Citizens of the Empire? Indentured Labor, Global Capitalism and the Limits of French Republicanism in Colonial Guadeloupe

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In the early days of France's Third Republic colonial administrators on the tiny island-colony of Guadeloupe extolled the Frenchness and patriotism of the local working population, most of whom were descendants of slaves freed in 1848. Official visits, Bastille Day celebrations, and work festivals all provided officials an opportunity to praise the population's "profound attachment...to Republican institutions...their wisely liberal aspirations and respect for authority."¹ No matter how they described it, nearly all agreed that local workers of color deserved inclusion in the French nation as citizens because, in short, they were French. Officials further backed these claims with concrete legislation that solidified the political status and rights of Guadeloupean citizens. Between 1870 and 1900 the Third Republic re-established universal male suffrage on the island, reaffirmed the right of Guadeloupeans to elect representatives to the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate in Paris, and also included them in key pieces of legislation, namely the 1884 law legalizing unions and other forms of association.

By 1910, however, a strikingly different set of discourses and policies had emerged. In the face of mounting economic and social problems, colonial officials revised their conception of Guadeloupe's worker-citizens of color. In subsequent years Guadeloupean men of color retained their official status as French citizens, but the content of this citizenship diverged significantly from that held by metropolitan Frenchmen. Above all, Republican officials excluded Guadeloupeans from new forms of state assistance and benefits being offered to metropolitan working citizens. In addition, officials undercut the political rights of Guadeloupeans and limited their right to unionize and strike. By the beginning of World War I Guadeloupeans of color had become second-class citizens.

This article examines the declining status of Guadeloupean workers of color in the early Third Republic; it does so by considering the way that changes in

1 Governor's Report to the Minister of the Colonies, March 22, 1882, Fonds ministériels, Série géographique, Guadeloupe 12/136, (hereafter FM SG Guadeloupe), Archives nationales d'outre-mer (hereafter ANOM).

colonial citizenship were conditioned by shifts in the global economy and the international labor market. French colonial policy in Guadeloupe was driven by two conflicting goals: a republican ideal of political and social assimilation for Guadeloupean citizens of color; and the economic advancement of a labor-hungry colonial sugar industry. The Republic's ability to balance these two competing demands ultimately depended on conditions in the capitalist global economy and particularly international patterns of labor recruitment and employment. The dramatic shift from an inclusive to a more restrictive and racialized notion of French citizenship in Guadeloupe are thus to be understood within the context of the global capitalist economy of the late nineteenth century.

The international movement of people and goods in the late nineteenth century initially created an opportunity for the French Republic to reconcile republican and economic ambitions, and to offer black Guadeloupeans a new, more inclusive form of citizenship. In Guadeloupe, the owners of sugar plantations and factories recruited indentured workers from India and other parts of Asia to work as manual laborers in sugar fields. These contract-bound workers provided the sugar industry with a cheap and docile labor force. Guadeloupean workers benefited socially and politically from the presence of Indian indentured laborers. Indentured workers supplied the sugar industry with essential manual labor thereby freeing (at least in the imagination of local colonial officials) Guadeloupe's black workers to pursue new economic opportunities and social advancement. As long as indentured laborers toiled in the colony's sugar fields and factories, the Third Republic embraced Guadeloupean workers as French and upheld its promise of political and social equality for all citizens. Indeed, the greatest potential for Guadeloupeans of color to be included in the French nation politically, socially, and culturally occurred when the colony's sugar industry had an abundance of immigrant labor to work the fields and factories. These opportunities began to disappear at the end of the nineteenth century as the international sugar market spiraled into crisis and contract labor recruitment trickled to a halt. The closing of the contract labor trade to Guadeloupe signaled the beginning of new political and social restrictions for local-born workers of color.

Global capitalism and the international flow of labor were two key factors that shaped opportunities for political and social inclusion in the French imperial-nation state. Situating the story of Guadeloupe within the context of global capitalism offers new ways to understand the racialization of French citizenship in the early days of the Third Republic. The limits of French republicanism in Guadeloupe cannot be understood by looking exclusively at events within the Third Republic and French empire, or by appeals to the inherent

contradictions within French republicanism.² Rather, one must explore the ways that these limits—and contradictions—emerged from a French imperial project that relied upon coercive labor regimes to accommodate republican ideals to the logic of a global capitalist economy.

The Problem of Labor in Post-Emancipation Guadeloupe

The shifting terrain of citizenship in Guadeloupe is an important, though often forgotten part of the Third Republic's colonial policy and *mission civilisatrice*. In general, Guadeloupe has been viewed as an archaic remnant of an older age of imperialism shaped by sugar, slavery, and merchant capitalism.³ Indeed, a quick view of Guadeloupe in 1880 reveals a colony marked by this earlier moment of imperialism. People of color comprised more than 80% of the population; most of these individuals descended from Africans who had been transported to the island as slaves. The vast majority worked for the sugar industry. A small population of educated elites, mostly of mixed race, worked in professional occupations. The island also contained a small group of whites who formed the colony's economic and political elite; the most influential of this group owned the colony's sugar factories and plantations. Finally, the colony included a limited group of colonial administrators. A Governor appointed by the Colonial Ministry in Paris headed this administration; he was assisted by two appointed officials, the Director of the Interior and the Attorney General. The governor worked in consultation with the local legislative body, the *conseil général*.

