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Frédéric RÉGENT, *Les Maîtres de la Guadeloupe. Propriétaires d'esclaves 1635-1848*

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REFERENCES

Frédéric RÉGENT, *Les Maîtres de la Guadeloupe. Propriétaires d'esclaves 1635-1848*, Paris, éditions Taillandier, 2019, 432 p., ISBN : 979-1021-03666-6, 23,90 €.

- 1 In 1763, at the end of the disastrous Seven Years War, the French government was relieved to be able to trade the whole of New France to Britain in order to recover the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe. The decision was testimony to the importance of the slaveowning planters who are the subject of Frédéric Régent's study. At the time, Guadeloupe, together with France's other island colonies, was the motor of the kingdom's growing capitalist economy, far more important than the northern lands that Voltaire famously dismissed as "a few acres of snow." Régent, already known for his study of Guadeloupe during the revolutionary era and his overview of the history of French slavery, now gives us a detailed history of the island's landowning elites and how they exploited the labor of enslaved Africans to build a social hierarchy and an economic empire.
- 2 Using parish records, notarial papers, and other sources, Régent follows eight generations of plantation-owners, from the original European settlers who wrested the island from the Carib Indians after 1635 to the increasingly embattled sugar barons who finally had to concede their laborers' freedom in 1848. In particular, he reconstructs the fortunes of four clans, the Caniquit, Douillard, Paviot, and Ruillier families, who were among the early settlers and whose descendants continued to own land in the island for the next two centuries. At the outset, like many other New World colonies, Guadeloupe was given over to a chartered company whose investors and

officials were rewarded with land grants, which they exploited by bringing in white *engagés*, or indentured laborers, to grow tobacco. Treated no better than African slaves, *engagés*, if they survived for three years, were rewarded with small land grants. A few of them, such as the Caniquits, became the ancestors of later generations of plantation-owners, but, even after many generations, they had few chances to rise to the level of the families whose ancestors had been among the island's original elite. In this first period of colonization, white women were scarce in the colony and white men often founded families with black or Indian women; racial distinctions were relatively fluid.

- 3 By the 1660s, Guadeloupe planters, still mostly concentrated in Basse-Terre, the western half of the island, had embraced the "sugar revolution" that had already transformed the British colony of Barbados. Sugar production required a greater investment than tobacco-growing, but the prospective profits made it worthwhile to replace white *engagés* with enslaved blacks imported from Africa. By 1671, blacks constituted the majority of the population. In the decades that followed, hitherto unexploited lands in Grande-Terre, the eastern half of Guadeloupe, were parceled out; by 1732, almost all the terrain suitable for sugar-growing had been occupied. The island was no longer a land of opportunity for new arrivals from Europe; their only chance of establishing themselves as plantation-owners was to marry a Créole woman from a landowning family. The sharp divide between wealthy families, capable not only of growing cane but also of refining it on their plantations, and smaller growers was firmly established. Elite families transmitted their wealth through carefully arranged marriages, often defying Church rules on consanguinity. At the same time, racial distinctions were taking on increased importance. Government documents now distinguished *libres de couleur*, free people with African ancestry, although *Blancs* did not become a recognized caste until 1729.
- 4 The 1730s marked a turning point in Guadeloupe's economic fortunes, as it was surpassed by the larger colony of Saint-Domingue. Although sugar-growers struggled, small plantation-owners found opportunities thanks to a growing demand for coffee and cotton, two secondary crops that could be raised on land unsuitable for sugarcane. Many of these poorer families had mixed racial ancestry, an increasing concern as government policy imposed ever harsher discriminatory laws on free people of color in an effort to forestall the emergence of a shared desire for autonomy on the part of the colonial population. By the time of the French Revolution, in 1789, Guadeloupe had become a thoroughly hierarchical society, but one whose economic underpinnings were increasingly fragile. Inheritance laws that militated against the division of large plantations meant that most owners were heavily weighted down by debts owed to other family members as their share of the property.
- 5 The revolution that broke out in France in 1789 left Guadeloupe's slaveowners scrambling both to ward off any threat to the institution of slavery and to gain advantages over other groups in the colony. The wealthiest plantation-owners were royalists, opposed altogether to the Revolution, but poorer whites embraced the "Patriot" cause in the hope that elected institutions from which free people of color were barred would give them a greater voice. In the spring of 1792, the Legislative Assembly in Paris granted rights to free people of color in the colonies. Some "Patriots" then joined with the free people of color and French sailors to revolt against the *grands Blancs*. Their victory was short-lived, as the British occupied the island at the end of 1793. Their occupation was equally temporary: in June 1794, the French republican

