
H-France Review Vol. 20 (August 2020), No. 147

Olivier Grenouilleau, *Fortunes de mer, sirènes coloniales: Économie maritime, colonies et développement: la France, vers 1660-1914*. Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2019. 239 pp. Maps, tables, figures, notes, and index. €24.00 (pb). ISBN: 978-2-271-12521-7.

Review by Pernille Røge, University of Pittsburgh.

In *Fortunes de mer, sirènes coloniales*, Olivier Grenouilleau—longtime historian of the French slave trade and maritime commerce—has gathered eleven of his previously published articles and book chapters and updated them for this volume. Written between 1997 and 2015, and presented with a new introductory chapter, the collection centers on the relationships between French colonial commerce and domestic economic development across three centuries. Engaging bodies of scholarship the contours of which have been shaped by Fernand Braudel, Ernest Labrousse, François Crouzet, Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, Jean Meyer, Paul Butel, and others, Grenouilleau aims to intervene in weighty historiographical debates about early French capitalism, the role of the French state in economic development, the entrepreneurial nature of merchants in French maritime communities, continuity and rupture between the first and the second French colonial empires, and the significance of the maritime economies in driving French industrialization. While the chapters are uneven in their analytical depth, Grenouilleau’s well-crafted introduction, original insights, and revisionist arguments make this volume well worth reading.

The chapters are organized chronologically and divided into three sections. The first section, entitled “Lorsque la France s’ouvrait à l’Atlantique colonial,” narrates the story about early modern French colonial expansion. According to Grenouilleau, early expansion was driven by the entrepreneurial efforts of merchants associated with the Newfoundland fisheries. Attaching themselves to a larger expanding Iberian Atlantic system, merchants from Saint-Malo, Rouen, and La Rochelle readily switched from local to long-distance trade and brought into existence a regional French maritime capitalism before Jean-Baptiste Colbert started pushing state-sponsored expansion into the Atlantic (chapter two). Once the state actively encouraged expansion through the creation of chartered companies, it reached a compromise with maritime merchants that laid the foundation for the spectacular growth of the French maritime economy in the eighteenth century. For Grenouilleau, this compromise—though constantly renegotiated—was an original response to rival European expansionist forces, rather than a delayed response as some have maintained (chapter three). Moreover, while historians such as Chaussinand-Nogaret have argued that a dynamic and innovative nobility spearheaded early overseas expansion (unlike a bourgeoisie more interested in spending its accrued capital on penetrating the second estate), Grenouilleau stresses that only a section of the nobility participated in maritime commerce, and those who did were no more dynamic than merchants from the third

estate. Moreover, the nobility who did participate were predominantly those who had fallen on hard times and sought to use profits gained from long-distance trade to remake themselves (chapter four). Grenouilleau observes that in these early years of French colonial expansion France was unable to send over as many subjects to its American colonies as other European powers. However, in his view, this scarcity of French colonial settlers did not impede the development of a French colonial commerce underpinned by the labor of enslaved Africans (chapter five).

In section one of the volume, Grenouilleau's close attention to merchant communities, especially to their practices and business cultures, enables him to make compelling observations about shifting logics of maritime capitalism over the long term—a theme he develops further in the remaining chapters. However, it is sometimes difficult to dive deeper into his analysis because of the absence of references in some of the chapters. Chapter two, for instance, is a meditation on André Lespagnol's research on the merchant elite of Saint-Malo in the age of Louis XIV, but it includes no other reference to scholarly works on this topic.^[1] Chapter three, a discussion of the role of the state in French maritime expansion, does not have a single reference. This can lead to a somewhat frustrating read in an otherwise thought-provoking chapter. Grenouilleau argues in the chapter that we should move away from a Manichean reading of state-merchant relations in which the state is seen as an obstacle to economic development while *le négoce* is presented as a dynamic force rebuffed by the state. Instead, we should understand the compromises made between state and merchant entrepreneurs as mutually beneficial. Grenouilleau thereby posits a dualism that ignores the porous boundaries between the state, finance, and merchant communities that historians such as Daniel Dessert and Philippe Minard have pointed to.^[2] A lack of references makes it unclear if Grenouilleau is even cognizant of these complexities.

In part two, "Succès et mirages du 'beau XVIIIe siècle,'" Grenouilleau moves his analysis into the eighteenth century. Between 1720 and 1792, he argues, trade between France and the Antilles was nationalized—both the direct commerce between France and the colonies or the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Pointing out in chapter six that there was nothing inevitable about French entry into the slave trade, he explains in chapter seven that the nationalization of commerce between France, Africa, and the Antilles was based around regional ports and had no notable economic impact on a national scale. Nor did the spectacular growth of the colonial economy lay a foundation for industrialization whose seeds instead can be found in northern and eastern parts of France. Relying on the familiar notion of the "two Frances," but turning it somewhat on its head, Grenouilleau sees the maritime centers of western France as regions of peripheral and artificial development that did not translate into any long-term development but proved debilitating instead (pp. 110, 118). In chapter eight, he explains this paradox by pointing to a particular form of "relational" capitalism (one that relied on families and networks) that undergirded eighteenth-century French maritime and colonial commerce (as opposed to an "anonymous" form of capitalism that won out in the following centuries) (pp. 121-122). While this form appeared successful for both the ancien régime state and maritime merchants, it fostered bad habits that would come to cripple the potential for economic growth and industrial take-off in many of France's key ports in the nineteenth century.

