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OLIVER CUSSEN

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Abstract

This dissertation is an intellectual history of old regime France's global economy. It shows how expansion of overseas trade after 1715 generated abstract ideas about political economy, expectations of progress, and critical discussions of commercial affairs in the public sphere—all of which influenced the way elites sought to develop the old regime's overseas empire.

“Commercial imperialism” was the product of these related economic and intellectual phenomena: the growth of merchant capital, and the emergence of critique. Organized around case studies of particular commodities—company shares, coffee, cochineal, acacia gum, gunpowder, and sugar—the dissertation tracks commercial imperialism across the Indian Ocean, the Levant, Cadiz, Oaxaca, Senegambia, French Guiana, and the metropole, from the “golden age” of commerce in the early eighteenth century to the Age of Revolutions.

The commercial imperialism of old regime France had two defining features. First, it relied on the global proliferation of institutions that had been and still remained essential to the operations of merchant capital in France: corporations, privileges, sinecures, patrimonial social relations, aristocratic hierarchies of value and taste, and, ultimately, the absolutist monarchy. The old regime was exported overseas. The resulting growth of trade, profits, and luxury goods in select French markets in turn produced the second feature of commercial imperialism: a discourse of political economy that projected the emergence of efficient markets, the improvement of resources, and the progress of society—theories of commerce that were, potentially, at odds with the practices of empire. Commercial imperialism was given form and direction by this inner contradiction between capital and critique—between the methods through which France accumulated wealth and power in the world economy, and the ideals, expectations, and frustrations those methods generated.

The dissertation makes three interventions. First, it reveals the specificities of capitalism and empire in eighteenth-century France. The old regime developed its overseas economy through a form of bricolage, taking institutions and social relations that had emerged out of prior domestic processes and turning them towards imperial ends. By attending to the concrete operations of merchant capital, the case studies explain how, why, and to what effect the old regime was exported overseas. Second, the dissertation explores the intellectual consequences of the global reproduction of France's absolutist institutions, disjointed markets, and social hierarchies. To a far greater extent than historians have realized, prominent categories of Enlightenment political economy—society, self-interest, the entrepreneur, civilization, the conservation of value—were rooted in France's overseas economy. Finally, each of the commodity chains considered in the dissertation traversed regions that, in the nineteenth century and beyond, served as cornerstones of French global power: the Mascarene islands, the Levant, Senegal, and French Guiana. The phenomenon of commercial imperialism therefore helps to explain the persistence of the old regime at the colonial periphery.

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Introduction

In 1739, François Castanier wrote a memoir for the shareholders of the Compagnie des Indes. It had been a good decade for the company. Trade with India and China was booming. On Ile Bourbon the enslaved labor-force had grown six-fold over the past ten years, resulting in a five-fold expansion in the production of coffee. The population of neighboring Ile de France was sixteen times larger than it had been in 1725. Sugar, coffee, and tobacco were increasingly prevalent in French ports. For Castanier, a director of the company, the increasing “consumption of merchandise from the Indies” was a sign of progress and prosperity, which had been achieved not through territorial aggrandizement but through the protection of long-distance trade and the production of commodities at the colonial periphery.¹ Castanier’s intended audience—the king, his ministers, and company shareholders—would have been familiar with these claims. If not yet a cliché, the argument that modern monarchies were better served pursuing commerce over conquest had recently been advanced, at greater length and in more sophisticated fashion, by the likes of Montesquieu and the abbé de Saint Pierre.² Attentive readers might even have recognized from the finer details of the memoir—from passages on company structure, for instance, or the relationship between trade and dividend yields—that Castanier’s greatest intellectual debt was to Jean-François Melon, author of the widely acclaimed *Essai politique sur le commerce* (1734), and subsequently recognized as a pivotal figure in the development of eighteenth-century economic thought.³

¹ “Mémoire de Castanier sur l’état de la compagnie en 1739,” Bibliothèque Nationale, Nouvelles Acquisitions Françaises 9354.

² Charles de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu, “Réflexions sur la monarchie universelle en Europe,” (1734) in *Oeuvres Complètes de Montesquieu*, 18 vols. (Oxford, 1998-2012) ii: 19-64; Charles Irénée Castel, abbé de Saint-Pierre, “Projet pour perfectionner le commerce de France,” in *Ouvrages de politique*, t. V (Rotterdam: Jean Daniel Beman, 1733). For an overview of this tradition, see John Shovlin, *Commerce Not Conquest: Political Economy, Capitalism, and the Franco-British Global Rivalry, 1688-1788*, forthcoming.

