# PATRIOTS, ROYALISTS, AND TERRORISTS IN THE WEST INDIES

## The French Revolution in Martinique and Guadeloupe, 1789–1802

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WILLIAM S. CORMACK

# Patriots, Royalists, and Terrorists in the West Indies

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# PATRIOTS, ROYALISTS, AND TERRORISTS IN THE WEST INDIES

## The French Revolution in Martinique and Guadeloupe, 1789–1802

# Introduction

In September 1789, two months after crowds stormed the Bastille in Paris, merchant ships from Bordeaux arrived at the colonies of Martinique and Guadeloupe in the eastern Caribbean bringing news of the French Revolution. The effect of this news, and of the tricolour cockades worn by the ships' passengers and crews as symbols of revolutionary liberty and national sovereignty, was dramatic. The colonial governors' efforts to prevent the wearing of such cockades sparked riots in the ports of Saint-Pierre in Martinique and Pointe-à-Pitre in Guadeloupe, and these riots began a protracted and convoluted revolutionary struggle in the Lesser Antilles or, as French contemporaries referred to them, the *Îles du Vent* or the Windward Islands. While smaller than the colony of Saint-Domingue, their sugar and coffee production made the Windward Islands valuable components of France's commercial economy. This production depended on slave labour, and the black slaves who worked the plantations vastly outnumbered the free population, which was itself divided along racial, economic, and social fault lines. The grievances and agency of the colonial population shaped the ensuing struggle but so did metropolitan influences. This study provides a history of the French Revolution in Martinique and Guadeloupe.

The arrival of news, ideas, and language from France provided a script for revolutionary action in the Windward Islands, a script that was revised periodically by new metropolitan communications. Rumours of emancipation sparked an abortive slave revolt in Martinique at the end of August 1789 and revealed the depth of white fears regarding the fragility of the slave system. Revolutionary symbols and rhetoric encouraged white resistance to colonial elites and provided new political identities: *petit-Blanc*, or poor white, and merchant supporters

of the revolution called themselves “patriots,” while referring to the governors as “despots” and to their planter enemies as “aristocrats.” Travellers’ accounts and newspaper reports, as well as official announcements, undermined royal authority in the colonies and provoked local claims to national or popular authority. While planters used existing colonial assemblies to arrogate legislative authority, defying metropolitan regulation of trade, a popular committee in Saint-Pierre claimed to speak for “the people” and denied the legitimacy of both the colonial assembly and the governor general. The colonial revolution, however, was deeply ambiguous. White colonists demanded freedom for themselves but also wanted the maintenance of black slavery. White insistence on strict racial hierarchy poisoned debates on citizenship for the *gens de couleur*, the colonies’ free people of colour, whose aspirations for equality were clear before 1789. Planters sought greater colonial autonomy yet backed governors against popular challenges to the islands’ elites.

The revolution’s ambiguity in the Windward Islands continued after 1789, as did competition between rival claims to legitimate authority. A bitter factional struggle escalated to civil war in 1790, and the representatives from France sent to end the conflict failed to reconcile the two sides or to impose principles of the liberal revolution. In 1792 planter-controlled colonial assemblies in Martinique and Guadeloupe rebelled against metropolitan authority under the banner of the old monarchy. A single frigate captain defeated this counter-revolution by both undermining its legitimacy and by promising equality to free people of colour, all the while reassuring masters that the French Republic would not threaten slavery. The tensions and contradictions within the republican regimes subsequently established in Martinique and Guadeloupe diminished the colonies’ ability to resist British conquest in 1794. In the context of international war, new agents of metropolitan France regained control of Guadeloupe and delivered the most radical of revolutionary scripts: the abolition of slavery and the Jacobin Terror. Yet racial and political ambiguity also characterized this radical regime. At the same time, planters in Martinique collaborated with the British occupation to maintain slavery and to isolate the colony from all notions of liberty and equality.

Developments in the colonies were not part of the traditional history of the French Revolution.[1] Yet since 1989 the study of upheaval in the Caribbean, along with the colonial questions facing metropolitan legislators, has shifted from the specialized field of colonial history to

become part of mainstream revolutionary scholarship.[2] Growing historical interest in slavery and its abolition, however, has focused almost exclusively on developments in Saint-Domingue. This concentration reflects the reality that in 1789 Saint-Domingue was the richest colonial possession in the world. Moreover, the colony was the site of a massive slave revolt in 1791 that threatened French control. After representatives of the metropolitan government proclaimed freedom for Saint-Domingue's slaves in the summer of 1793, the National Convention voted the decree of 16 *Pluviôse* in February 1794 that abolished slavery throughout the French empire. Subsequent revolt against Napoleon Bonaparte's attempt to reintroduce slavery in 1802 led to the declaration of the independent Republic of Haiti in 1804. Given the world-historical importance of the events in Saint-Domingue, many historians now refer to the entire period as the Age of the French *and* Haitian Revolutions.[3]

Revolution in the Windward Islands has not been neglected entirely. The recent historical literature on the interaction of slavery and revolution in the French Caribbean includes two important studies of developments in Guadeloupe. In *Esclavage, métissage, liberté: La révolution française en Guadeloupe 1789–1802*, Frédéric Régent emphasized the limits of revolution and emancipation in the colony since racial distinctions and forced labour continued after the formal abolition of slavery in 1794. People of colour in Guadeloupe who were free before 1789 enjoyed relative prestige and prosperity under the new republican regime, while the newly freed slaves continued to work the colony's plantations as "cultivators." Régent argued that this reflected limited free-coloured militancy before 1789, as well as complex ties of solidarity and clientage between whites and free-coloured people that persisted after 1794.[4] Rather than social structures, Laurent Dubois's *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean 1787–1804* centred on revolutionary conflict in Guadeloupe. He argued that slave insurgents at Trois-Rivières in 1793 succeeded in integrating themselves into the Republic by claiming to be "citizens" and that Guadeloupe's revolt against Bonaparte's new administration in 1802 influenced Haiti's War of Independence by exposing the French state's intention to restore slavery. Thus the study placed events in Guadeloupe in the context of a larger struggle for liberation. Moreover, if the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen of 1789 provoked debates on whether freedom and equality were possible in the colonies, Dubois contended that it was slave and free-coloured insurrection in the Caribbean that gave these revolutionary principles universal meaning.[5]

This assertion that colonial revolution influenced European ideology fits into a larger trend within the historical literature that emphasizes globalization.[6] While investigating the French Revolution's origins in the context of global trade and finance in the eighteenth century represents a promising research subject, the "global turn" risks exaggerating the colonies' importance to the debates and decisions of revolutionary assemblies.[7] Moreover, it could minimize or downplay the extent to which the metropolitan revolutionary dynamic shaped colonial upheaval. In his recent book, *You Are All Free: The Haitian Revolution and the Abolition of Slavery*, Jeremy Popkin argued that the radical and completely unauthorized decision of metropolitan commissioners in Saint-Domingue to proclaim freedom in June 1793 for slaves who would fight for the Republic was not the direct outcome of the slave uprising. Rather, it was taken in response to a crisis in the town of Cap Français arising from conflict among the colony's free population. Popkin argued that a further series of contingencies, rather than any inevitable logic of revolutionary ideology, caused the deputies of the National Convention to condone the granting of general liberty in Saint-Domingue and to vote the decree of 16 *Pluviôse* in February 1794.[8] Beyond its emphasis on contingency, Popkin's study demonstrated that the complex revolution in Saint-Domingue cannot be reduced to a struggle between masters and slaves. Destabilizing conflict among free colonists also played a critical role.