Old and new structures of empire rested uneasily in Guadeloupe in the Third Republic. It is exactly for this reason that Guadeloupe offers a key

2 For example, Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism Between the Two World Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) and Alice Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895–1930* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

3 In comparison to North Africa, West Africa, and Indochina, Guadeloupe and the other anciennes colonies have received scant attention in recent scholarship. Notable exceptions are Benoît Fricoteaux, *Propagandes et assimilation aux Antilles françaises entre 1890 et 1946* (Lille: Atelier nation de reproduction des thèses, 2004); Myriam Cottias, "La silence de la nation: les 'vieilles' colonies comme lieu de définition des dogmes républicains, 1848–1905," *Outre-Mers* vol. 90, no. 338–339 (2003): 21–45; Céline Flory, "New Africans in Postsavery French West Indies and Guiana, 1854–1889," in *Paths of the Atlantic Slave Trade: Interactions, Identities, and Images* ed. Ana Lucia Araujo (Amherst, MA: Cambria, 2011); and Rebecca Hartkopf Schloss, *Sweet Liberty: The Final Days of Slavery in Martinique* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2009).

opportunity to study the colonial project of the Third Republic. As one of France's oldest possessions, Guadeloupe was also one of the colonies in which France pursued its policy of assimilation most actively. Assimilation would have meant the full extension of French political and social rights to Guadeloupeans, the automatic extension of all metropolitan laws to the island, and the administrative integration of the island to the metropole. At the same time, the island's recent transition from a regime of slave to wage labor made the labor question and economic productivity an explicit topic of debate in colonial policy. In the early days of the Third Republic, then, colonial officials in Guadeloupe openly sought to balance the republican ideal of assimilation with an economic goal of productivity.

Their attempts to do so, however, were shaped by the economic and social structures they inherited from the Second Empire and its response to emancipation in Guadeloupe. On March 4, 1848 the Second Republic ended slavery on French soil. The abolition decree not only emancipated slaves in the *anciennes colonies* but also granted them full French citizenship including universal male suffrage. Former slave owners and sugar producers decried the proclamation, arguing that it would bring economic crisis and social upheaval. Guadeloupean sugar producers had good reasons to predict the worst.⁴ In 1848 sugar production on the island revolved around inefficient agro-industrial complexes (*habitations-sucreries*) reliant on slave labor.⁵ Most Guadeloupean sugar planters teetered on the brink of bankruptcy and used slave labor to compensate for aging machinery and outdated techniques.⁶ Emancipation and the shift to free labor thus instigated a sea change on the island. In Guadeloupe, 87,087 (roughly 67% of the population) people, most of them working in the sugar industry, were freed from bondage.⁷ The economic effects of emancipation were

4 Sugar production dropped initially but began to recover by 1858. Lucien Casta-Lumio, *Étude historique sur les origines de l'immigration réglementée dans nos anciennes colonies de la Réunion, la Guadeloupe, la Martinique, et la Guyane* (Paris: G. Vilette, 1906), 34. Also Christian Schnakenbourg, *Histoire de l'industrie sucrière en Guadeloupe aux XIXe et XXe siècles. La transition post-esclavagiste 1848–1883* (Paris: Harmattan, 2007).

5 J.H. Galloway, *The Cane Sugar Industry: An Historical Geography from its Origins to 1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 140.

6 On the debt and precarious position of sugar producers prior to emancipation see Josette Fallope, *Esclaves et citoyens. Les noirs à la Guadeloupe au XIXe siècle dans les processus de résistance et d'intégration, 1802–1910* (Basse-Terre: Société d'Histoire de la Guadeloupe, 1992), 252–262. For parallels with nearby Martinique see Dale Tomich, *Slavery in the Circuit of Sugar: Martinique in the World Economy, 1830–1848* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1990).

7 Statistics are from Nelly Schmidt, "1848 dans les colonies françaises des Caraïbes. Ambitions républicaines et ordre colonial." *RFHOM* 1er sem vol. 87, no. 326–327 (2000): 205–244. Also see

enormous. Men and women once forced to toil in the cane fields and sugar mills were now free, and most wanted nothing more to do with the hated industry.

Intense struggles between former slaves and former masters, particularly over labor and labor practices, marked the transition from slave to wage labor. At first sugar producers sought new forms of labor discipline.⁸ The Second Empire, which effectively dismantled the political rights of ex-slaves, facilitated these initiatives. White sugar planters lobbied for, and won, formal legislation curtailing the rights of workers of color to support themselves as subsistence farmers, work irregularly, and to change jobs freely. A racialized discourse about the unformed work habits and improvident character of black workers justified these juridical tactics. Race therefore continued to play a fundamental role in structuring economic opportunities and social relations on the island.

Sugar producers, though, were not content. Hoping to reduce their dependency on “unreliable” former slaves, Guadeloupean sugar producers searched for new labor sources. They found what they sought in Africa and India. In 1852 Guadeloupean sugar producers successfully petitioned the government to bring indentured laborers to the island.⁹ Guadeloupean sugar planters initially turned to West Africa, from which they transported nearly 6,000 Africans between 1857 and 1861. They ended the trade at the request of the British government, which argued that labor recruitment in West Africa too closely resembled the slave trade. In return, the British government allowed the French to recruit laborers from British India. Between 1854 and 1889, 41,828 Indians traveled to Guadeloupe to serve five- or ten-year contracts on local plantations.¹⁰

Henri Bangou, *La Guadeloupe. Les aspects de la colonisation, 1848–1939* (Paris: Harmattan, 1987), 35.

8 For a full description of the transition see Paul Butel, *Histoire des Antilles françaises XVII–XXe siècles* (Paris: Perrin, 2002), Chapter 9; Rosamund Renard, “Labour Relations in Martinique and Guadeloupe, 1848–1870” in *Caribbean Freedom*, ed. Hilary Beckles and Verene Shephard (Kingston: Ian Randle, 1993); and Ernest Wright, *French Politics in the West Indies* (Ann Arbor: U. Microfilms International, 1981).

