) since the 1980s. As a result for example, New Caledonia has not implemented the French policy on the reduction of working time. In Tahiti the Labour legislation n° 86-845 of July 17, 1986, has been amended in 2011. Interestingly, Article 2 of the former 1986 Loi du pays was specifically targeting anti-discrimination in employment (preserved in the amended Act, 2011). In particular, both Territories have been seeking to foster positive discrimination of local employment using their jurisdictional prerogative. While there is now the legal obligation for employers to hire Territorial labour if available at equal qualification level in New Caledonia (n° 2010-9 Act July 2010), the Polynesian 2009 Loi du pays on the protection of local employment have subsequently been revoked by the French Conseil d’État as for being too restrictive and is still being a matter of political debate.

Industrial Relations very much resemble those in France, marked by union (conflictual) pluralism with a mixed of French union antennas and home-grown unions, including indigenous led trade unions (USTKE in New Caledonia; O Oe To'oe Rima and Otahi in Polynesia) as well as union involvement as social partners in the joint management (with employer associations and the relay of Territorial authorities) of social insurance and all matters relating to social welfare at large. As in France, sector based (branch) bargaining provides a fairly high level of union coverage guaranteeing working conditions across the board. Yet, a noticeable fragmentation of the labour market, with a hike in labour hire in New Caledonia and the dramatic rise of self-employment in Polynesia in a context of a depressed labour market and poor level of job creation has been identified as worrying trend. It is fair to say that indigenous as well non-indigenous labour organisations alike are altogether contributing to decent work to all, although indigenous led unions are more likely to be engaged in direct representation of indigenous workers, as in the case of Otahi in Tahiti, a

---

8 http://www.dtenc.gouv.nc/portal/page/portal/dte/dossier/theme_emploi/Emp_local
newly formed union actively involved in the organising of cleaners and other non-qualified workers at the fringe of the labour market.

All in all, labour organisations are not only instrumental in advancing working conditions through their industrial arm and collective representation, but they’re also pivotal in the struggle for decent living standards, either directly through political activism or indirectly within the parameters of institutionalised social dialogue, including importantly their participation in the management of social welfare (a matter of union internal division in Tahiti). As a matter of fact, in the wake of the campaign against the cost of life and social inequalities, unions’ efforts over the last few years have translated into substantial increases in minimum wages (up to +5% in New Caledonia) in addition to active social and fiscal dispositions to increase the purchasing power of low-income earners or families on welfare payment.

**Contextualised comparison: the ‘curse of wealth’ and the ‘cage of beauty’**

To start with, it must be noted that we are talking of complex social and multi-cultural microcosms and that the observations outlined below would require much development and refinement.

First, as mentioned above, the so-called ‘conflictual pluralism’ that is characteristic of French trade unionism has been replicated in both colonies. However, beyond traditional divides in trade union ideologies, the division within the labour movement in New Caledonia and Polynesia alike (but much more so in New Caledonia) is exacerbated by indigenous issues. In short, French affiliated trade unions are accusing indigenous trade unions of being a ‘divisive’ force, and blame them for diverting trade unionism from what ‘it should be’ in order to advance their own political agenda (or merely to pursue their self-interest, in the case of indigenous trade union leaders). It is true that while indigenous people are represented by both trade unions, indigenous trade unions pursue their anti/counter colonial agenda through politics, notably in New Caledonia. And in the eye of the French this is neither right nor acceptable. Resentment was indeed expressed in relation to the fact that the political wing of the indigenous pro-independence movement was successful in placing New Caledonia on the UN list of countries to be decolonised, likewise recently in Polynesia. It must be recalled, however, that this remains a highly controversial issue among Polynesians.
Second, the two territories evolved under contrasting processes of colonial subordination. The ‘Curse of Wealth’: New Caledonia being so rich in mineral resources – the French call it the ‘caillou’, the rock – there is no much hope for indigenous people that multinational corporations will leave the place while there is so much to exploit. SMSP and Xstrata have recently invested US$3.8 billion in what is to become one of the biggest nickel mining operations in the world. The ‘Cage of Beauty’: Polynesians have been constantly told throughout their colonial history that they were a ‘blessed’ people living in paradise with no need to worry or complain because they had the best of what the world had to offer. For instance, such symbolic manipulation can be illustrated in the case of French nuclear experimentations. Unlike other A-bombs, the French ones were allegedly ‘clean’. Today the health bill linked to past nuclear related activity is rocketing, which left Polynesians heavily dependent on medical assistance and oncological expertise from the French beyond the financial compensations already paid by French authorities (hundreds of million euros a year).