³ For the most prominent interpretations of Melon, see Catherine Larrère, *L’invention de l’économie au XVIIIe siècle: du droit naturel à la physiocratie* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1992); Simone Meyssonier, *La*

The reliance of a financier like Castanier on the arguments of a philosophe like Melon might suggest that Enlightenment political economy was enjoying precocious influence over the governing institutions of European empire. Following the interpretive schema of Istvan Hont, historians have tended to present Melon as one among many European intellectuals of the eighteenth century who sought an alternative to the “jealousy of trade,” a “mongrel idiom” that captured the phenomenon in which markets, the sites of mutually beneficial exchange, had become the objects of hostile, zero-sum competition between states. Melon’s contribution to this project was to reframe geopolitical relations in terms of the internal dynamics of “commercial society,” a no less contradictory term that described the emergence of useful and productive associations out of interactions between self-interested individuals. Like the subjects they governed, who competed but co-existed peacefully thanks to what Kant later called “unsocial sociability,” states could simultaneously pursue gain without resorting to conflict. Jealousy would turn into emulation. Melon therefore provided functionaries of European power, like Castanier and the Compagnie des Indes, with a “critical perspective... that was predicated on a cosmopolitan theory of globalization.” Political economy, as a theory of commercial society, promised solutions to the contradictions of modernity and the potentially bellicose ramifications of European expansion. What’s more, those solutions still apply in the twenty-first century. “The commercial future that many eighteenth-century observers imagined as plausible,” Hont argued in 2005, “has become our historical present.”⁴

balance et l’horloge: la genèse de la pensée libérale en France au XVIIIe siècle (Montreuil: Editions de la Passion, 1989); John Robertson, *The Case for Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680–1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 325–76; Istvan Hont. “The ‘Rich Country–Poor Country’ Debate Revisited: The Irish Origins and French Perceptions of the Hume Paradox,” in Carl Wennerlind and Margaret Schabas (eds.), *David Hume’s Political Economy* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

⁴ Istvan Hont, *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation-State in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), 156 (for “historical present”); idem., *Politics in Commercial Society: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015). For “critical perspective...” see Béla Kapossy, Isaac Nakhimovsky, and Richard Whatmore (eds.), *Commerce and Peace in the*

A closer look at the apparent consensus between Castanier and Melon reveals a different relationship between Enlightenment political economy and the global operations of French capital. Castanier provided, at best, a partially accurate representation of the commercial practices of the Compagnie des Indes. He deployed the language of political economy to secure public investment and state protection for an institution that accumulated wealth on a global scale through oligopoly, arbitrage, slavery, and (when necessary) war, not through the irenic processes of commercial society. Melon, for his part, had written a series of his own memoirs on behalf of the Compagnie des Indes in the 1720s, as it sought investment and credibility from the financial and political elite of France. The following decade, disappointed by the direction the company had taken, he repurposed these memoirs alongside more abstract and critical reflections on trade and statecraft in the *Essai politique sur le commerce*, which he published for a general audience. His political economy must therefore be understood not only in the context of a dialogue among intellectuals about European commercial development, but also, and more precisely, in the context of experiences of, debates about, frustrations with, and aspirations for a specifically French imperial project. There was a dialectical relationship, then, between Castanier's capital and Melon's critique: the one generated the other. Together, they contributed not to the gradual realization of "commercial society," but instead to a form of "commercial imperialism" that was unique to old regime France.

Understanding the global expansion of old regime France in terms of commercial imperialism requires due consideration of the articulate statements of Enlightenment political economy. But it demonstrates that the abstract ideals and idioms of that discourse emerged out of

Enlightenment (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 3, a collection that evinces both the range and influence of Hont's scholarship. See also Béla Kapossy, Isaac Nakhimovsky, Sophus A. Reinert, Richard Whatmore (eds.), *Markets, Morals, Politics: Jealousy of Trade and the History of Political Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2018).

and addressed the concrete operations of merchant capital through the colonies, commodity chains, and trading companies of the French empire—through its merchant houses and trading posts, its ports and plantations. By attending both to theory and practice, metropole and periphery, the aspirations of political economy and the realities of the old regime, this approach widens the frame of analysis inherited from scholars who have charted the inexorable triumph of commercial society. In doing so it opens up alternative ways of thinking about the commercial expansion of early modern European states, as well as the ideas and categories that expansion produced. What follows is an attempt to pursue one such alternative. Its animating conviction is that the commercial imperialism of old regime France is no less relevant to the “historical present” of twenty-first century global capitalism.