This was even more the case in the Windward Islands, which did not experience a slave uprising on the same scale as that which occurred in Saint-Domingue. If the importance of political struggles between rival white factions has been downplayed in recent literature, these clashes were crucial to the revolution in Martinique and Guadeloupe. Fear of slave revolt was always present, as was the tension between white resistance to racial equality and desire for allies among the *gens de couleur*. Central to the factional conflict, however, were revolutionary ideas, language, symbols, and practices from metropolitan France. These were the elements of a new political culture, through which power could be exercised or contested. This new political culture undermined the authority of Old Regime administrators, but it also generated a struggle between competing claims to a new legitimacy based on the nation's or the people's will.[9]

The role and impact of revolutionary political culture in Martinique and Guadeloupe can be clarified by consideration of the transmission and reception of news and information from France and of its

circulation and interpretation within the colonies. A recent history of France's colonial empire between the Treaty of Utrecht and the end of the Seven Years' War suggests the value of applying aspects of communications theory. Kenneth J. Banks's *Chasing Empire across the Sea: Communications and the State in the French Atlantic, 1713–1763* provides a comparative study of Canada, Louisiana, and the Windward Islands, as well as an Atlantic-world revision of the understanding of absolutism and its relationship to empire. Banks broadly defined "communications" as the gathering, analysing, displaying, storing, and disseminating of information and representations of authority, suggesting that communications should be understood to encompass shipping patterns and public celebrations as well as official correspondence and merchants' letters. He argued that while the absolutist state was relatively successful in monopolizing communications in metropolitan France, it faced serious difficulties in obtaining, analysing, and controlling information in the colonies as part of its effort to shape the social order and to maintain metropolitan control.[10]

Three of Banks's themes regarding the problems encountered by the metropolitan state in reinforcing its authority and shaping colonial society have direct relevance to revolutionary struggles over political culture. First, he examined the significance of delays in the transmission of important news from France to the colonies, and of confusion regarding its implications, using the announcement of peace in 1713 as a case study.[11] News of the outbreak of revolution in 1789 had an even bigger impact in the colonies, while the nature of its dissemination, and how it was received, was even more threatening to colonial authorities. Second, he contended that the French state sought to control marginal groups in colonial society by curtailing their freedom of communication. He refers to convicts, soldiers, and slaves, arguing that the *Code Noir* represented an attempt to encode and control slaves by circumscribing their learning, travel, and assembly.[12] The colonial administration's inability to control the communication of revolutionary ideas and symbols after 1789 threatened not only its domination of slaves but also free people of colour and *petits Blancs*. The republican authorities who superseded governors and colonial assemblies associated with the Old Regime, as well as the royalists who returned to power in Martinique under British occupation and Victor Hugues's Jacobin-inspired regime in Guadeloupe, also sought to control the communications of slaves and *gens de couleur* with limited success. In discussing the absolutist state's reliance on merchant networks to carry dispatches and to gather

news in the colonies, Banks developed a third theme that might be applied to the revolutionary struggle. He argued that local elites became "culture brokers," who mediated between the state and colonial society, and that competition and conflicting interpretations among these colonial elites weakened metropolitan administration in the French Atlantic.[13] Arguably the French Revolution divided colonial elites even more than the Seven Years' War. Different representatives of the state, sent by successive metropolitan regimes after 1789, introduced different variants of revolutionary political culture and, with the support of local allies, these culture brokers sought to enforce compliance in the colonies.

This study of Martinique and Guadeloupe is less concerned with the mode or logistics of sending information across the Atlantic, however, than with how the contents of communications helped to influence colonists' political action and understanding. Such a hermeneutic approach fits with the notion of the "revolutionary script" that Keith Michael Baker and Dan Edelstein suggest can be applied to the comparative study of revolutions. Revolutionaries have been intensely self-conscious of previous revolutions, which offered frameworks to define situations, suggest actions, and project narratives. They did not merely follow existing scripts but adapted, revised, and transformed them.[14] The modern revolutionary script was written during the French Revolution of 1789, according to Baker, because this was the historical moment when the idea of revolution as descriptive fact was replaced by a conceptualization of revolution as self-conscious act. French revolutionaries, unlike previous rebels acting against established authority, perceived themselves to be seeking to achieve universal values that were at risk in an uncertain political drama.[15]

A possible criticism of this concept, however, might be that it implies that historical actors, like those in a theatre, follow scripts that dictate their actions: it could suggest that they have no volition or free agency. To be clear, the concept of the "revolutionary script" is not used here to deny historical agency or to imply that the actions of colonial actors were ideologically determined by metropolitan patterns. Rather, the notion of scripting is applied to the revolution in Martinique and Guadeloupe to argue that such patterns were more influential than recent studies suggest. News from France provided different groups in colonial society with a cause to justify resistance to metropolitan control, to the domination of colonial elites, to racial inequality, and even to the continuation of slavery. The revolutionary script did not play out in the

colonial setting without tensions and contradictions, of course, and successive representatives of the metropolitan state brought revised versions that altered the narrative. Opponents of the revolution in the colonies also found inspiration and direction in metropolitan scripts of counter-revolution or conservative reaction. Concepts, symbols, and language provided roles to be played, rhetorical lines to be delivered, and ideological understanding of a struggle that linked the colonies to France and beyond.

This study examines the revolution in the Windward Islands from 1789 to 1802. It considers developments in Martinique and Guadeloupe within a single geographical setting, given the important commercial, administrative, and political links between the two colonies. The international context of war and great power politics reinforced these links. Beyond addressing the relative neglect of this archipelago in the historical literature, the study argues that the metropolitan revolutionary dynamic helped to shape developments in the colonies. Its focus is on the political struggle to apply or implement revolutionary principles in the Windward Islands but also to qualify or resist them. Thus it considers the words and actions of "patriots" and "aristocrats," republicans and royalists, radicals and moderates. This study involves an exploration of the role of political culture, emphasizing the power of revolutionary ideas and language to provide a script for political action, as well as their ambiguity in the colonial setting. These political actors sought to control the transmission and circulation of news, rhetoric, and symbols, and they tried to monopolize the interpretation of this information. The questions of whether liberty applied to slaves and whether equality applied to *gens de couleur* were crucial to the revolution in Martinique and Guadeloupe. Conflict over these questions occurred within a larger struggle for power among different factions; however, it was a struggle shaped by conflicting conceptions of authority and driven by competing claims to legitimacy. Given the crucial interaction between colonial upheaval and metropolitan political culture, therefore, what follows is a history of the French Revolution in the Windward Islands.