9 Casta-Lumio, *Origines de l’immigration réglementée*, 81–108.

10 Emile Légier, *La Martinique et la Guadeloupe* (Paris: Bureaux de la Sucrierie Indigène et Coloniale, 1905), 20. Also see David Northup, “Indentured Indians in the French Antilles,” *RFHOM* vol. 87, no. 326–327 (2000): 245–271 and Schnakenbourg, *Histoire de l’industrie sucrière*, Chapter two. The British government did place limits on this trade; it regulated French recruitment in India and also monitored conditions in Guadeloupe. The British government would eventually end transport to Guadeloupe because of the abusive work

Thus under the Second Empire Guadeloupean sugar planters created a nominally-free labor force: a population of workers who “freely” entered into a labor contract that specified long hours, low wages, and deprived them of basic civil liberties and rights that would allow them to challenge the contract legally. This workforce remained essential even after modern factories replaced the old sugar mills.¹¹ Factories did not run by themselves and sugar cane did not grow of its own accord; labor remained the essential component of production. Sugar producers did everything within their power to remind colonial officials that the colony’s prosperity depended on a marginally-free labor force.

Labor and Assimilation in the Early Years of the Third Republic

The labor policies enacted in post-emancipation Guadeloupe were not unusual. Across the Atlantic world, former slave owners undermined the liberties of former slaves and recruited indentured labor.¹² Guadeloupe might have remained faithful to this model had it not been for the momentous changes of 1870–1, which ushered in the Third Republic.¹³ In 1871 the new Republic restored the political rights of Guadeloupeans and called the island’s male citizens to elect national representatives.¹⁴ The regime also assigned new colonial officials

conditions to which the workers were exposed, the inadequate medical services offered to workers, and low repatriation rates.

- 11 Between 1861 and 1884 twenty factories replaced the more than 1,000 mills that existed previously in Guadeloupe. Fueled by steam power and equipped with steel rollers, the new factories decreased processing time and increased the amount of sugar extracted. Galloway, *The Sugar Industry*, 136; Noel Deerr, *The History of Sugar*, 2 vols. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1949–1950), 2: 537, 549; and Christian Schnakenbourg, “From Sugar Estate to Central Factory,” in *Crisis and Change in the International Sugar Economy, 1850–1914*, ed. Bill Albert and Adrian Graves (Norwich: ISC Press, 1984), 91.
- 12 On this transition elsewhere see Thomas Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832–1938* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1992); Walter Rodney, *A History of the Guyanese Working People, 1881–1905* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1981); Walton Look Lai, *Indenture Labor, Caribbean Sugar: Chinese and Indian Migrants to The British West Indies, 1838–1918* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2006); and Alex Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor: The Political Economy of Convict Labor in the New South* (New York: Verso, 1996).
- 13 Liberalizing reforms began during the last years of the Second Empire and in 1869 politicians even considered easing suffrage restrictions in Guadeloupe. See Hazareesingh, *From Subject to Citizen*.
- 14 *Gazette Officiel de la Guadeloupe*, October 1, 1870.

and established administrative rules that aspired to color-blindness in social and political policies. Guadeloupeans of color hoped that emancipation's promises of equality, liberty, and full citizenship might finally be realized.¹⁵

The Third Republic, however, was beset by problems. Political rivalries and power struggles threatened the new regime from its inception. Ideological conflicts among the Republic's supporters also contributed to the regime's woes. Republicans may have been united in their desire for a Republic, but they did not always share the same vision of the future or agree on the government's role in shaping French society. Above all, the new Republic confronted an old challenge: how to balance claims for social and political equality, particularly among the working class, while promoting economic development and the concerns of industrial capitalists who had, historically, sided against the Republic?

The issue did not simply affect Republican metropolitan rule. Stability and prosperity in the *anciennes colonies* also depended on the Republic's ability to reconcile the two claims. In Guadeloupe the clearest expression of this conflict emerged during debates over labor and labor legislation. The Third Republic had reinvested Guadeloupeans with the rights of citizenship but did not overturn the restrictive labor laws immediately, a decision that pointed to the Republic's vested interest in the economic well-being of the sugar industry and white sugar elites.¹⁶ The Minister of the Navy and Colonies deflected the issue by organizing a commission to resolve the issue. The group, which was led by the abolitionist Victor Schoelcher, met regularly in 1873 to debate colonial policies towards black working citizens in Guadeloupe, Martinique, and Réunion.¹⁷ At the heart of the debate were two competing conceptions of colonialism: one viewed colonialism as an economic endeavor in which profit drove policy; the other subscribed to more humanistic goals such as assimilation. At the head of this second group was Schoelcher, who argued against any laws that would deny black citizens basic political rights and civil liberties in the name

15 It should be noted that this conception of citizenship was gendered; the Second Republic offered the promise of universal *male* suffrage. Women in France would not receive the vote until 1944.

16 The extent to which these political rights were, and could be embraced, is, of course, another story. See the first volume of Jean-Pierre Sainton's *Les nègres en politique: couleur, identités, et stratégies de pouvoir en Guadeloupe au tournant du siècle*, 2 vols. (Paris: Septentrion Presses Universitaires, 2000).

17 Victor Schoelcher was the author of the abolition decree of 1848. He elaborated his position on immigration in the *anciennes colonies* in *Polémique coloniale* (Paris: Dentu 1882) and in Guadeloupe in *Nouvelle réglementation de l'immigration à la Guadeloupe* (Paris: Dentu, 1885).

of economic productivity. He urged instead more benevolent and uplifting policies to liberate workers and shape them into ideal citizens. The solution to the labor question in the *anciennes colonies*, he argued, was to offer the population economic, political, and educational opportunities—particularly the opportunity to become landowners.¹⁸

Nevertheless, economic concerns could not be ignored. While many commission members agreed that restrictive labor laws should be overturned, they also insisted that sugar producers be guaranteed a reliable workforce. Indentured laborers—who were not French citizens and could therefore be governed by special laws—were already working in the colonies and could aid the sugar industry. Many commission members urged the state to continue indentured labor recruitment to the colonies, arguing that immigration would allow the state to dismantle restrictive labor laws thereby guaranteeing the rights of local worker-citizens.¹⁹ Despite the concerns of Schoelcher, who argued that immigrant workers would compete with local workers and depress wages, the proposal won widespread support among the commission members and its continuation was confirmed.