Third, although the context of colonial dependency differs, the conditions of social discrimination are rather similar. Both islands face dramatic challenges in terms of social integration, as outlined, with a clear divide between the ruling class, stemming from the French, Territorial administrations, and the ‘others’, including a significant proportion of urban unemployed and working poor. Both also face a daunting problem of economic and environmental sustainability, whether because of the abundance of resources (New Caledonia) which poses the question of preservation of native habitats in the context of mining extension; or in the absence of resources (Tahiti), which heightens the dependency on welfare provisions. Further, a common issue of social exclusion and de-culturation is particularly acute along the urban/rural divide (or core/periphery in the case of remote islands), and especially for young native people cut off from their traditional way of living and lured by a Western like consumption society, which we will discuss later.

Fourth, despite having to deal with common social issues (and a common colonial ruler) New Caledonian and Polynesian trade unions (including indigenous led trade unions) are acting in relative isolation from each other. Insular dynamics also evolve in isolation from English-speaking countries of the Pacific. This is less so for Kanak people gaining access to external political representation in their quest for decolonisation (especially through the Melanesian ‘fer de lance’). This can be explained by two factors: Melanesians and Polynesians are quite
distinctive peoples with exclusive cultures. The lack of English proficiency is definitely a major obstacle for both communities to reach out to other Pacific islands, New-Zealand and Australia.

**Focus on indigenous labour activism**

In both regions, the prevalence of indigenous trade unions in the representative chessboard exacerbates union rivalry. The dominant, French-led, trade unions – affiliated to the Confédération française démocratique du travail (CFDT); the USOENC (New Caledonia) and A Tia I Mua (Polynesia) – openly condemn the political orientation of indigenous (pro-independence) trade unions, i.e., the USTKE and O Oe To Oe Rima, respectively, as well as other minor French union antennas, such as, Force Ouvrière (FO). While the USOENC and A Tia I Mua are home grown trade unions, relatively autonomous and with a long standing history, they both align themselves to the CFDT’s culture of social dialogue and business unionism, away from political activism. In contrast, indigenous trade unions fully embrace a model of political unionism. In both regions, indigenous trade unions are capitalising from having their political wing in power. This occurs much more organically in New Caledonia, through the FLNKS and the Labour Party, than in Polynesia where there is a leadership competition between O Oe To Oe Rima and Oscar Temaru, the leader of Tavini Huiraatira (Polynesian Liberation Front), President of the Territorial Government, Assembly of Polynesia.

Although French-led trade unions organise indigenous and non-indigenous workers with indifference to ethnicity – it must be noted for instance that the USOENC has been doing much to advance Kanak workers’ status and conditions throughout its history – Polynesian and Kanak indigenous trade union organisations display a distinctive racial demarcation and, especially in the case of the USTKE, a clear political motivation. It must be acknowledged that the racial component is central to the (comparative) analysis: Polynesia is much more interracial than New Caledonia where there is a notable black/white divide; multiculturalism now is the dominant feature of French Polynesia and blurs the cards of the pro-independence movement.

---

9 The CFDT also providing expert services and representative access to the ITUC.

10 Special attention to industrial relations is particularly relevant here, for several reasons: first, historically, the split of indigenous activists from the mainstream union gave the impetus to the formation of the Kanak People liberation movement (FLNKS); second, the issue of independence is quite a divisive issue between indigenous and French led unions, in a context where industrial relations find themselves engulfed in the frame of social partnership (Segal 2009); third, the Labour Party is the political arm of the Kanak labour movement.
O Oe To Oe Rima is a relatively weak under resourced trade union (in terms of organisation and membership) compared to the USTKE, which is the second dominant union in New Caledonia after the USOENC, but its leader is particularly charismatic and the uncontested Polynesian trade union voice in the media. In the view of O Oe To Oe Rima’s leader, trade unionism is a way to ‘provide traction to the struggle for independence’, which otherwise was ‘without direction’ (research interview, July 2011). Already mentioned, another Polynesian trade union (Otahi) has been on the rise lately (after a split from FO) and is based on an organising model. Otahi’s leadership is sympathetic to the Polynesian Liberation Front but not politically branded as anti-colonial. Interestingly, Otahi’s leadership recognises that, much more than the Capital, the Territorial administration (and its politico-bureaucratic class) is the ‘enemy’. Their organising success relates much to the fact that this union networks along traditional family lines (rather than occupations), which makes sense ethnographically as Polynesian societies are based on kin structures. Melanesian social organisation is rather based on clans and tribes. Hence the USTKE’s slogan: ‘Usines Tribus, Même Combat’ (Factories, Tribes, Same Struggle) (http://ustke.org/). The foundation constitution of the USTKE (drawn by former Kanak union activists) was, indeed, a definite racial and political statement explaining why Kanak workers had to create their own trade union:

Us as a People are different and the ‘cultural’, ‘social’ and ‘political’ distinctiveness of Kanak workers are improperly represented by existing unions (...) Before colonisation, our society was a rich civilisation, a culture based on ancestral rules which command respect; a culture that the colonial (brutal) forces wanted to break but that is still alive and standing and which is our distinctive identity (...) We are numerically superior but economically subordinated (our value systems not being the same) and we are considered as inferior beings (...) The exploitative violence of capitalism does not suit the Kanak way of life (...) We are a colonised People, our dignity has been scorned; we seek to regain our freedom and we will carry on the struggle till we see the day of an independent and socialist Kanak country... [author’s translation of extracts of the 1981 USKE foundation statement] (also see Israël 2007: 285-286).