**Dramatis Personae**

The Old-Regime Administrators:
Charles-Joseph Hyacinthe du Houx, comte de Vioménil (governor general, 1789–90)

Pierre-Xavier-François Foullon d'Écotier (intendant, Martinique)
Baron de Clugny (governor of Guadeloupe, 1786–92)
René-Marie d'Arrot (second in command, then governor of Guadeloupe, 1792–3)
Claude-Charles, vicomte de Damas (governor general, 1783–9, 1790–1)

The "Patriots":
Ruste (Martinique)
Crassous de Médeuil (Martinique)
Thoumazeau (Martinique)
Jacques Coquille Dugommier (Guadeloupe)
Thyrus Pautrizel (Guadeloupe)

The "Royalists":
Louis-François Dubuc (Martinique)
Louis De Curt (Guadeloupe)
Bellevue-Blanchetière (Martinique)
Baron de Clairfontaine (Martinique)
Romain Lacaze (Guadeloupe)

The Representatives of Metropolitan France (1791–4):
Jean-Pierre-Antoine, comte de Béhague de Villeneuve (governor general, 1791–3)
Jean de Lacoste (king's commissioner 1791; Minister of Marine 1792)
Louis-Maurice Magnytôt (king's commissioner, 1791)
Antoine Eu de Montdenoix (king's commissioner, 1791)
Jacques Linger (king's commissioner, 1791)
Donatien-Marie-Joseph de Vimeur Rochambeau (governor general, 1793–4)
Georges-Henri-Victor Collot (governor of Guadeloupe, 1793–4)

The Officers of the French Navy:
Henri-Jean-Baptiste, vicomte Pontevès-Gien (captain, *Illustre*; commander Windward Islands Station, 1788–90)
Chevalier de Rivière (captain, *Ferme*; commander Windward Islands Station, 1790–2)
Vicomte d'Orléans (captain, *Embuscade*)
Louis Mallevault de Vaumorant (captain, *Calypso*)
Jean-Baptiste-Raymond Lacrosse (captain, *Félicité*; commander Windward Islands Station, 1793–4; captain general, Guadeloupe, 1801)

Corentin-Urbain de Leissègues (captain, *Picque*; rear admiral, commander Windward Islands Station, 1793–9)

The "Terrorists":
Victor Hugues (civil commissioner, 1794–6; agent of Directory, 1796–8)
Pierre Chrétien (civil commissioner, 1794)
Goyrand (civil commissioner, 1795–6; agent of Directory, 1796–8)
Lebas (civil commissioner, 1795–6; agent of Directory, 1796–8)
Pierre Villegégu (administrator, Guadeloupe)

Victor Hugues's Critics:
Mathieu Pelardy
Hapel de La Channie
Thouluyre Mahé

The Republicans of Colour:
Bellegarde (Martinique)
Julien Fédon (Grenada)
Chatoyer (St Vincent)
Marinier (St Vincent)
Jean Kina (royalist, Martinique)

The British:
Lieutenant General Sir Charles Grey
Vice Admiral Sir John Jervis
Major General Thomas Dundas
Brigadier General Colin Graham
Lieutenant General Robert Prescott
Lieutenant General Sir John Vaughan
Governor Robert Shore Milnes
Governor William Keppel

# 1 The Windward Islands on the Eve of Revolution

On the eve of the revolution France's Caribbean colonies were sources of tremendous national wealth, but these overseas possessions were neither secure nor stable. The colonies were the basis of a commercial network that had developed since the seventeenth century around the production and marketing of colonial products such as cotton, indigo, coffee, and, above all, sugar. By the mid-eighteenth century the dramatic expansion of sugar consumption drove a thriving industry that accounted for sixty million *livres*' worth of French exports to Europe in 1785 alone.[1] This rich trade depended on the fertile plantations of the West Indies. Saint-Domingue was the most important French possession: by 1789 the annual revenue from its production had reached an estimated 180 million *livres*.[2] This was almost seven times that of Martinique or Guadeloupe, but these smaller colonies in the Windward Islands remained extremely valuable. The French decision to retain Guadeloupe rather than Canada in the Treaty of Paris of 1763 reflected the disproportionate wealth generated by the small island.[3] Yet if the colonies were valuable, they were also vulnerable. War cut communications and disrupted trade. The British capture of Guadeloupe during the Seven Years' War, along with Martinique and the other French islands in the Lesser Antilles, demonstrated the threat posed by France's imperial rivals to its colonies. Despite the return of Guadeloupe and Martinique to French control after 1763, and France's success in the American War of Independence, this threat remained in 1789. Beyond the external threat of war, Martinique and Guadeloupe were also highly vulnerable to dangers intrinsic to the colonial system. In keeping with the mercantilism of the age, the French Crown sought to prevent its colonies from trading with rival powers and to limit their commerce

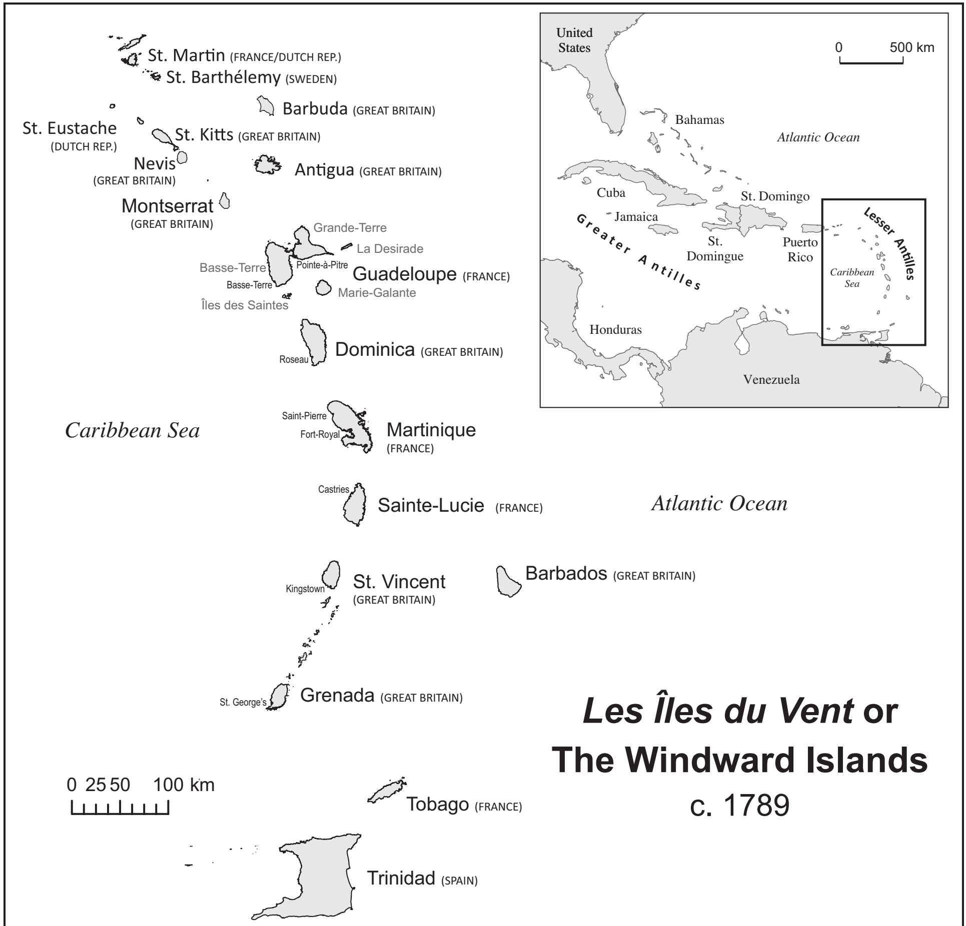
to French shipping. Planters deeply resented these restrictions, embodied in the regulations of the *Exclusif*, and such resentment fuelled demands for autonomy from metropolitan control. News of revolution in France undermined the authority of royal administrators, thus opening the door to greater independence. Yet it was the bitter tensions within colonial society that made the Windward Islands a powder keg. White colonists were socially and economically divided between the *grands Blancs*, consisting of government administrators, rich merchants, and the owners of large sugar plantations, and the *petits Blancs,* who included minor merchants and small planters, as well as the rootless population of artisans and seamen in colonial ports. This crucial division was overshadowed by the brutal disproportion between free minority and enslaved mass: the black slaves who worked the plantations made up 80 per cent of the colonies' population. If slave labour was the basis of the colonial economy, it was also a source of fear and instability: vastly outnumbered, the white population was preoccupied with maintaining control over the blacks. Socially and legally inferior to all whites, although sometimes the owners of substantial property, was a heterogeneous class of free blacks and people of mixed race known as the *gens de couleur*. This group's aspirations to civil equality with whites before 1789 challenged the racial hierarchy upon which colonial society was based. The other, even more radical challenge was the call for slavery's abolition. A small but vocal number of metropolitan liberals insisted that slavery was abominable and incompatible with the principles of reason and humanity associated with the Enlightenment. The communication of these ideological threats to the colonial system inspired fears and hopes that exacerbated the economic, social, and racial tensions in the colonies. Therefore, if the Windward Islands represented precious sources of commercial wealth in 1789, the French Revolution would expose the precarious nature of their internal regimes.