In the end colonial administrators and politicians reconciled demands for social and political equality by Guadeloupean workers of color and the self-interested appeals of sugar producers for “economic liberty” in Guadeloupe and the other *anciennes colonies* through immigration. French local-born workers in the colony would no longer be subject to special work legislation. Instead they would be free to pursue new professions and opportunities deemed more appropriate to their interests and status. Meanwhile sugar production would continue with the labor of a marginalized immigrant population possessing few legal and political rights.²⁰ The colonial administrators who embraced this system rarely questioned the colonies’ dependence on sugar production or considered diversifying the colonial economy. Rather they

18 Proceedings of the Commission du régime du travail aux colonies, especially the December 15, 1873, December 22, 1873, March 2, 1874, and June 1, 1874 sessions, FM SG Généralités, 127/1105, ANOM.

19 Proceedings of the Commission du régime du travail aux colonies, December 8, 1873. Also July 15, 1874. FM SG Généralités, 127/1105, ANOM. It should be noted that Victor Schoelcher and the representative of French Guyane, Marck, lobbied against immigration, arguing that immigrants unfairly competed with local workers and lowered local wages.

20 An older variation of this idea was promoted by the Abbé Sieyès. See William H. Sewell, Jr., *A Rhetoric of Bourgeois Revolution: The Abbé Sieyès and What is the Third Estate* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 153–158 and Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787–1804* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2004), Chapter six.

were content to soothe the fundamental tensions plaguing the colony by shifting the onus of production onto a non-French working class.

Guadeloupeans into Frenchmen

The Colonial Commission debates in the early 1870s resolved—at least temporarily—competing social, political, and economic demands by lifting restrictions on local workers of color. Yet, the Commission stopped short of creating new economic opportunities for native-born (*créole*) workers.²¹ It also did not address broader demands for the complete assimilation of the *anciennes colonies*. Assimilation would have instigated two major changes: first, the integration of the “old colonies” into France as full departments; and second, the extension of all metropolitan legislation and policies to the territories and their populations. In 1875 Guadeloupean citizens enjoyed many of the same rights and duties as their metropolitan peers, but not all.²² Full assimilation would have made colonial citizens indistinguishable from metropolitan citizens and would have fully integrated them into the French nation.

Guadeloupeans petitioned for assimilation in the 1880s and 1890s. Local politicians, elites, and colonial administrators from all backgrounds called for inclusion. Indeed, few meetings of the local legislative body, the *conseil général*, concluded without passing motion for full assimilation.²³ Their claims for total integration rested on the idea that Guadeloupeans were French. According to one discourse that became commonplace in the early years of the Third Republic, the black inhabitants of the French Antilles had thoroughly assimilated to French civilization during centuries of exposure to the French. It was said that the slave population had “mixed with the metropolitan-born population whose language, religion, and manners and customs they adopted.”²⁴

21 In the early Third Republic the term *créole* referred to individuals who had been born in Guadeloupe (rather than individuals who had been born in France and settled in Guadeloupe). The term referred to all island-born individuals regardless of race or class; however, when used in reference to workers, the term *créole* almost always implied that the individual was of African-descent whose ancestors had been brought to Guadeloupe as slaves.

22 At this time, Guadeloupeans possessed nearly all the political rights of metropolitan French, including universal adult male suffrage. They were not, however, required to perform military service, a duty—or right—that many hoped to secure through assimilation.

23 In the 1880s the seat of the *conseil général* was largely occupied by white or mixed-race elites.

24 Alcindor, *Les Antilles françaises*, 91.

Abolition, which transformed slaves into free wage laborers, solidified their French status.²⁵

In this discourse Guadeloupeans qualified for assimilation because of cultural affinities that they acquired over centuries of servitude. Nevertheless it was the change in their status—from unfree to free people—rather than cultural factors that entitled them to the label of “French.” The importance of labor and productivity for national inclusion in the early days of the Third Republic—and the shifting idea of what kind of labor suited citizens—is perhaps best illustrated by the discussions surrounding two immigrant populations on the island. In part, these discourses are striking because they reversed racial hierarchies common in the late nineteenth century that placed Africans near the bottom of the order and Indians slightly higher; in Guadeloupe officials praised African immigrants while denigrating contract workers from India.²⁶

On the one hand, the local administrators and elected officials extolled the virtues of African residents in Guadeloupe. In 1884 leading members of the African-born community asked to be naturalized by the French government.²⁷ The administration and *conseil général* warmly received the request of these individuals, who had first arrived in Guadeloupe in the 1850s and 60s as indentured laborers and, upon completing their contracts, had settled in the colony and become local residents. A leading *conseiller*, Justin Marie, introduced the discussion by applauding the petitioners who, in his estimation, “follow our lives, free of contract, and who constitute an integral part of the population.” Moreover, he explained, “they contribute to the prosperity of the region...most of them being property owners.” He concluded by stating that “these men [who are] of the same race and same origin as the vast majority of the colonial population should be included in the common law as citizens and enjoy those same civil and political rights.”²⁸ Marie’s opinion was firmly supported by Alexandre Isaac, the Director of the Interior, who argued that “these foreigners...have blended into the local population whose habits they adopted, and today they

25 Ibid.

26 Prevailing racial theories at the time placed Africans at the bottom of the racial hierarchy while linking Indians with Aryan traditions. See Thomas Trautmann, *Aryans and British India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) and William Cohen, *The French Encounter with Africans: White Responses to Blacks, 1530–1880* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980).