Defining Commercial Imperialism

In the waning decades of Louis XIV’s reign, French foreign policy had centered on costly military campaigns and dynastic wars in Europe. The colonial infrastructure that existed in Canada, the Caribbean and on the coasts of India was flimsy and disjointed.⁵ A subsequent period of reform during the Regency culminated in John Law’s disastrous attempt to reorganize French finances through the establishment of a National Bank and an East India Company. For Fernand Braudel, who argued that after 1720 merchant capitalism elsewhere experienced “the rapid take-off of the Age of Enlightenment,” Law’s failure was proof that the French economy lacked the “politico-socio-economic maturity” of England—that it was “unable... to jump on to the infernal bandwagon.”⁶ And yet from the 1720s to the Revolution, French overseas trade grew

⁵ James Pritchard, *In Search of Empire: the French in the Americas, 1670–1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁶ Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th–18th Century, vol. 2: The Wheels of Commerce* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 135–6.

by 1,310 per cent, at a rate faster than any of its European rivals.⁷ Historians have tended to account for this phenomenon by focusing on French participation in Atlantic trade and the Antillean plantation complex. But overwhelming attention on these epicenters of hard globalization has obscured the full range of the old regime's "imperial repertoire": the "ruling strategies" that were available to France, and only France, after Law's failed attempt to emulate England; the myriad techniques adopted by the state and commercial elites to develop the overseas economy beyond the booming Atlantic; and the political and intellectual energies released by this eclectic project, as the old regime embarked on its own "rapid take-off of the Age of Enlightenment."⁸

As an economic and intellectual phenomenon, this pursuit of overseas development is best understood as a project of "commercial imperialism." It had two defining features. First, it relied on the global proliferation of institutions that had been and still remained essential to the operations of merchant capital in France: corporations, privileges, sinecures, patrimonial social relations, aristocratic hierarchies of value and taste, and, ultimately, the absolutist monarchy. The old regime was exported overseas. The resulting growth of trade, profits, and luxury goods in select French markets in turn produced the second feature of commercial imperialism: a discourse of political economy that projected the emergence of efficient markets, the improvement of resources, and the progress of society—theories of commerce that were, potentially, at odds with the practices of empire. Commercial imperialism was given form and direction by this inner contradiction between capital and critique—between the methods through

⁷ Guillaume Daudin, *Commerce et prospérité: la France au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2011 [2005]), 196-203; François Crouzet, "Angleterre et France au XVIIIe siècle: essai d'analyse comparée de deux croissances économiques," *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 21, 2 (1966), 254-91; Ruggiero Romano, "Documenti e prime considerazioni intorno alla 'Balance du Commerce' della Francia dal 1716 al 1780," in *Studi in onore di Armando Saporiti* (Milan: Istituto editoriale cisalpino, 1957), ii: 1267-1300.

⁸ On "imperial repertoire," see Jane Burbank and Frederic Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press), 3 et passim.

which France accumulated wealth and power in the world economy, and the ideals, expectations, and frustrations those methods generated.

Beginning in the 1720s and continuing through to the Revolution, the old regime pursued commercial imperialism on island colonies in the Indian Ocean; across more “informal” spaces of power, such as the Levant, Cadiz, and the Spanish Atlantic; at west-African trading posts and coastal footholds in Guiana; and in the metropole itself. Governing institutions changed over time. Initially the *Compagnie des Indes*, which had survived the downfall of Law’s system, was ascendant, but soon other actors and institutions took charge: trading houses with state access and cosmopolitan connections, botanists and agronomic improvers, private companies formed by aristocrats at court, engineers and mercantile kinship groups. All of these social forms existed within the imperial repertoire of the old regime. Despite Law’s ambitions and Braudel’s retrospective judgments, the “politico-socio-economic maturity” of England—a national bank, a joint-stock company, an integrated home market—was not necessary to jump on the infernal bandwagon.