## I France's Colonies in the Eastern Caribbean

Eighteenth-century Frenchmen knew the Lesser Antilles, the archipelago of small islands curving north from Trinidad and separating the Atlantic Ocean from the Caribbean Sea, as the *Îles du Vent* or the Windward Islands. This designation was based on the direction of the prevailing trade winds, which blow from east to west, and distinguished them from the *Îles sous le Vent* or the Leeward Islands. These large islands to the west, now referred to as the Greater Antilles,

include Puerto Rico, Jamaica, Cuba, and Hispaniola, which was divided between the Spanish colony of Santo Domingo and French Saint-Domingue. On the eve of the revolution, France's colonies in the Windward Islands included Tobago; Sainte-Lucie (Saint Lucia); Martinique; Guadeloupe and its small dependencies of Marie-Galante, Desirade, and the Saints, as well as the northern part of Saint-Martin.[4] The division of the West Indies into different colonial domains was based in part on initial settlement but also on war. Some French influence remained on the British colonies of Dominica, St Vincent, and Grenada, which had been under France's control until they were granted definitively to Great Britain in 1763. The largest and most important of the French Windward Islands were Guadeloupe and Martinique. Two linked islands made up the colony of Guadeloupe, with Grande-Terre to the north-east separated from Basse-Terre by the Rivière Salée. Mountainous Basse-Terre was topped by the volcanic summit of La Soufrière, rising 1,464 metres above the sea, which overlooked the major town and administrative capital also called Basse-Terre. In contrast, the flat limestone island of Grande-Terre had no elevation above 200 metres. The town of Pointe-à-Pitre on Grande-Terre was the colony's principal commercial port.[5] If Guadeloupe's plantations had become more prosperous, Martinique had vital strategic importance: the superb natural harbour of Fort-Royal on the island's west side was France's principal naval base in the West Indies. To the north of Fort-Royal, with its fortifications and administrative headquarters, was the flourishing commercial port of Saint-Pierre. With a population of between twenty thousand and twenty-five thousand people, many of them living in imposing stone houses, Saint-Pierre was the largest town in the Windward Islands. Northern Martinique was characterized by dense forest and volcanic mountains, the highest being Mont Pelée at 1,397 metres, whereas the south featured lower summits and somewhat sparser vegetation.[6] The colonies' tropical climate made them ideal for growing crops like sugar and coffee. For all of the Windward Islands the year was divided between two basic seasons: the dry season, *le carême*, from January to May, and the wet season, *l'hivernage*, from June to December. It was during the latter that hurricanes could sweep across the islands, devastating crops and sinking any vessels outside sheltered harbours.[7]

French colonization of the Lesser Antilles began in the seventeenth century under the auspices of trading companies with royal sponsorship.[8] After the foundation of a French colony on Saint-Christophe




Map 1 "*Les Îles du Vent* or The Windward Islands, circa 1789." Map by Marie Puddister of the Department of Geography, University of Guelph.

(St Kitts) in 1625, the *Compagnie des Îles d'Amérique* established small settlements on both Guadeloupe and Martinique in 1635. Initial friendly relations between European settlers and the indigenous inhabitants were short-lived. The Caribs resisted French colonization and the ensuing warfare only came to an end in 1660, when the Caribs had been driven from both colonies and confined to the islands of St Vincent and Dominica.[9] In 1648 the *Compagnie des Îles d'Amérique* went bankrupt and the governors of Guadeloupe and Martinique become independent governor-proprietors. Jean-Baptiste Colbert, Louis XIV's great minister, was determined that the colonies should increase France's power and expand its economy. In 1664 he created the *Compagnie des Indes Occidentales*; gave it a monopoly on all West Indian trade; and sent Alexander Prouville, seigneur de Tracy, with warships and soldiers to return the islands to the French empire. Planters resented the West India Company's monopoly, and the outbreak of war with England devastated the company's profits. Colbert's vision prevailed, however, and he strengthened the commercial links between France and the Antilles. In 1674 Colbert dissolved the West India Company, placing the colonies under the direct authority of royal government.[10]

The structures established under Colbert laid the basis for colonial administration in the eighteenth century. A governor, who was a high-ranking military officer and thus a noble, represented the king in each colony. He commanded its military forces, the militia as well as regular troops, and had authority over commerce and general administration. After 1714 the French possessions in the Leeward and Windward Islands were administered separately. Saint-Domingue's governor general resided in Port-au-Prince, while the governor general of the Windward Islands was based at Fort-Royal in Martinique. Therefore, except for a brief period following the Seven Years' War, the governors of Guadeloupe and the other Windward Islands were subordinate to that of Martinique. An *intendant*, also appointed by metropolitan government, although from the ranks of the sometimes non-noble officers of the pen, assisted each governor. *Intendants* were responsible for public works, the administration of justice, the registration of royal laws, supervision of accounts for the navy and merchant marine, and above all for finances and collection of the *impôt*, a head tax on colonists and on their slaves, the only direct tax paid in the islands. While in theory there would be complete harmony between them, governors and *intendants* were sometimes rivals rather than allies.[11] The two agents of royal authority shared a number of powers in common, the most important

being the power to assemble the colony's sovereign council.[12] Created in 1645, these councils were composed of the principal administrators as well as a number of the richest planters nominated by the governor. The sovereign council was somewhat analogous to a *parlement* in metropolitan France: it functioned as the colony's high court of justice, but it also had the right to examine ordinances introduced by the governor or *intendant* and to submit remonstrances to the king. Members of the councils exercised various police powers and enjoyed a number of jealously guarded privileges.[13] If the sovereign councils demonstrated the influence of the colonies' elite, Colbert and his successors wanted colonial administration to remain independent from the planters; governors were to uphold royal will and metropolitan interests, particularly with regard to trade.

