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Frédéric Régent, *Esclavage, métissage, liberté: La Révolution française en Guadeloupe, 1789-1802*. Paris, Grasset, 2004. 507 pp. Maps, tables, appendices, notes, bibliography, index. 22€ (pb). ISBN 2 246 64481 X.

Review by Laurent Dubois, Michigan State University.

In this book, based on prodigious and unparalleled archival research, Frédéric Régent provides a rigorous examination of the lives and actions of the population of Guadeloupe during the revolutionary period. The work builds on and extends the foundational work of Anne Pérotin-Dumon and Jacques Adélaïde-Mérlande, but also sets a new standard for research on the French Antilles. [1]

The political mobilization of slaves, imperial warfare, and social transformation that took place in Guadeloupe during this period—an era of profound change that reconfigured the governance and geography of France’s Atlantic empire—were tightly linked to events in Saint-Domingue, Martinique, French Guiana, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, Grenada, metropolitan France and beyond. But Guadeloupe’s Revolution involved a particularly dramatic set of transformations and reversals. An era of widespread political mobilization on the part of planters, free people of color and the enslaved that began in 1789 was interrupted by a brief British occupation in 1794. A few months later, however, a small French mission arrived in the colony, armed with the National Convention’s decree abolishing slavery. (In 1793, French administrators in Saint-Domingue, facing widespread slave revolution and the threat of foreign invasion, had conceded emancipation in the colony, and the National Convention had ratified and extended this local decision to the entire French empire.)

The promise of freedom gained recruits for the French mission in Guadeloupe commanded by commissioner Victor Hugues enabling them to take back the island from the British. During the next years, Hugues created a regime that brought together aspects of an egalitarian and revolutionary order with authoritarian governance and various forms of labor coercion, all the while using Guadeloupe as a launching pad for invasions of nearby British islands and extensive corsair missions against enemy and neutral shipping. In 1801, an uprising of troops of African descent in Guadeloupe, angered by the actions of a metropolitan administrator, created an autonomous regime, though one that insisted on its loyalty to France and demonstrated its willingness to use coercion to maintain plantation prosperity. In 1802, a mission of French troops, sent by Bonaparte to re-assert metropolitan control, arrived on the island and began disarming soldiers of African descent. This incited a widespread uprising that led to several weeks of war between local rebels defending emancipation and racial equality and the French, who were intent on dismantling the revolutionary order in the colony. In the wake of the defeat of the insurgents, several hundred of whom committed suicide at Matouba rather than surrender, slavery was re-established on the island. Guadeloupe’s population would have to wait until 1848 for a second emancipation. The events in Guadeloupe, meanwhile, helped to propel the parallel, and ultimately successful, struggles in Saint-Domingue, which culminated in Haitian independence in 1804.

Régent’s work draws together and presents an impressive catalogue of archival sources about the period in Guadeloupe, and provides a careful bibliography that will be a touchstone for all future researchers working on the topic. These include the wealth of documents in the French National Archives, both in Paris and Aix-en-Provence, the military archives at Vincennes, as well as previously little-used sources from the period located in the Departmental Archives in Guadeloupe. The core of the study is the methodical use of the rich notarial records from throughout the island that exist for the revolutionary

period, many of them preserved only in Guadeloupe. Indeed one of the author's major contributions has been to fully investigate and make use of these important archival collections that complement those available in metropolitan France.

Régent's work with the notarial records parallels that carried out on free people of color in Saint-Domingue by John Garrigus, Stewart King, and Dominique Rogers. But it also combines these sources (along with the *état civil* records from the period), with a series of remarkable censuses produced in Guadeloupe to provide extensive examination of the enslaved and their experiences after emancipation.[2]

Régent's first chapter provides a thorough history of colonial legislation surrounding slavery and the treatment of free people of color in Guadeloupe—probably the most detailed treatment to date of the question. He illustrates both the significance of the laws, and the space that sometime separated legislation from practice, through well-chosen individual examples taken from notarial records. Régent then turns in Chapter 2 to the organization of work on the plantations, carefully analyzing the forms and hierarchies of labor and the links between these hierarchies and racial identification. Chapter 3 examines the “daily life” and “culture” of Guadeloupe's slaves and free people of color. One aspect of these early chapters that stands out is his interesting treatment of the relationship between Catholic priests and the enslaved. Régent nicely presents the legislation surrounding evangelization, as well as interesting sources (including some from archives in Rome) written by missionaries themselves, but places these sources in relation to the small number of existing baptismal records and notarial records that illuminate the role of Catholicism in Guadeloupe. His treatment of the issue is subtle and an important contribution.

The following two chapters lead us into the events of the Revolutionary period, primarily through a focus on the free people of color in Guadeloupe. Their numbers in the colony were small in comparison to Saint-Domingue or even Martinique, yet their role in society and particularly in shaping the revolutionary years was crucial. In Chapter 4, Régent brings this community alive in all its diversity and complexity, examining the structures of discrimination that were put in place and the many ways in which free people of color responded to, and in many ways circumvented, them. Because his research is grounded so carefully in notarial records that provide extensive details about their material and family life, his treatment provides us with interesting individual trajectories that embody the complexities of colonial society. It also provides us with broad re-interpretations of the history of the island. Régent proves, for instance, that free people of color were drastically under-counted by censuses from the pre-revolutionary period. He also shows quite convincingly that, even as juridical structures sought to create barriers between whites and free-coloreds, economic and family relationships crossed these boundaries constantly. His treatment of the often successful struggle for education and literacy within this community is particularly well-drawn and compelling.