commissioner Victor Hugues reclaimed Guadeloupe for France. As is well known, Hugues guillotined at least 500 white royalists who had supported the British, but Régent finds that he did not decimate the *grands Blancs*, as is often claimed: the majority of them had fled the island in time, leaving primarily smaller planters to bear the brunt of republican vengeance. Equally surprising is Régent's estimate that some 9 percent of the enslaved blacks on the island accompanied their *émigré* owners. In these cases, "social and emotional relations between slaves and masters overcame the separations created by legal categories," he concludes (279).

- 6 The republican authorities sequestered *émigrés'* plantations and leased them out, rather than selling them off, which meant that the old owners were often able to reclaim them after Napoleon carried out his bloody reconquest of the island and reimposed slavery in 1802. The turmoil of the revolutionary years and the rise of new producers were especially hard on the smaller white landowners who had specialized in growing coffee and cotton; the big sugar plantations recovered better in the post-Napoleonic era, until they, too, found themselves in decline in the 1830s. By this time, French official policy was tilting cautiously but unmistakably in the direction of increased rights for free people of color and gradual emancipation of the slave population. News of the democratic 1848 revolution in France inspired so much unrest in Guadeloupe and Martinique that the local authorities announced emancipation even before news arrived that Victor Schoelcher had persuaded the provisional government to abolish slavery.
- 7 Régent sees the story of Guadeloupe's slaveowning elites as part of a larger narrative that explains how colonialism contributed to the transformation of France from a society still heavily shaped by the heritage of the seigneurial system into a capitalist economy. Although he does not spell the conclusion out, he shows that there was no incompatibility between capitalism and reliance on enslaved labor. Another important lesson from Régent's story is that Guadeloupe's slaveowners were not the racially exclusive class they often pretended to be by the end of the 18th century. Many if not all "white" families had at least one African ancestor, and free people of color made up a small but significant percentage of plantation-owners from an early date. Despite this internal contradiction, Régent shows that the island's property-owning elites were largely successful in maintaining their privileged position down to the middle of the 19th century and even beyond.
- 8 Régent's decision to organize his story around the fate of the descendants of four clans over eight generations makes it hard to follow the fate of any particular individual or lineage; sometimes, readers have to wade through long lists of landowners with similar names. After the first generation of settlers, no vivid personalities emerge from this welter of data: in this history, reconstructed primarily from parish records and notarial papers, Guadeloupe's plantation-owners remain almost as shadowy as their enslaved workers. This approach, rooted in the quantitative tradition of the French *Annales* school, does not lend itself to the psychological explorations characteristic of recent English-language plantation histories, such as Trever Burnard's *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (2004), which drew on a detailed planter diary, or Paul Cheney's *Cul de Sac: Patrimony, Capitalism, and Slavery in French Saint Domingue* (2017), which profited from a large collection of family correspondence. Many of the themes in Régent's story—the importance of white indentured workers in the early years of colonization, the rise and decline of the sugar

economy, the upheavals of the revolutionary years—are familiar from studies of other parts of the Atlantic world, but Régent rarely casts a glance beyond the shores of Guadeloupe and its associated islands, particularly Marie-Galante. *Les Maîtres de la Guadeloupe* does, however, amply justify its author's contention that a history of France's slave empire requires an understanding of the owners as well as those they exploited.

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