Parallel to the transition from governor-proprietors to royal administration, the colonies' economy changed from one of small-scale agriculture with a mixed labour force to a plantation system dependent on black slavery. Early settlers in Guadeloupe and Martinique grew cash crops of cotton, indigo, cocoa, ginger, and especially tobacco. Producing tobacco on small estates using white indentured servants, or *engagés*, was profitable as long as the demand in Europe was high.[14] After 1630, however, the market was saturated and prices slumped. It was then that the Dutch, who controlled trans-Atlantic trade, introduced the growing of sugar cane to the English and French Caribbean colonies. During the seventeenth century most of Europe's sugar had come from Brazil, where the Portuguese had developed a system of large plantations. The Portuguese first enslaved native Indians, but when this proved unsatisfactory they began to import slaves from Africa to work in the sugar fields.[15] English Barbados was the first colony in the Lesser Antilles to switch fully from tobacco to sugar in the 1640s.[16] By 1680 Barbados was beginning to experience soil exhaustion, but it had already provided a successful model for the rest of the Caribbean. After 1654 Dutch merchants and Portuguese Jews expelled from Brazil brought expertise in sugar growing to Martinique and Guadeloupe.[17] Sugar production required major capital investment in land but also in mills to extract the juice from the canes and in boiling houses to transform the juice into crude sugar and molasses. The planting, weeding, manuring, and especially harvesting of sugar cane were very labour intensive activities. *Engagés* were neither available in sufficient numbers nor economical to employ. Therefore, like the Portuguese before them, the French colonists imported increasing numbers of African slaves beginning in the

1660s. Guadeloupe moved first from tobacco farms to sugar plantations, but Martinique's many small holdings were also giving way to fewer large sugar estates by 1670, when the West Indies faced a crisis of overproduction. The European market was oversupplied with sugar and prices plummeted. This did not end production, however, but accelerated its concentration into the hands of fewer but richer planters. By the time prices recovered in 1690, a sugar economy had been established in Saint-Domingue and the Windward Islands had been transformed. In 1661 there were only 3,000 slaves in Guadeloupe, and even fewer in Martinique. By 1700 Guadeloupe had 73 sugar plantations and 6,700 slaves, while Martinique had 183 plantations with 14,200 slaves.[18]

Colonial trade boomed in the period of peace after 1715. Its contribution to France's economy rose rapidly in the first half of the eighteenth century and continued to grow until the revolution.[19] A high demand for sugar rewarded large investments of capital in the West Indies and, consequently, as much land as possible was put into sugar. Other tropical products remained important as well, and colonists first planted coffee in Martinique in 1720. While some food for the slaves was grown in the colonies, everything else was imported. Therefore, metropolitan merchants shipped, unloaded, and processed commodities imported from the islands, and they also exported food and all other goods demanded by the colonists. Almost as important as the direct trade between France and the colonies was the re-export of colonial products to the rest of Europe, which accounted for 32 per cent of all French exports in 1787.[20] The trade in slaves became a crucial and lucrative adjunct of the trade in colonial commodities. The demand for slaves in the French colonies rose in proportion to the expansion of sugar cultivation. Originally royal government gave chartered companies such as the *Compagnie du Sénégal* a monopoly on the slave trade, but they proved unable to meet the growing demand. In 1716 the trade was opened to *négriers* from five French ports; by 1741 this had been extended to merchants from virtually all French ports. Even when it was placed in the hands of private slavers, the trade received important fiscal concessions from the state. Goods traded for slaves in Africa were exempt from export duties, and sugar and other products purchased from the sale of slaves in the colonies received a 50 per cent reduction on entry duties to France. In 1784 the crown abolished the exemptions, which cost millions of *livres* in lost tax revenue, replacing them with a subsidy based on the tonnage of each slave ship.[21] The French slave trade expanded rapidly between 1713 and 1744, then stagnated during the middle decades of

the eighteenth century largely because of the maritime struggles with Great Britain, before growing again from 1778 to the French Republic's declaration of war against Britain in 1793.[22] Nantes became the centre of the French slave trade, and that city's merchants outfitted more than 1,400 slaving expeditions in the eighteenth century, accounting for 45 per cent of the national total.[23] Nantes prospered because of the slave trade, but all of France's great seaports and their hinterlands benefitted from thriving colonial trade and the production it stimulated: the colonies were a captive market for metropolitan flour, wine, codfish, salt beef, textiles, and many other products. Bordeaux was the most important of these port cities; its West Indian trade in 1789 had a value of 112 million *livres*.[24] The wealth generated by all of this commerce was reflected in Bordeaux's grand *Place de la Bourse*, its busy warehouses and impressive merchants' residences. Thus the Caribbean colonies, including Guadeloupe and Martinique, were crucial to the most dynamic segment of the French economy at the end of the Old Regime.

The colonies were also central to the intense imperial rivalry between France and Great Britain during the eighteenth century.[25] War revealed the close connection between colonies, trade, and sea power. Major military expeditions from Great Britain conquered the French Windward Islands during the Seven Years' War (1756–63).[26] Prime Minister William Pitt the Elder guided British strategy, advocating aggressive colonial and naval warfare to destroy the bases of French commercial and maritime strength.[27] Yet concessions to France at the peace table, principally the return of Guadeloupe and Martinique, foiled his plans. The subsequent recovery of the French Navy, which had suffered shattering defeats at sea in 1759, vindicated Pitt's insistence that the roots of French power had not been pulled out. In 1778 France declared war on Great Britain in support of the American rebels. The French Navy's victory at Chesapeake Bay contributed directly to the British surrender at Yorktown in 1781, thus assuring the independence of the United States.[28] In the Caribbean, French forces captured St Kitts, Dominica, Grenada, and St Vincent, but naval defeat at the Battle of the Saints in 1782 thwarted French plans to conquer Jamaica. In the Treaty of Versailles of 1783 ending the war, France ceded all its conquests in exchange for Sainte-Lucie and the former British colony of Tobago. French commerce expanded in the final decade of the Old Regime as sugar and coffee production boomed. For both France and Great Britain the Caribbean colonies had become the biggest depositories of overseas investment, but they were also the most vulnerable. Statesmen on both sides of the Channel

perceived that colonial trade was vital to French shipping and naval strength. Therefore when war came again in 1793, conquest of the French sugar islands was a major element of British strategy for ruining France's commercial and sea power.[29]

Wars in the eighteenth century threatened the French Windward Islands with conquest, but they also disrupted the patterns of trade dictated by metropolitan government. The French Navy's weakness enabled the British enemy to stop French merchant ships from reaching the colonies. As a result, wartime saw trade between the French islands and foreign merchants increase significantly. Such illegal trade was a direct threat to the colonial system where the colonies were the domain of the crown, and all their trade had to be conducted with metropolitan France using French ships only. Planters in the Caribbean resented this system, which benefitted metropolitan commercial interests at their expense, and they resented the colonial administrators who sought to enforce it.

## II Regulation of Trade and Resentment of Colonial Administration

Episodes of conflict at the beginning of Louis XV's reign revealed the early strength of this resentment and the weakness of colonial authority. In 1715 the crown attempted to impose an *octroi*, an additional tax to help pay for colonial defence, on the Windward Islands. After initial acceptance by assemblies of notables in Martinique and Guadeloupe, noisy popular protests forced colonial administrators to abandon the project. Poor white colonists took part in demonstrations, but resistance to the *octroi* was coordinated by rich planters in the islands' sovereign councils.[30] This resistance was minor compared to *la Gaoulé*, a revolt in Martinique two years later, which was the first serious conflict of the eighteenth century between the Caribbean colonies and the French state.[31] While the revolt was essentially a protest against restrictions on trade and constraints on the expansion of sugar production, the rebels claimed a colonial identity and colonial interests distinct from those of metropolitan France in order to legitimize their challenge to the authority of royal administrators. The mild repression following the revolt's collapse provided further evidence of the weakness of this authority. Developments similar to *la Gaoulé* followed in Saint-Domingue, where colonists revolted in 1722.