27 African residents in Guadeloupe were considered country-less and nationality-less and consequently had to petition the French government for basic civil rights, including the right to marry. Appeals are found in FM SG Guadeloupe 72/548, ANOM.

28 *Conseil général, session ordinaire. Extrait du procès-verbal* (December 13, 1884), FM SG Guadeloupe 107/754, ANOM.

continue with their hardworking tendencies, they are a population quite worthy of [our] concern.”²⁹ The motion passed overwhelmingly.

In contrast, leading officials in Guadeloupe remained skeptical about Indian laborers. Although considered a necessity, officials criticized Indians for indolence, poor work habits, and immorality as well as for evading work, breaking their contracts, or feigning illness.³⁰ Accounts of their alcoholism, unschooled children, and allegedly tumultuous domestic lives were taken as a further indication of their inferiority. While Indian laborers also had the right to appeal for naturalization after they had fulfilled their contract, this was an exceptional status awarded to only the most honorable and disciplined of Indian workers.

Sugar factory owners openly castigated Indian immigrants, to whom they transferred a number of negative stereotypes once applied to Guadeloupean workers of African descent. Ignoring the obvious ways that the exploitative labor regime itself produced worker resistance, sugar elites depicted Indian workers as inherently “unruly,” “undisciplined,” and “violent” individuals needing constant surveillance and punishment. Despite these descriptions, sugar producers regarded indentured laborers as “a necessary evil.” Sugar factory owners were open about the fact that they preferred *créole* workers, whom they depicted as strong, fast, and conscientious. But they also acknowledged that local workers had little interest in sugar industry work. In contrast, immigrants—no matter how “uncouth,” “lazy,” or “uncivilized”—were contractually bound to work in the sugar industry. Their presence ensured that crops were harvested and sugar cane processed in a timely manner. The sugar industry therefore depended on the continued availability of immigrant laborers. Immigration, they argued, was “a question of life or death for the colony...to deprive the colony and its agricultural sector of the workers it needs is to condemn it to ruin—a ruin that is immediate and certain.”³¹

Between 1880 and 1895 Guadeloupe’s white sugar elites repeatedly asked the colonial government to secure new supplies of indentured workers from India, China, and even Annam (Vietnam). These requests were spurred by the global sugar crisis, during which the price of sugar dropped dramatically and the profits earned by sugar producers plummeted.³² Faced with mount-

29 Ibid.

30 Monthly Governor’s reports to the Minister of the Colonies, FM SG Guadeloupe 12/135, ANOM.

31 *Le Courrier de la Guadeloupe*, January 4, 1881.

32 The sugar crisis began in 1884, when the price of sugar dropped from almost 50 francs/100 kg to 32 francs/100 kg. The price of sugar fluctuated between 15 and 28 francs/100 kg between 1886 and 1908.

ing debts, sugar elites saw few options for reducing production costs other than cutting labor costs. Sugar elites consequently sought to expand the contract labor pool and displace local, Guadeloupean workers of color. Sugar producers framed their economic demands in terms of the local worker's presumed social and economic desires. In their appeals colonial elites reiterated and reinforced the connections between labor and social status established in earlier discourses. Sugar producers depicted Guadeloupeans as productive, skilled laborers who rightly loathed the sugar industry's dirty and onerous work. Guadeloupeans who worked in the industry rightly preferred skilled jobs in the factories. Sugar producers acknowledged this reality and, as a result, sought a population that was more suited to the industry's other jobs.

Thus the early decades of the Third Republic witnessed the emergence of discourses and policies that linked labor and citizenship in ways that appeared to advance claims for assimilation. In this discourse native-born Guadeloupean workers of color were embraced as French. Their history, culture, and labor preferences revealed their "Frenchness," an elusive quality determined more by habits and mores rather than skin color. Nevertheless, this was not a race-blind vision of assimilation that accepted all individuals. Rather it was a policy of acceptance that reconciled republican ideals with the exploitative logic of a capitalist system of production through the recruitment of foreign labor. As such, economic productivity remained dependent on the exploitation of labor, but this labor force was to be recruited not from the local citizenry, but from abroad. Thus, while white sugar elites and colonial officials confirmed the "Frenchness" and social rights of Guadeloupean workers of color, they also demanded new convoys of indentured laborers. Immigrant workers were to provide the sugar industry with a malleable labor force whose discipline could be enforced through deportation and whose exploitation could be justified by racial hierarchies and civilizational narratives. The capitalist organization of the international sugar economy and the economic ambitions of Guadeloupe's sugar plantations thereby forced the Republic to delimit the republican ideal of universal rights for all of Guadeloupe's sugar workers. Forced to choose between the economic health of the colony and the rights of citizens, the Republic endorsed a third option: the creation of a secondary pool of unfree labor. Through the creation of a dual labor system, the Third Republic ultimately found a way to balance the competing demands of a colonial policy of assimilation based on republican ideals and a colonial economy based on a capitalist mode of production.