Focusing on commercial imperialism beyond the Atlantic, this dissertation argues, reveals the specificity of capitalism in eighteenth-century France. That is not to say that features of the old regime were not exported to the Antilles, or that trade between Europe and the New World did not attract the scrutiny of Enlightenment political economy. The north-Atlantic, however, was a comparatively well-integrated economy of complementary markets, converging prices, and falling shipping costs. The boom in Atlantic commerce and the intensification of colonial slavery resulted, as Robin Blackburn has put it, from “the spontaneous dynamic of civil society”: both were largely driven by the initiative of independent merchants and planters, rather than deliberate state policies. Colonies like Saint-Domingue and Martinique therefore “bore a

distinct resemblance” to those of other European powers, making it hard to discern the “social basis and logic” of a French imperial project.⁹ By contrast, we can get a better sense of how old regime France went about creating, extending, and consolidating circuits of merchant capital by attending to isolated colonial projects in areas less prone to imperial competition (the Mascarene islands), to markets where France enjoyed commercial hegemony (Cadiz, the Levant, and Senegambia), and to territories where deliberate improvement projects were carried out (Guiana). Although these fragments of the French empire were not strictly situated, like the Antilles, in the “core” of the eighteenth-century world economy, they can nevertheless reveal exactly how, and to what effect, the old regime oriented itself towards the sustained accumulation of capital through trade.

If the first objective of this dissertation is to understand the role of merchant capital in the global reproduction of France’s absolutist institutions, disjointed markets, and social hierarchies, then the second is to demonstrate the intellectual consequences of that process. To a far greater extent than historians have realized, prominent categories of Enlightenment political economy—society, self-interest, the entrepreneur, civilization, the conservation of value—were rooted in the global commodity chains of the French commercial imperialism. In some cases, a quite radical reinterpretation of these categories emerges from recovering their origins in the circuits of merchant capital. Melon and Vincent de Gournay, for instance, so often portrayed (for better or worse) as champions of commercial society, of politics oriented towards the laws of the market, in fact used the public sphere to normalize the old regime’s particular approach to empire. In other cases, such as in Senegambia and Guiana after the Seven Years War, or in the Indian

⁹ Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern, 1492-1800* (London: Verso, 1997), 6 for “spontaneous dynamic”; 300 for “distinct resemblance” and “social basis”; 371-400 for the general “eighteenth-century boom.”

Ocean towards the end of the old regime, Enlightenment ideals informed the objectives and aspirations of imperial projects—and provided a vocabulary for the venting of frustrations when those aspirations were not met. Concepts of improvement and conservation altered the politics of merchant capital, and shaped opinions about empire on the eve of the Revolution.

Attention to “commercial imperialism” therefore yields new interpretations of developments that, in the scholarship, have become falsely familiar: namely, commercial growth and Enlightenment political economy. Before outlining the methods, interventions, and narratives of this dissertation, it is first necessary to define commercial imperialism’s constitutive elements, capital and critique.

The Bricolage of Capital

Institutional and intellectual investment in long-distance trade after 1720 stemmed from the prospect of unparalleled gains. According to Guillaume Daudin, at best 8 per cent of growth throughout the century can be attributed to intercontinental trade, representing a cumulative gain for total revenue of around 2, maybe 3 per cent. A total of 2.5 billion livres tournois (l.t.) was invested in that sector towards the end of the 1780s, a period of feverish colonial speculation. This was not nothing, but it paled in comparison to the 32 billion l.t. invested in the “interior” economy. Nevertheless, it is Daudin who has made the most forceful claims for the transformative impact of overseas trade on the French economy. His case is based in part on the observation that the intercontinental sector had “a redistributive role in favor of capital.” A fast-growing “maritime frontier” offered an outlet for dormant capital and entrepreneurial ambitions that were, for the most part, otherwise held back in the interior economy, where agriculture and industry were resistant to accumulation and where markets were narrow, divided by fiscal

borders and geographical distance.¹⁰ For a resource-hungry state and for merchants in search of profit, there were few more attractive horizons than the colonial periphery of the French economy.

The structural configuration of domestic markets therefore explains why French capital gravitated to overseas trade. In order to understand how exactly this “extroversion” was achieved, we must examine the concrete functions of merchant capital.¹¹ This is a notoriously difficult category to define. It is best understood as a mode of accumulation in which “merchants dominate production and extract a major share of the profits.”¹² Historically, merchant capital has been heterogeneous in its operations, working through a variety of institutions, such as states, banks, merchant houses, and plantations, as well as through different methods of production: peasant households, putting-out systems, indentured labor, slavery.¹³ This flexibility was necessary in the economy of old regime France, which, in Jean-Yves Grenier’s lucid formulation, was “a world of exchange and uncertainty.” Goods circulated through fragmented markets, profits were realized wherever information, privilege, and expertise pooled, and wealth was accumulated through versatile investments and the avoidance of specialization. In such conditions, the reproduction of capital was not assured, and nor could value be established through the generalized mechanisms of the market. External institutions were necessary to achieve those ends. The state granted monopolies and privileges to create pockets of activity and

¹⁰ Guillaume Daudin, “Profits du commerce intercontinental et croissance dans la France du XVIIIe siècle,” *Revue économique*, vol. 57, no. 3 (2006), 605-13.