The crown crushed the rebellion in Saint-Domingue but also moved to codify its control of colonial trade clearly and rigorously in a series of

regulations known collectively as the *Exclusif*. These regulations were contained specifically in the *Lettres Patentes* of 1717 and of 1727. Those of 1717 addressed metropolitan commerce with the colonies and required ships destined for the colonies to return to their port of departure, exempted outbound cargoes from all duties save those of the *Ferme générale des Aides et Domaines*, and insisted that colonial imports be charged only 3 per cent *Domaine d'Occident* on their value. The 1717 text also regulated the re-export of colonial merchandise as well as the slave trade.[32] The *Lettres Patentes* of 1727 addressed foreign commerce in the colonies. They strictly forbade importing from or exporting to the colonies any slaves, effects, or produce from or for foreign countries. Foreign ships could neither land nor navigate within a league of French colonies, and all merchandise of foreign origin would be confiscated.[33] While these regulations clarified the royal government's intentions regarding colonial trade, the repressive edicts proved difficult to enforce. The practice of illegal or contraband trade, known to contemporaries as *le commerce interlope*, posed a constant challenge to the *Exclusif* throughout the eighteenth century. In some cases illegal trade occurred openly with the complicity of corrupt administrators, while in others it involved fraudulent claims of French ownership or of storm damage, which allowed foreign vessels to enter French colonial ports. Given the general complicity of the colonies' inhabitants, administrators and naval officers acknowledged the impossibility of stopping this traffic.[34] The French colonists' participation in illegal trade reflected a tradition of defying authority going back to the pirates who had helped to found the colonies. Fundamentally, however, *le commerce interlope* demonstrated both the failure of metropolitan suppliers to meet colonial demands and the colonists' perception that unrestricted trade better served their interests.[35]

War opened breeches in the *Exclusif,* making it even more difficult to enforce when peace returned. Even colonial administrators admitted that trade with foreigners was often necessary in wartime to maintain the colonies and to feed their slaves. During the Seven Years' War there was a de facto suspension of the *Exclusif.* Yet metropolitan chambers of commerce, representing the interests of merchants and ship owners, were powerful enough to prevent the royal government from permitting the complete opening of colonial ports to neutral vessels that the inhabitants wanted. Colonial dissatisfaction with the compromise adopted helps to explain the tepid resistance offered to British forces, particularly in the conquest of Guadeloupe.[36] Metropolitan government perceived that the influence of colonial proprietors on its administrators

had become dangerous, and the royal ordinance of December 1759, increasing the pay of governors and *intendants* but forbidding their marriage to Creole women, was an attempt to reduce this influence.[37] French planters in the Windward Islands thrived under British occupation, and they were even more inclined to engage in contraband trade when the *Exclusif* was reimposed in 1763 at war's end. Moreover, the Treaty of Paris created conditions encouraging this tendency, particularly the cessation of Dominica, directly between Martinique and Guadeloupe, to Great Britain.[38] Resentment of the *Exclusif* and the return of full metropolitan control was dramatic in Saint-Domingue, where colonists revolted against the administration of the governor general, the comte d'Estaing, in 1768–9. Poor whites opposed reforms to the militia placing them on the same level as free-coloured troops. The rebellion's leaders in the sovereign council and the *Chambre d'Agriculture*, however, had more fundamental grievances. Their challenge to the political power of royal administration and the economic power of metropolitan commerce demonstrated the existence of an autonomist spirit in Saint-Domingue.[39] Royal administrators believed that such a spirit also existed in the Windward Islands. The new governor general and the *intendant* of Martinique strongly distrusted the Dubuc brothers, planter grandsons of the *Gaoulé* revolt's leader, who had arranged the colony's surrender to the British in 1762. They accused the Dubuc clan of being "republicans" and being devoted to the system of "English government."[40] Such charges may have been exaggerated, but many planters in the Windward Islands saw the existing relationship between France and its colonies as harmful to their interests.

Following the Seven Years' War metropolitan government introduced a series of reforms to modify the *Exclusif*. Initial measures reflected the influence of Jean-Baptiste Dubuc, member of the family of Martinique planters, whom the duc de Choiseul appointed head of the *Bureau des Colonies* within the ministry of marine.[41] In 1767 the new secretary of state for the marine, the duc de Praslin, opened two *entrepôts* to enable the colonies to acquire needed provisions (but not slaves) from foreign suppliers in exchange for rum and sugar syrup: the one for Saint Domingue was located at Môle Saint-Nicolas, and the other for the Windward Islands was established at le Carénage in Sainte-Lucie.[42] This marked the beginning of the "*Exclusif mitigé*," a trade regime in which colonial administrators permitted an increasing number of exceptions to the original restrictions of the *Lettres Patentes*

while also claiming to police contraband trade, which provoked protests from metropolitan commerce.[43] The American Revolution transformed the situation. Ships from New England, no longer able to trade with British Caribbean colonies, converged on the French islands in even greater numbers than before. Yet metropolitan merchants ceased to demand full restoration of the *Exclusif*, because the rebel British colonies were now opened to them.[44] This changed in 1778 with the outbreak of war between France and Great Britain. Metropolitan chambers of commerce again called for restrictions, but British sea power prevented supplies from France reaching the colonies. Therefore, as in previous conflicts, application of the *Exclusif* was suspended during the War of American Independence.[45] French colonists in the Windward Islands supported the American rebels and fought under their governor general, the marquis de Bouillé, to capture Dominica, St Vincent, and Grenada. The very different spirit in the islands than that which had prevailed during the Seven Years' War reflected the belief by some colonists that this war was a struggle for economic liberty and greater colonial autonomy.[46]

Such attitudes, as well as the new situation created by France's treaty with the United States, made it impossible for metropolitan government to reimpose the strict principles of the *Exclusif* when the war ended in 1783. The energetic Charles-Eugène de La Croix, marquis de Castries, who had been minister of marine since October 1780, was determined to reform colonial economic policy definitively in order to achieve a balance between the interests of metropolitan merchants and ship owners, and those of colonists. This was the objective of the royal government's *Arrêt* of 30 August 1784, which introduced an expanded but clarified version of the *Exclusif mitigé*. It designated a new *entrepôt* for every colony in the Windward Islands (Saint-Pierre for Martinique, Pointe-à-Pitre for Guadeloupe,[47] le Carénage renamed Castries for Sainte-Lucie, and Scarborough for Tobago) and one for each region of Saint-Domingue, into which foreign vessels could import a range of necessities, subject to a special 1 per cent duty, in exchange for sugar syrup or rum.[48] Colonial policy in the final years of the Old Regime, however, was markedly different from the loose, often corrupt, toleration that had characterized the *Exclusif mitigé* before the American War. Castries intended that the regulation of colonial trade be enforced rigorously to preserve the monopolies of metropolitan commerce. The minister took firm measures to suppress contraband trade, including the replacement

of the ineffective customs patrols with permanent naval stations in the Leeward and Windward Islands.[49] Castries resigned in 1787, having quarrelled repeatedly with the controller-general of royal finances, Charles Alexandre de Calonne, but his policy continued under his successor, César-Henri, comte de La Luzerne, who had been governor general of Saint-Domingue. Thus royal government made significant reforms to the *Exclusif*, yet the vigorous efforts by administrators to stamp out illegal commerce and to uphold metropolitan trade privileges aroused anger in the colonies on the eve of the revolution. If this anger was more pronounced in Saint-Domingue, planters in the Windward Islands also resented the remaining restrictions on their access to foreign commerce. This resentment, expressed as opposition to "despotism," shaped their responses to 1789.