Chapter 5 then turns to a close examination of the political mobilization of free people of color and the enslaved during the early years of the Revolution. Here again, the level of detail surpasses that of other studies, and we are given a careful examination of the complexity and diversity of political engagement that continues to use carefully situated individual stories to illustrate the broader situation. In Chapter 6, Régent then turns to an examination of the post-emancipation period. Here the strength of his careful demographic approach is demonstrated most fully, for Régent is able to provide answers to questions that have escaped historians in the past about the full economic and social impact of emancipation in Guadeloupe. He draws on previously unused sources from the military archives in Vincennes to provide the most detailed examination yet of the constitution of the armed forces in Guadeloupe, which were made up primarily of former slaves, but whose officer class was dominated by free men of color. He also uses censuses and other records to provide a careful reading of the extent of flight from the plantations

during the period. This chapter is an enormous contribution to our understanding of what freedom meant and how it was experienced in Guadeloupe during this period.

The final chapter turns to probably the most dramatic moment of Guadeloupe's Revolution: the period from 1801 to 1802, when the revolutionary order of racial equality was attacked by metropolitan administrators and defended by Guadeloupe's free people of color and former slaves. The narrative of these events is enormously strengthened by the detailed life and community histories that have preceded it, which make clear the stakes and the complexities of the struggles of 1802. In combination with an edited collection of primary sources, which Régent co-authored with two other historians in 2002, this chapter provides the most detailed analysis of these struggles now available. This is quite a contribution, for the events of 1802 are both crucial for our understanding of the broader course of events in the Caribbean during these years and a central, and quite controversial, crossroads of contemporary debate about the status and future of the French Antilles.[3]

Régent's style is fluid and tempered, and he carefully braids individual stories with his broader analytic points. His chapters are organized thematically rather than chronologically, but nevertheless present an engaging story of the social transformation of Guadeloupe. Because of the richness of the research on which the book is based, the book opens up many fascinating questions that Régent might have explored and theorized more fully. Régent describes the changing politics surrounding racial identification, and argues convincingly that color often influenced and shaped work hierarchies, the possibilities of freedom, and the formation of social networks. But, as he also notes at a few points, social and political status also influenced the ways in which color was marked in the documents.

It is obviously difficult to know exactly what combination of forces led to particular forms of racial marking at particular moments. But at times Régent is perhaps too confident about the direct relationship between what was marked in the documents and the ways in which color was envisioned and experienced in the society. Further examination of the ways in which designations of color linked to particular individuals either shifted or stayed the same over time—work that could parallel the detailed investigation of this question for Saint-Domingue carried out by John Garrigus—could help us understand more about the intersection between identification within documents and the broader social practices in the society. Finally, the significance of Régent's reflections on the history of Guadeloupe would have been strengthened if he had framed them in a slightly broader framework, particularly in relation to the work on other slave societies of the Caribbean. His discussion of sexuality, for instance, both in terms of master-slave relations and in terms of the lives of free people of color, could have been sharpened and improved through a dialogue with the increasing literature in Caribbean and African-American Studies on these topics. Hopefully, building on the foundation of the work presented in this book, Régent will explore some of these questions in future work.

With this magnificently-researched and written book, Régent has established himself as a leading historian of the French Antilles, whose work will play a central role in expanding and solidifying our understanding of these societies whose often-marginalized history is central to our understanding of France and the Americas.

NOTES

[1] In the late 1970s and 1980s a number of works were published about Guadeloupe's revolutionary period, notably Anne Pérotin-Dumon, *Etre patriote sous les tropiques: La Guadeloupe la Colonisation et la Révolution (1789-1794)* (Basse-Terre: Société d'Histoire de la Guadeloupe, 1985) and Jacques Adélaïde-

Mérlande, *Delgrès: La Guadeloupe en 1802* (Paris: Kharthala, 1986). Pérotin-Dumon's magisterial second book, *La ville aux îles, la ville dans l'île: Basse-Terre et Pointe-à-Pitre, Guadeloupe, 1650-1820* (Paris: Kharthala, 2000), a long-term study of two ports on the island, also provides extensive analysis of the revolutionary period. I have explored the history of Guadeloupe during this period in *Les Esclaves de la République: l'histoire oubliée de la première émancipation* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1998) and *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

[2] John Garrigus, *Sons of the Same Father: Race and Citizenship in Colonial Haiti* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, forthcoming); Stewart King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig: Free People of Color in Pre-Revolutionary Saint-Domingue* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001); Dominique Rogers, "Les libres de couleur dans les capitales de Saint-Domingue: fortune, mentalités et intégration à la fin de l'Ancien Régime (1776-1789)" (Ph.D. dissertation, Université de Bordeaux-III, 1999).

[3] Jacques Adélaïde-Merlande, René Béléus, and Frédéric Régent, *La Rébellion de la Guadeloupe, 1801-1802* (Gourbeyre: Société d'Histoire de la Guadeloupe, 2002).

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