Frenchmen into Peasants

In the years that followed assimilation won widespread support from colonial officials, local politicians and Guadeloupean elites—including leading sugar producers. In 1882 Guadeloupean Deputy Gaston Gerville-Réache authored a law to assimilate Guadeloupe, which was supported by a number of influential colonial and metropolitan officials including Victor Schoelcher. In spite of this support, the measure did not win the requisite votes in the Chamber of Deputies. Although bids for assimilation failed, officials did not abandon the position that Guadeloupeans were essentially French and that Guadeloupe should be treated as a department of France.³³ Nevertheless, subsequent appeals for assimilation were muffled by larger concerns. Guadeloupean demands paled in comparison to the broader economic problems afflicting France in the 1880s. Likewise new colonial projects overshadowed the plight of the old colony. Finally, political instability and social unrest in the metropole drew attention away from colonial affairs.³⁴

The colony itself experienced many of the same problems plaguing metropolitan departments. Like France, Guadeloupe suffered considerable economic problems during the 1880s and 1890s. For the island this economic upheaval resulted from fluctuations on the international sugar market. The island was likewise riven by political tensions between conservatives and socialists. Finally, colonial officials expressed numerous concerns about local workers. Although immigration helped to free Guadeloupean workers from the sugar industry in theory, there were few other jobs available on the island. Officials worried that lack of economic opportunities might lead working class citizens towards unions, strikes, and socialist politics that would undermine the Republic.³⁵

33 Officials, politicians, and elites voiced their continued support for, and desire of, full assimilation during the annual meetings of the *conseil général*. The issue was also discussed at the Congrès colonial national held in conjunction with the 1889 Universal Exposition in Paris. At the meeting colonial officials and lobbyists issued a motion strongly supporting the immediate assimilation of Guadeloupe and other *anciennes colonies*. The discussion can be found in *Recueil des délibérations du Congrès Colonial National Paris 1889–1890, t. 1* (Paris: Librairie des annales économiques, 1890), 169–193.

34 A contemporary perspective on this shift, and particularly the role that global economic pressures played in the reassessment of colonial policy, is found in Marcel Dubois and Auguste Terrier, *Les colonies françaises. Un siècle d'expansion coloniale* (Paris: Challamel, 1902), 374–397.

35 The socialist party developed under the leadership of Hégésippe Légitimus and received broad support from black working-class voters. Socialist politicians won key political offices in the 1890s and 1900s.

Colonial officials responded to the island's problems with policies that resembled metropolitan reforms.³⁶ In the 1890s colonial administrators tried to create economic opportunities for Guadeloupean workers of color and buffer them from "questionable" political influences by turning wage laborers into peasant farmers.³⁷ Over the next decade colonial administrators promoted smallholding as an ideal occupation, and peasant farmers as ideal citizens. Happy in their situation and free from economic or political concerns, the smallholder and his family would ultimately help to reform society and promote social harmony on the colony. This, in turn, would help stabilize the republic. As in the metropole, French labor in Guadeloupe was to be defined as small-scale farming as done by the independent peasant.

At first, colonial officials considered ways to support Guadeloupe's tiny peasantry, most of whom lived in the mountainous regions of Basse-Terre. Governors encouraged the *conseil général* to extend credit to worthy smallholders. In addition, they applauded metropolitan legislation granting tax reductions to secondary crops—namely coffee and cacao—grown by smallholders in the mountains.³⁸ There were also attempts to improve agricultural instruction on the island and to hire an agronomist who would help local growers.

Beginning in the mid-1890s colonial administrators undertook the active constitution of a smallholder class. In a series of letters written to the Minister of the Colonies in early 1894, Governor Pardon sketched the issues driving the policy. On the one hand, he wrote, *créole* workers despised the idea of laboring for someone else and were, as a result, unreliable and poor workers.³⁹ On the other hand, he argued, immigrant laborers, particularly indentured workers from India, were "more docile and less free, because they are under contract." Indian contract laborers possessed fewer political and legal rights than local workers, which diffused the possibility of collective action and thus made them remarkably useful for plantation and factory work. As a result, island

36 This was part of a larger effort to stem the rural exodus. The idea was fully elaborated in Jules Méline, *Le retour à la terre et la surproduction industrielle* (Paris: Hachette, 1906).

37 Interestingly Victor Schoelcher first advanced the idea of peasant farming in the colonial commission in 1872. He argued that peasant farmers would buffer the colony from social and economic divisions. Commission du régime du travail aux colonies, December 15, 1873, FM SG Généralités 127/1105, ANOM.

38 See the opening speeches of the Governor of Guadeloupe before the *conseil général* in 1889, 1891, and 1892 and Report from the Governor, June 1892, FM SG Guadeloupe 13/140, ANOM.

39 Governor's Report to the Minister of the Colonies, June 29, 1894, FM SG Guadeloupe 203/1229, ANOM.

employers “greatly desire the re-opening of Indian immigration.” Nevertheless, he admitted, *créole* workers, who had few alternatives to working in the sugar industry, viewed foreign workers as a threat.

Governor Pardon suggested that colonial officials resolve the problem by reconfiguring the island's workforce. Immigrant labor, he argued, was “indispensable,” but only possible if the administration were to free *créole* workers from wage labor. “For this,” he continued, “one could develop a concession system in the island's state lands. The lands would be completely suitable for coffee and cocoa production, which would be very remunerative.” One could, he continued, give each interested family a plot of two hectares and, in doing so, expose them to the freeing effects of property. In short, Pardon suggested that the administration could create a new class of smallholders. By providing the *créole* workforce with a small plot of land, the workers could be freed of the negative effects of wage labor.

