CHAPTER 7

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).
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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