Frédéric Régent, *Les maîtres de la Guadeloupe: Propriétaires d'esclaves 1635–1848*.

Paris: Tallandier, 2019. 427 pp. (Paper €23.90)

This book is an enormously valuable overview of the continuities and shifts of French Caribbean slave society that will be of interest to a wide range of specialists of Caribbean, African diaspora, and Atlantic World histories. Frédéric Régent starts from the premise that in this historical subfield, “the dominated are more studied than the dominant” (p. 8), and he seeks to explore the experience of slaveowners from the rise of slave society in Guadeloupe to its downfall. Drawing on extensive archival research, he tells this sweeping story in a way that retains a sense of granular detail, with an emphasis on demographic and economic data. He shows, for example, how the use of European *engagé* laborers persisted through the middle of the seventeenth century, with no real impetus to shift away from this model until the “sugar revolution” of the 1660s. African descended enslaved people went from 20 percent of the population to nearly 60 percent in the years from 1654 to 1671. Therefore, it was only well after this transition that a formal body of slave law was finally created, and somewhat later that the category of “*blanc*” was used at all.

Régent makes a convincing case that the family should be seen as the crucial unit of analysis for understanding the economic and social evolution of the island, starting from the fact that most sugar plantation owners in 1796 had family roots going back to the seventeenth century. This landholding class became a rigid oligarchy due to a combination of challenges that played out over generations. On one hand, there was the need to keep the whole enslaved labor force and manufacturing elements together with a large piece of land rather than allowing them to be divided up among heirs from one generation to another. Two legal practices followed from this imperative. First, an extended debate established that enslaved people should be treated as *immovables* before the law, and therefore not be subject to seizure by creditors. At the same time, families practiced *partage en valeurs*, a legal innovation unknown in metropolitan France at the time, which meant that partial heirs could be paid for their portion of the estate in order to keep it intact. These practices led to high levels of debt held within the extended clan—Régent quotes a contemporary who described “inheritors of immense fortunes, to which they can neither have access nor even obtain the smallest portion” (p. 231). He argues that these practices ultimately relied on massive levels of metropolitan credit, thereby highlighting the capitalistic nature of property relations compared to the metropole in the same period. On the other hand, owners of estates devoted to “secondary crops” such as cotton and tobacco were six times as numerous as the sugar plantation owners, owned more than half of the enslaved population,

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and commonly saw their estates divided up over the course of generations. The paradox is that families in this class often wanted nothing more than to enter the sugar producing elite, something they could only do through marriage. Yet if successful in this pursuit, “from being comfortable landowners they became indebted sugar producers” (p. 234).

The genealogical approach allows Régent to show that “a good number of the people reputed to be and recorded as white also have Amerindian or African servile ancestry” (p. 199), and that they were precisely the ones who were, as Schoelcher later noted, the quickest to exclude those of mixed race “who stayed on the wrong side of the color line” (p. 201). For the revolutionary era, Régent rightly places debt to metropolitan creditors at the center of his story, and also seeks to dispel the “myth of the mass beheading of great planters” in 1794, as fully three quarters of this class had left the island to escape this fate (p. 275). They were accompanied by some 9 percent of the enslaved population, a phenomenon he ascribes to the strength of “social and affective” bonds, though he is perhaps too quick to qualify these departures as “voluntary.” It is certainly striking that landowning families often had no other revenue during their years of exile in neighboring British-held islands than renting out these enslaved laborers. In the final decades of slave society, the great majority of manumissions occurred among smaller holders, not sugar plantation owners, as family debt remained a crucial piece of the equation. Even as the indemnity voted by the French Parliament after abolition was supposedly meant to help planters pay wages to the formerly enslaved, most of it went to settle debts with metropolitan creditors.

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