Thirty years on, the interview conducted with one of the foundation members and co-leader of the USTKE echoed this foundation statement. While, quoting an ex-(murdered) Kanak political leader, he explained that the challenge of independence was ‘to manage inter-dependencies’. ‘After all’, he concluded it was just ‘a matter of dignity’.
Challenges to citizenship: engaging the youth and balancing the Economy

In the presence of a legal and industrial relations framework that is providing a rather solid institutional background for decent working conditions in both Territories, up-skilling and access to employment are seen as the way forward to reduce broader social inequalities. In Polynesia, employment statistics are showing that low-qualified men and especially the youth have been particularly impacted by the economic downturn: in between 2007 and 2012, youth job rate has dropped by an estimated 32%\textsuperscript{11}. In New Caledonia, while unemployment levels have overall remained fairly stable although slightly on the increase to reach 12%, it is estimated that 36% of job seekers are in between 20 to 30 years old, around the same proportion of those are unskilled. This has prompted New Caledonia to engage a series of policy initiatives, June 2013, to target youth unemployment and further promote access to vocational training. There is already a range of educational resources in place whilst continuous vocational training is a compulsory requirement for employers; the challenge rather lies in the connectivity of the youth to the labour market, and especially bridging the gap with the indigenous youth who often find themselves in a situation of double social exclusion: of the labour market and from traditional means of subsistence and community support.

If access to employment and up-skilling is at the lower end of the labour market represents the main area of concern, union officials in both Territories are reporting the existence of a ‘glass ceiling’ at the other end, with native employees and especially indigenous people being under-represented in the ranks of management. There is thus a call for positive action to break this ‘glass ceiling’, a call for a so-called ‘Océanisation des Cadres’ that is also supported and echoed by most labour organisations.

As outlined, in a context of an institutional setup that in each Territory is conductive to decent working conditions and protective of employees’ rights, labour market participation is regarded as being the key policy challenge to address economic disparities and nurture social inclusion. However, inequalities have to be understood in broader terms and require forward-looking policy making aimed at balancing and diversifying the economic activity and cascading down its dividends (and public investments) to community-based (sustainable) development: a viewpoint commonly shared by social partners (unions and employer

\textsuperscript{11} Points forts de la Polynésie Française, Études, 2012. ISPF, p.7.
associations alike). The USTKE 2014 Labour slogans were precisely along those lines: ‘equity’ (‘rééquilibrage’), ‘(local) employment’ and ‘citizenship’.

**Research avenues**

Beyond the need to further document employment relations in French Pacific Territories, three avenues for further research can be identified. Considering the endogenous character of the dynamics at play in each context and their unique internal complexity, the first question that comes to fore is to whether it is relevant to conduct a comparative analysis? Are we comparing apples with oranges? It is believed, however, that identifying commonalities among differences may help reveal the very determinants of colonial subordination. In other words, a ‘contextualised’ comparative exercise (Locke and Thelen 1995) would provide a ‘structural’ dimension to the analysis.

The first research avenue would then be to identify and analyse the major ‘fault lines’ and ‘sticking points’. For instance, ethnographic singularities and the degree of industrialisation and economic development (which explains much of the rich Caledonian labour history) constitute two principal fault lines. Mechanisms of colonial governance and the politics of cooptation – e.g., the promotion of a ‘shared destiny’ in New Caledonia – are common ‘sticking points’. This would include giving attention to both objective and subjective forms of subordination and accommodation.

The second research avenue relates to the impact of wage labour, consumerism and property, all of which are at odds with traditional values, social organisation and modes of organic solidarity. Such research should place emphasis on the issues of economic and environmental sustainability and well-being. It could be argued that, controversially, the more people are distant from Capitalism, the better off they seem to be! This parallels the latest call from the Global South indigenous social movement: ‘we don’t want to live better, we want to live well’.

The third research avenue would be to provide a specific focus on indigenous dimensions of labour politics. For instance, to what extent trade unionism is a vehicle of emancipation as well as being an instrument of social control? As much as wage labour is ‘unnatural’

---

12 La marche du 1er-Mai de l’USTKE prend des accents politiques: http://www.lnc.nc/article/pays/defiler-c-est-voter
(especially for the ‘nature-men’ as Polynesians like to call themselves), unionism as an institutional by-product of capitalism is itself not a native species. So can liberation from colonial (capitalist) rule and access to full citizenship be fought for through trade unionism? What are the repertoires of contention? How are the notions of sovereignty, autonomy and independence to be conceived, politically articulated and contested (internally as well as externally)?

References