A year later Pardon offered a more concrete policy. He suggested reopening “official” immigration, but under one condition. “Immigration,” he wrote, “is only morally possible if *créole* workers are given access to property”⁴⁰ “I would like it to be possible,” he continued, “for the Administration to give 100 *créole* workers a concession of land of at least one hectare each for every 100 immigrant workers introduced to the colony. Immigration is indispensable for large property, but its only chance of lasting success depends on creating small property owners.” The smallholder, he argued, was the future of the colony. In the margins of the report the Minister of the Colonies scribbled, “Encourage the Governor in the creation of *la petite propriété*.”⁴¹

The proposal would have redeveloped vast areas of the colony according to an idealized vision of rural France. In addition it would have transformed Guadeloupean workers of color into peasant farmers who would confirm their aptitude for the truest form of “French” labor: farming. Peasant farmers would stabilize the colony socially and politically. Far from the questionable influences of the sugar factories and the whims of the international market, peasant farmers would be immune to economic, political, and social troubles. Thus, assimilation and integration meant dividing Guadeloupe into two spheres. The sugar industry was to dominate the first, located in Grande-Terre. In this region administrators were willing to concede to the economic demands of local planters, essentially granting their claims that the economic interests of

40 Governor's Report to the Minister of the Colonies, April 21, 1895, FM SG Guadeloupe 203/1229, ANOM.

41 Ibid.

capitalists should take priority over the social and political rights of workers. Small farms were to occupy the second sphere located in Basse-Terre. Here Guadeloupean citizens would find their true calling as French peasants, and ultimately realize the vision of freedom and liberty that many of them had expressed in the immediate post-emancipation period. This conception of freedom privileged social and political equality over economic imperatives, and expressly challenged the idea that to be “free” was to be able to sell one’s labor to an employer in the sugar industry.

Disappearing Labor, Disappearing Citizens

Ultimately plans to reconstitute Guadeloupe as a rural department failed. Pardon’s proposals remained just that; Guadeloupeans were not transformed into peasants, and Guadeloupe was not remade into an ideal French countryside. Instead, Guadeloupe and Guadeloupeans experienced a different kind of transformation. Rather than becoming prototypical French peasants, the population became surprisingly “un-French.” A tangle of reasons contributed to the shift, but economic factors best account for the particular timing of the turn.

In the late 1890s and early 1900s new developments in the global market—including increased market integration, heightened competition and protectionism—coincided with, and exacerbated, economic problems within France and the French empire. Conditions deteriorated rapidly in Guadeloupe. As the price of sugar dropped to twenty-five francs per one hundred kilograms, the island transformed its trade surplus of 1.5 million francs to a deficit of 4.2 million francs.⁴² Staggering amounts were drawn into the trade deficit, and currency became scarce. By mid-1895 the colony and the sugar industry stood on the brink of financial collapse. Sugar producers struggled to pay their creditors. In fact, 1895 would mark the beginning of a series of defaults and foreclosures in which local economic elites began to lose their hold on the Guadeloupean sugar industry.

The disappearance of a government-supported labor recruitment program preceded the shift. By the turn of the century sources of immigrant labor began to evaporate. Citing abuse, neglect, and low rates of repatriation, British

42 Fallope, *Esclaves et citoyens*, 531. Also Alain Buffon, *Monnaie et crédit en économie coloniale: contribution à l'histoire économique de la Guadeloupe, 1635–1919* (Basse-Terre: Société d'histoire de la Guadeloupe, 1979).

authorities outlawed the transport of Indian laborers to the French Antilles in 1888.⁴³ Colonial officials and sugar elites attempted to fill the void by bringing Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese workers, but with little success.⁴⁴ In the early 1900s officials even considered recruiting Europeans, but found few people willing to move to the colony to work in the cane fields. By 1905 organized efforts to recruit mass populations of immigrant labor, which had been the linchpin of Pardon's plans, had disappeared.

Meanwhile the sugar industry's labor demands did not abate; high labor inputs at low costs remained central to its economic model. Indentured workers had helped planters to achieve this goal and to weather the sugar crisis of the 1880s and 1890s. Crisis struck the sugar industry once again in the 1900s, but this time sugar producers did not have recourse to cheap foreign labor provided by the state. Sugar producers nevertheless redoubled their efforts to lower production costs by decreasing labor costs. They cut wages, pushing most local workers into abject poverty. In addition, some sugar producers illegally recruited workers from nearby islands. Local workers quite rightly viewed these recruits as competitors who undercut wages.

In addition, factory owners cut production costs by reducing the amount paid for sugarcane. In the 1880s sugar factories purchased most of their sugar cane from independent producers or farmers who rented land from the factories. Far from the independent peasantry promoted by the colonial administration, this farming class was contractually tied to the sugar industry. In the 1900s sugar factory owners squeezed this group by reducing the amount paid for sugarcane, often below production costs.

Guadeloupean workers and smallholders did not accept these changes without a fight. Indeed, they did exactly what officials feared. In the 1900s Guadeloupean workers and smallholders claimed their rights as French citizens and mobilized. Guadeloupe experienced small waves of strikes in 1900 and 1902 as well as a major strike in 1910. The last of these ground sugar production on the island to a halt and temporarily crippled the industry. Through their actions local workers tried to achieve what administrators had only talked about: integration into the nation as equals. Through unionization and collective action, workers in Guadeloupe—much like workers in the

43 Schnakenbourg, *Histoire de l'industrie sucrière*, 85.

44 French officials had little success with Chinese officials, but successfully recruited Japanese and Annamite workers. These experiments, however, were an unqualified disaster. Japanese and Annamite workers both rebelled soon after their arrival in the colony. Officials returned Japanese workers home but sent Annamite workers to French Guyane, a penal colony.

metropole—tried to carve out a better life by transforming work conditions and compensation. In short, they asked the Republic to recognize them as citizens and as workers and to guarantee their rights no matter what kind of labor they performed.