In the same context of reform in which the *Exclusif* was modified, the royal ordinance of 17 June 1787 created colonial assemblies in Martinique and Guadeloupe.[50] They replaced the *Chambres d'Agriculture*, formed following the Seven Years' War, and they were intended to give colonists a more formal role in the colonies' fiscal and economic administration to placate the autonomist spirit in the islands. The colonial assemblies were composed of the governor, the *intendant*, the *commandant en second,* the *commissaire général de la marine*, and a number of deputies. Governors and *intendants* were to convoke the assemblies annually, while between sessions a *Comité intermédiaire* of six members was to execute the assembly's *arrêtés* and prepare material for its deliberations. The colonial assemblies were not legislatures, but they were to advise the administrators on matters pertaining to commerce and agriculture, public works, and, most important, taxation. Composed almost exclusively of planters, Martinique's colonial assembly pushed in its first sessions for the burden of taxation to be shifted on to the shoulders of the commercial community in the island's ports. The assembly also called for the *impôt* to weigh more heavily on free-coloured proprietors than on white ones.[51] The colonial assembly in Guadeloupe was more concerned in 1788 to press the government to make both Pointe-à-Pitre and Basse-Terre *entrepôts*. *Intendant* Foullon d'Écotier reported to the minister that the "particular interests" of planters dominated the assembly, which he characterized as hostile to both local merchants and national commerce.[52] The sessions of the colonial assemblies in Martinique and Guadeloupe on the eve of the Revolution, therefore, point to a fundamental economic conflict in colonial society.

## III Hierarchy and Conflict in Colonial Society

Following the outbreak of civil war in Martinique in 1790, Antoine-Pierre-Joseph-Marie Barnave reported to the National Assembly that division in the colony was based on an old hatred between the planters and the merchants of Saint-Pierre to whom they were in debt.[53] Under the conditions of the *Exclusif*, or the *Exclusif mitigé*, planters in the Windward Islands had to market their produce through merchants in the colonies' ports, who they hoped would sell to metropolitan commerce at the highest possible price. These merchants extended credit for the commodities they received or were promised and dispersed the provisions and other goods they had purchased from French ships to the planters. The need for supplies, and hence credit, was constant, but colonial harvests could be reduced by poor weather or devastated completely by hurricanes. Under these conditions, planters quickly went into debt and profits had to be turned over to these local agents of commerce. Colonial debt mounted in the late eighteenth century as plantation size and the need for slaves and provisions grew. Mutual suspicion and animosity also intensified: planters accused merchants of selling their products at low prices, while buying provisions at exorbitant prices, and merchants accused planters of being careless and dishonest and of pursuing luxury rather than attempting to pay their debts. Contrasting attitudes towards the *Exclusif* accompanied these sentiments. Planters wanted free access to foreign commerce, even if this meant resorting to contraband trade. Colonial merchants, on the other hand, vigorously supported the monopoly of metropolitan commerce to force repayment of the credit they had extended.[54]

The principal objects of the planters' hostility were the commissioners of Saint-Pierre. This mercantile elite had controlled the commerce not only of Martinique but also of all the Windward Islands since 1720.[55] Their wealth enabled them to buy entire cargos from ship captains and to advance credit to planters for potential harvests. Moreover, they acted as intermediaries between the colonies and metropolitan merchant houses, many of which had permanent representatives based in Saint-Pierre who negotiated directly with the commissioners. Guadeloupe's colonists were even more dependent upon Saint-Pierre's commissioners than were those of Martinique. Because few French ships stopped at Guadeloupe, the colony relied on the coasting trade with Martinique for its provisions and to export its products.[56] This dependence decreased

somewhat following the Seven Years' War, but Guadeloupe's planters remained indebted to the merchants of Saint-Pierre. In 1788 the commissioners responded to the colonial assembly's changes to the assessment of the *impôt* and to the import/export duties for Martinique with outraged protests. When these brought no satisfaction, they refused to pay any taxes. Governor General the vicomte de Damas and *Intendant* Foulquier appealed to the minister to rule on the issue that had created a financial crisis in the colony.[57] La Luzerne had also received numerous statements of support for Saint-Pierre's commissioners from French seaports, and he ordered the administrators in Martinique to lower the duties.[58] The ministerial decision represented a victory for the merchants, but it also stiffened the resolve of the colonial assembly to assert the interests of Martinique's planters in 1789 and beyond.

Just as important as the economic conflict between planters and merchants was the social division between the *grands Blancs* and the *petits Blancs* in the Windward Islands. Royal administrators and the wealthiest merchants were among those who dominated colonial society, but most *grands Blancs* were rich planters. A wide spectrum of French society had settled the colonies in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries: nobles, members of the merchant bourgeoisie, peasants, and urban artisans, as well as deserters, exiles, mutinous sailors, buccaneers, and filibusters.[59] If early settlers, of whatever background, farmed small holdings using *engagés*, the shift from tobacco growing to sugar production demanded increasing investments of capital and slave labour. Land became concentrated in fewer hands, small proprietors were squeezed out, and a planter class emerged. The planter elite in the Windward Islands was not exclusively of noble origin, and it was different than that which developed later in Saint-Domingue. By the late eighteenth century the *grands Blancs* of Saint-Domingue controlled enormous wealth, but most were absentee owners of estates who were not embedded in colonial society. The *grands Blancs* of the Windward Islands, in contrast, constituted a truly colonial aristocracy. In these older colonies the plantations were smaller than in Saint-Domingue, there were fewer slaves and the planters' fortunes were more modest. Yet these resident *grands Blancs* enjoyed immense local prestige and preponderance, not only economic and social sway but also political influence exercised through the colonies' sovereign councils. A number of family clans dominated Martinique, like the Dubucs, some of which had their origins at the beginning of colonization while others had arrived early in the eighteenth century. Some colonists of modest social background

rose into the planter class by marriage or through the assistance of a powerful patron, but family alliances were crucial to the success of all Martinique's *grand Blancs* who saw themselves as a unified elite.[60]

A vast social gulf separated the Windward Islands' planter aristocracy from the colonies' *petits Blancs*. In his description of Martinique following the Seven Years' War, the *abbé* Raynal identified categories or classes of *habitants* beneath the rich sugar planters, including those who grew "less important crops" such as coffee or cotton on their estates using fewer slaves and those whose plantations had simply failed.[61] Many French immigrated to the West Indies hoping to make their fortune as planters. Few succeeded. Many of those who managed to purchase a small holding were forced to abandon it because of a lack of capital, crop failure, or other misfortune. Those who did not secure work as an overseer on someone else's plantation ended up in the colonial port towns where they joined floating populations of minor merchants, clerks, artisans, innkeepers, soldiers, sailors, and foreign adventurers. Together these constituted the *petits Blancs,* who formed a turbulent underworld that colonial elites regarded as dissolute, vice-ridden, and dangerous.[62] Retailers and craftsmen might aspire to buy enough land to become *habitants* themselves,[63] but most poor whites were deeply hostile towards the planters. *Petits Blancs* were numerous in the port towns of the Windward Islands in 1789: their concentration in the commercial quarter of Saint-Pierre made it, for contemporaries and historians, the "foyer of revolution" in these colonies.[64] The colonial ports were important windows on to the wider world of the greater Caribbean and the Atlantic. Sailors were a highly visible element of port society, one that often ran afoul of colonial authority, and their reputation for rebellion fit with the image of all poor whites as unruly and violent. As migrant and often multilingual workers who criss-crossed different colonial empires in their voyages, sailors were also a vital source of news regarding developments in other colonies and overseas.[65] The spread of such information, and its reception among *petits Blancs*, was crucial to the revolution in the Windward Islands.

