CHAPTER TWO

MARITIME POWERS, COLONIAL POWERS: THE ROLE OF MIGRATION (C. 1492–1792)¹

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Many things have been written about the encounter between the Europeans and the Amerindians, the collapse of pre-Columbian societies and the establishment of European colonial empires in the Americas. Despite much sophisticated research, some images and clichés are nevertheless still prevalent, like the idea of a continent conquered by a handful of people. Yet one knows that the conquistadors were rapidly reinforced by important contingents of indigenous people and that the numbers question was crucial from the very beginning of European settlement. *Mutatis mutandis*, the situation was comparable in many other areas, as in Canada where the English ousted the French partly because of their larger presence.

That said, the numbers question is also something quite relative. European forces did not only depend on migration from the old continent. Native people and slaves deported from Africa also played a very important role during the conquest and, moreover, the phase of the exploitation of American resources. Hence the necessity to have maritime power at one’s disposal, that is to say ships, sailors, technical and military capabilities. A kind of triangular explanation is thus necessary for the understanding of the conquest and exploitation of the Americas by the Europeans, linking colonial power, human and maritime resources. These three elements, whose combinations evolved through time and space, can only be defined by looking at concrete cases. The cases dealt with here will concern the period between Christopher Columbus’s discovery of America (1492) and the beginning of the ‘French Wars’ (1792).

DIFFERENT RESPONSES TO THE SAME CHALLENGE (SENDING MEN)

The first question to arise is that of the number of Europeans who emigrated to overseas territories in general and to the Americas in particular before 1800. The question is simple but essential, and it is difficult to give a clear or precise answer. While research on the quantitative analysis of the Atlantic slave trade has made considerable progress since Philip Curtin’s census of 1969 (recently enriched by a remarkable data base on CD-ROM) and while the Atlantic slave trade is now one of the most studied migratory movements in history, the same cannot be said of European overseas migrations before 1800.2 The many studies of the question that are available deal mainly with questions pertaining to living conditions before departure and on arrival. There are far fewer statistical studies of the migratory phenomenon in the strict sense of that term.3 While a great deal of information is available on certain aspects of this question (French migration to Canada), we know less about others (indentured servants [engagés]), and in some cases (freebooters, for example), the information is no more than fragmentary.

When they do exist, the statistical studies are not necessarily all based on the same criteria. Some take into account all departures, while others look at ‘net’ departures without always specifying how the latter are calculated. Mulattoes are sometimes counted as white, and sometimes counted separately.4 Less information is available on some geographical

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3 The study of European migrations seems to have inverted the methods used by studies of the Atlantic slave trade. The latter began by looking at the question of the “numbers game” and gradually produced first-rate statistical data that now have the indirect effect of allowing us to arrive at a better understanding of the trade’s regional and African dimensions. We already know a lot about European demography, and that knowledge has helped to encourage research into the question of the factors that led Europeans to migrate, and the problems of gender and status (contract laborers). Other lines of research have analysed expatriates as members of colonial societies. European migratory movements in the strict sense have not been studied to the same extent.

4 This explains, for example, the considerable discrepancy between the estimates of the white population in the Caribbean given by Pieter Emmer: in P.C. Emmer and Magnus Mörner, European Expansion and Migration: Essays on the Intercontinental Migration from Africa, Asia and Europe (New York and Oxford: Berg, 1992) and David Watts (The West Indies: Patterns of Development, culture and Environmental Change since 1492 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).