The strikes, however, occurred in the midst of broader changes within France's imperial policy. Assimilation—the ideal of the 1880s and 1890s—had since given way to a new emphasis on economic development and productivity (*mise en valeur*) and the idea of association.⁴⁵ France's revised colonial policy privileged economic development over social and political concerns. Guadeloupe had been drawn slowly into this new policy in the course of the 1900s, but the implications of this shift for the local population were not entirely clear until the strike of 1910 when sugar producers and metropolitan investors insisted that the colonial government break up the strike and force employees to return to work at their old wages. In their correspondence Guadeloupean sugar producers reminded the government that a favorable resolution to “the labor issue” was essential to the colony's future. Sugar producers and their supporters no longer asked that the colonial administration resolve the issue by finding new and ample sources of cheap docile labor, which they knew to be hard to find and elusive. Acknowledging the changes that had occurred in the global labor market and driven by their own need to maximize profits derived from the sugar cane crop, they demanded that the colonial government use its power to make the existing labor pool of native-born workers compliant. Members of the Chamber of Commerce in Paris, citing their “interests in the region,” even wrote to the Minister of the Colonies to demand that he “reestablish order and peace in our unfortunate colonies for which the labor question is essential.”⁴⁶

The colonial administration eventually met the demands of sugar elites by undertaking a number of political, social, and economic reforms. Economic and labor conditions in Guadeloupe deteriorated in subsequent years as the colonial administration refused to support worker claims or strikes. Threats to bring in

45 The French colonial policy of association aimed to “uplift” and “modernize” native populations while simultaneously preserving their unique cultural systems and social structures. As Raymond Betts has explained, “Rather than attempt to absorb the native societies administratively and culturally into the French nation, France was to pursue a more flexible policy which would emphasize retention of local institutions and which would make the native an associate in the colonial enterprise.” Raymond Betts, *Assimilation and Association in French Colonial Theory, 1890–1914* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005 [1960]), xv.

46 Letter from the Chamber of Commerce Paris to the Minister of the Colonies dated March 31, 1910, FM SG Guadeloupe 221/1370, ANOM.

the military to break up local strikes effectively deprived Guadeloupean workers of the right to unionize and engage in collective action—rights that might have allowed them to push for change and reform from within the sugar industry. Other factors contributed to the shaping of a politically-weakened working class. Like other colonies, Guadeloupe possessed few institutionalized forms of aid.⁴⁷ Factories distributed assistance to workers, thereby discouraging worker protest. The governor also had a small fund, which he distributed to “deserving” individuals. In dire economic times, workers found it necessary to comply with the demands of administrators and employers, or face hunger. Through these measures Guadeloupean officials and sugar elites created a new system of labor discipline and control. Guadeloupean workers of color found themselves integrated into a new colonial system of unfree labor organized to meet metropolitan economic interests and the dictates of a capitalist economy.

In addition, the colonial administration backed the exclusion of Guadeloupean workers from new rights and benefits extended to workers and farmers in the metropole by the Third Republic. Between 1900 and 1912, Guadeloupeans were left out of key pieces of legislation regarding accident insurance, work hours reductions, and medical assistance, all of which offered metropolitan rural populations new resources and benefits. Moreover, Guadeloupeans did not receive legislation that strengthened the collective power of workers. Guadeloupeans were not included in the 1909 law that allowed unions to take on some of the functions of cooperatives and to purchase machines, equipment, tool, and other supplies. Guadeloupean workers were likewise left out of a law that created rural mediating boards (*conseils de prud'hommes*) and offered new forms of credit to rural workers and smallholders.

By the end of the decade the Guadeloupean population had been pushed back into the sugar industry—both in a practical sense and in the imagination of colonial officials. A familiar discourse resurfaced as Guadeloupean workers returned to this most “un-French” form of labor. Terms such as “lazy,” “ignorant,” and “superstitious,” which were once reserved for indentured laborers, were once again applied to Guadeloupean workers. Where officials and elites once extolled the French qualities of the local populace, they now questioned the population’s fitness for citizenship. As this discursive transformation occurred, the real political and social rights of Guadeloupeans also diminished. By 1910 the French citizens of Guadeloupe had been reduced to mere colonial citizens who had to prove their worth to the Third Republic through economic productivity.

47 Hospice and hospitals served the neediest, but officials even reduced or cut these services.

Conclusion

On the eve of World War I, Guadeloupean workers possessed a form of citizenship unequal in rights and status. Long-formed associations between labor and citizenship helped to justify and reinforce their second-class status. In the first years of the Third Republic, when immigrant labor had been abundant, sugar industry work had been portrayed as undesirable and inappropriate for French citizens. *Créole* workers who worked in the industry were disassociated from the work they performed by their disdain for the sugar industry and their desire to find better opportunities as independent farmers. Their economic aspirations confirmed the “Frenchness” of Guadeloupean workers, and justified calls for assimilation and departmentalization. Ultimately, however, economic upheaval and the disappearance of immigrant labor, coupled with new colonial policies, undermined this idyllic vision of Guadeloupe. In the face of economic crisis, Guadeloupeans would be locked into jobs once characterized as “un-French.” The shift would be accompanied by a new racialized discourse that marked Guadeloupean workers, and their labor habits, as uncivilized and unworthy of inclusion in the nation as full French citizens.

This dramatic transformation in the status of Guadeloupean workers ultimately emerged from an antinomy at the heart of the Third Republic’s colonial policy. On the one hand the Third Republic sought to extend republican ideals to the colony, even holding out the possibility of full political and legal assimilation for Guadeloupean workers of color. At the same time, the Third Republic refused to give up the dream of a productive and prosperous sugar industry in Guadeloupe despite the fact that the its producers claimed that the only way for it to keep apace with global sugar production was through a cheap, controllable labor force. Colonial officials initially balanced the social and economic demands of workers and the capitalist imperatives of sugar producers through the recruitment of indentured labor. As this labor pool disappeared, however, colonial officials eventually privileged the economic aspects of French colonialism over republican ideals, and enacted policies that created a new set of marginally-free laborers from its own citizenry.