In chapters seven and eight, Grenouilleau thus begins to answer one of the key questions posed in this volume: the impact of colonial commerce on French domestic economic development. In his view, and despite all the eighteenth-century splendor and attraction of some of the maritime

ports of the Ponant, colonial commerce contributed little to domestic economic development on a national level. In making his case, Grenouilleau is often persuasive, but he also leaves open a number of questions. For instance, if parts of northern and eastern France were on a different trajectory, did these regions not operate according to the logic of relational capitalism? Had they already begun to embrace an anonymous form of capitalism? When downplaying the role of eighteenth-century French maritime commerce as an engine for long-term growth, Grenouilleau implicitly posits parallel and more forward-looking developments in other regions of France without telling us, however briefly, what they were.

Part three, entitled “Des colonies à l’empire coloniale?,” focuses on the years from ca. 1780 to 1914 and explores notions of continuity and rupture between France’s ancien régime colonies and its second colonial empire of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. According to Grenouilleau, the French Revolution and Napoleonic Empire disrupted the ancien régime maritime colonial economy, but its *modus operandi* continued beyond the revolution among new merchant families. It did so alongside new forms of empire. Already from the 1780s, some voices began to propose a reorientation of empire and colonization toward Africa based on a “legitimate commerce” (p. 134), although it was ultimately political and ideological rather than economic incentives that pushed France deep into Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (chapter nine). Like its predecessor, Grenouilleau underlines, this African-based colonial empire did not aid French economic development on a national scale, even if it did become economically profitable to a few industrialists.

So, where did this leave French maritime commerce after the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars? According to Grenouilleau, it was not plunged into long-term crisis in the nineteenth century, as historians often claim. This era included periods of growth and prosperity, although Grenouilleau acknowledges that this question requires a lot more research still (chapters ten and eleven). In 1914, the percentage of colonial commerce of all French international commerce was back up to the levels it had reached in the late 1820s after decades of decline. But by this time, French maritime regions largely owed their continued activities to their trade with other industrial countries rather than with the French colonies. At the time of the Second World War, colonies were about power and prestige for the French state; they were not major sources of economic growth. At the national level, once again, France was therefore not transformed by the colonial sirens.

Whether one agrees with Grenouilleau’s overall thesis that colonial commerce may have periodically promoted regional growth over the course of three centuries but not domestic growth on a national scale, his volume is stimulating and often delightfully provocative. His straddling of three centuries, furthermore, allows for fruitful comparisons across periods that are often not studied together and opens up to a rethinking of moments of growth, crisis, and decline. However, the focus on long-term developments also runs into problems. As Grenouilleau himself points out, the historiography on French maritime commerce is uneven at best, with a wealth of scholarship on the long eighteenth century (from Colbert to the Revolution and Napoleonic Empire) and comparatively few studies on the seventeenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. Grenouilleau seeks to overcome these shortcomings, but his chapters and interventions become more conjectural and prescriptive than analytical and persuasive as he moves into less well-studied areas and periods.

In summary, specialists will find a wealth of arguments to wrestle with in this book. In contrast, newcomers to the field might find some of the historiographical controversies with which Grenouilleau engages to be somewhat confusing since they are not always clearly introduced. Since he references solely francophone literature when speaking of French economic history, although drawing on an anglophone literature when including comparisons with other European empires, historians working in the anglophone academic context may also be puzzled by the remarkable absences of works in English on the key themes Grenouilleau explores. Though all chapters have been updated, Grenouilleau does not include neither classic nor recent studies in English that are relevant to his work, including Louis Robert Stein's work on the eighteenth-century French sugar business, Jeff Horn's work on eighteenth-century French economic development, Paul Cheney's book on early modern capitalism and Saint-Domingue, Emma Rothschild's study of the impact of the Atlantic economy on *la France profonde*, and David Todd's exploration of continuity and rupture in the post-revolutionary period to mention but a few.[3] One can merely speculate about the reasons for these absences, but they certainly should not turn away scholars working beyond *l'hexagone*. Grenouilleau is to be commended for succeeding in making these chapters, published over a period of two decades, speak so easily to each other. It allows *Fortunes de mer, sirènes coloniales* to stand as a contribution that is more than the sum of its parts.

NOTES

[1] André Lespagnol, *Messieurs de Saint-Malo: Une élite négociante au temps de Louis XIV* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 1997).

[2] Daniel Dessert, *Argent, pouvoir et société au grand siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 1984); Philippe Minard, *La fortune du colbertisme: État et industrie dans la France des Lumières* (Paris: Fayard, 1998).

[3] Louis Robert Stein, *The French Sugar Business in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988); Jeff Horn, *Economic Development in Early Modern France: The Privilege of Liberty, 1650-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Paul B. Cheney, *Cul de Sac: Patrimony, Capitalism, and Slavery in French Saint-Domingue* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Emma Rothschild, "Isolation and Economic Life in Eighteenth-Century France," *The American Historical Review* 119, no.4 (2014): 1055-1082; David Todd, "A French Imperial Meridian, 1814-1870," *Past and Present* 210, no.1 (2011): 155-186.

Pernille Røge
University of Pittsburgh
per20@pitt.edu

Copyright © 2020 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views

posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172