Yet it was the institution of slavery that made the Caribbean colonies so unstable. Black slaves made up the vast majority of the islands' population. The disproportion on the eve of the revolution was most dramatic in Saint Domingue, which had over 500,000 slaves and fewer than 36,000 whites.[66] The smaller colonies had grown much less than Saint-Domingue during the second half of the eighteenth century, but their populations were also lopsided. In 1789 Guadeloupe's population

numbered 106,293, of which 89,523 were slaves and only 13,712 were white. Martinique's population in 1789 was slightly smaller at 96,158 people, including 83,414 slaves and 10,636 whites.[67] Because the slave trade had neglected these colonies, the nature of their enslaved majorities was also somewhat different than that of Saint-Domingue. Fewer of the Africans were from the Congo, and more of them were from the regions of Biafra and Sierra Leone, while the proportion of women and children among the slaves of Guadeloupe and Martinique was higher. There were also proportionally more Creoles, or slaves born in the colonies, than *bossales*, African-born slaves.[68] These demographic differences, however, did not eliminate the tensions associated with slavery from the Windward Islands, where the free population was overshadowed by the enslaved mass.

Slave labour was fundamental to the colonies' economy and had been since the sugar revolution of the seventeenth century. Slaves represented the planters' major capital investment and the number of slaves determined a plantation's value. Figures for 1790 suggest that 112 slaves worked an average sugar plantation on Guadeloupe. Abbé Raynal's assessment of Martinique in 1770 claimed that the 100 large, self-sufficient sugar plantations had 120 slaves each, while the remaining 186 estates had sixty slaves apiece.[69] Masters organized their slaves into *ateliers*, or gangs, to carry out collective labour under tight discipline and close supervision. On most plantations slaves were divided between three gangs. Adults of both sexes, chosen for their strength and ability, were assigned to the *grand atelier*, or great gang, which performed the most difficult, labour-intensive tasks. The *petit atelier*, or second gang, was composed of those slaves not physically capable of working in the great gang and worked either in conjunction with the great gang or independently at lighter tasks. Younger children were initiated to the discipline of collective labour under the supervision of an old slave woman in the weeding gang.[70] The slaves' working day on the plantations began with prayers at sunrise, and aside from pauses for breakfast and another for a meal at noon, they toiled until sunset. At harvest time this was extended late into the night.[71] The division between planting and harvest defined the agricultural year, but masters sought to minimize the natural season break and kept their slaves working continuously.[72] Work was less intensive, and surveillance of slaves less exact, on the coffee estates because coffee plants required less care than sugar cane and the production process was more fragmented.[73]

A hierarchy existed within slavery, resulting in more privileges for the skilled slaves and fewer for the *esclaves de jardin*, or field slaves, in the gangs. On sugar plantations, the most important slaves were the master of the mill, who managed ten to twenty other slaves, and the head refiner, who supervised the boiling, skimming, and transfer of the cane juice and decided when the sugar was ready to strike.[74] In addition to these skilled slaves and the field hands, others were needed to perform various tasks, including herdsmen and mule drivers, and artisans, such as carpenters and barrel makers.[75] The residence also needed slaves to clean, cook, and drive coaches for the white master and his family.[76] The domestic slaves enjoyed better food, clothing, and lodging than the field slaves, just as conditions for town slaves were preferable to those of plantation slaves. Many urban slaves were owned by rural masters; merchants, administrators, and military officers often rented slaves instead of buying them. Once the contracted sum for their labour was given to the master, these rented slaves could sometimes work for wages in town, thus saving money to buy their freedom.[77]

The status and treatment of all slaves in the French colonies was determined legally by the royal edict of 1685, known as the *Code Noir*. The *Code Noir* did not contain any philosophical justification for slavery but provided only a legal framework for its operation. Slaves had no legal or juridical identity; they were property.[78] The *Code Noir* did prescribe, however, that masters must fulfil various responsibilities towards their slaves. Slaves were to be baptized and instructed in the Catholic faith and be given rest on Sundays and on religious holidays. The *Code Noir* required masters to provide adequate provisions for their slaves.[79] To save on the expense of importing provisions, planters preferred to grow food for the slaves on their plantations. They set aside time during the work schedule for slaves to tend their own plots or to cultivate fields designated for provisions rather than commercial crops.[80] Various administrators tried in vain to curb this practice that, along with insufficient imports of provisions from France, created periodic shortages of food. If a hurricane destroyed local crops, shortages could threaten slaves with starvation. Such a hurricane struck Martinique in the summer of 1788, and the resulting provisioning crisis was an important context for slave reactions to the advent of the revolution.[81]

If the *Code Noir* required masters to baptize, feed, and house their slaves, it also insisted on the slaves' obedience to their masters. The planters' main concern was to make their slaves work. This required

domination that, along with the limitations on the amount of labour available or on the effective division of labour possible under slavery, revealed the fundamental weakness and danger of the slave system.[82] A hierarchy of authority on the plantation was responsible for the discipline and control of the field slaves.[83] The master was at the summit. In the case of absentee owners or masters uninterested in the administration of their estates, however, a *gérant*, or manager, was in charge of the plantation's operations. Beneath the manager was the *économe*, or overseer, who supervised the slaves and was responsible for maintaining order. Traditionally overseers were *petits Blancs*, but as sugar production expanded in the eighteenth century free-coloured overseers became more common. Immediate control of the field hands lay with the *commandeurs*, or drivers, who were slaves themselves. This hierarchy of domination sought to motivate slaves with small rewards, but above all it relied on fear of punishment. Slaves were subject to the lash, to being placed in irons, to imprisonment, or to even more brutal treatment. The *Code Noir* placed limitations on punishment and even allowed for slaves to inform royal prosecutors in the case of inhumane treatment.[84] Economic self-interest was more important in limiting excessive cruelty: to kill or mutilate slaves was to destroy capital investment. In 1784–5 Castries, the reform-minded minister of marine sought to force masters to respect the tenets of the *Code Noir* regarding adequate food and humane treatment of slaves.[85] These reforms proved impossible to enforce and planters resented them as restrictions on their property. The punishment and treatment of slaves was appalling.[86]

The slaves' response to their enslavement was not passive, and their resistance posed a constant threat to the prosperity and security of the French colonies. Slaves worked neither willingly nor enthusiastically, but their resistance could be much more dangerous. Some slaves, newly arrived from Africa, committed suicide rather than submit to enslavement. White colonists often feared that slaves were trying to poison livestock, or even their masters, and believed that this was linked to the practice of voodoo religion or witchcraft.[87] The most important form of slave resistance, however, was *marronage*, or the flight of slaves from the plantations. French colonists recognized two different forms of this phenomenon. *Petit marronage* involved individual absenteeism for limited periods. *Grand marronage*, in contrast, involved the flight of slaves, often in groups, for long periods with no intention of returning. The latter also implied the commission of a crime, requiring the intervention of royal justice.[88] *Marronage* represented flight from work or from harsh