¹¹ On “extroversion” (long-distance trade, colonial commodity production, manufacture for export) as the principal mode of early-modern economic development, see Giovanni Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the Twenty-First Century* (London: Verso, 2009).

¹² Jairus Banaji, “Merchant Capitalism, Peasant Households and Industrial Accumulation: Integration of a Model,” *Journal of Agrarian Change*, vol. 16, no. 3 (July 2016), 425. Banaji takes this definition from Frédéric Mauro, *L’expansion européenne (1600-1870)* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1964).

¹³ This is one of Braudel’s central arguments in his three-volume study of early modern capitalism, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th–18th Century*.

to combine the resources of disparate entrepreneurs. Patrimonial networks held together by notions of dependence, honor, and reputation were used to raise necessary credit. Aristocratic hierarchies determined the value of goods.¹⁴ Often in the historiography of capitalism these peculiarities of the old regime—an interventionist, seemingly arbitrary state; the oligopolistic capture of governing institutions; the feudal shackles of archaic value systems—are used to explain France’s “underdevelopment” relative to other, more mature and efficient economies.¹⁵ But they are better understood on their own terms: as the particular institutional forms of merchant capital in the *ancien régime*, serving the necessary function of transforming the kingdom’s vast resources into productive investments, of organizing its heterogeneous economy.

Throughout the eighteenth century, the same institutions and practices that coordinated domestic markets proved remarkably adept at governing and making profits out of France’s overseas economy, with its assemblage of diverse environments and distended commodity chains. The old regime accompanied merchant capital overseas.¹⁶ Privileged corporations, patron-client networks, kinship-based elites, feudal customs of land tenure and inheritance, and the centralizing force of absolutist monarchical sovereignty, all remnants of a centuries-long process of state formation, were folded into the French imperial repertoire.¹⁷ Ministers,

¹⁴ Jean-Yves Grenier, *L'économie d'Ancien Régime: un monde de l'échange et de l'incertitude* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1996), 80-9 et passim.

¹⁵ Douglas C. North & Robert Paul Thomas, *The Rise of the Western World: A New Economic History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009 [1973]), 120-31; Douglass C. North and Barry R. Weingast, “Constitutions and Commitment: The Evolution of Institutions Governing Public Choice in Seventeenth-Century England,” *The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (Dec., 1989) 803-832; Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson, and James Robinson, “The Rise of Europe: Atlantic Trade, Institutional Change and Economic Growth,” *American Economic Review*, vol. 95, no. 3 (2005), 546-79; David Stasavage, *Public Debt and the Birth of the Democratic State: France and Britain, 1688–1789* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹⁶ On the replication of old regime social forms in the colonies, see Helen Dewar, “Souveraineté dans les colonies, souveraineté en métropole: le rôle de la Nouvelle-France dans la consolidation de l’autorité maritime en France, 1620-1628,” *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française*, v. 64, n. 3-4 (2011), 63-92; Malick W. Ghachem, *The Old Regime and the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

¹⁷ David Parker, *The Making of French Absolutism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1984); James B. Collins, *The State in Early Modern France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

entrepreneurs, colonial administrators, and planters crafted empire in a fashion reminiscent of what Claude Lévi-Strauss called “bricolage,” taking instruments fashioned for domestic purposes and recombining them to serve new imperial ends. In stark contrast to the “engineer” of modern civilization, or indeed to Enlightenment theorists of political economy, who understand the world through abstract, theoretical frameworks and generalized propositions, Lévi-Strauss’s “bricoleur” builds models of reality out of finite elements drawn from myth, ritual, magic, and lore—the “fossil remains” of the prior historical processes. Likewise, the architects of commercial imperialism created a global infrastructure for merchant capital out of the existing materials of the absolutist state, the “odds and ends” that were at hand. As the failure of Law’s reforms demonstrated, they could not import material from other states.¹⁸ Undeterred by the necessary finitude of France’s imperial repertoire or the path dependence imposed by centuries of “absolutism,” the bricoleurs of commercial imperialism embraced the old regime’s unique capacity to accumulate capital through overseas trade.

Path dependence did, however, affect the consequences of that accumulation. The expansion of merchant capital did not automatically entail the integration of France’s fragmented markets. Nor did the extroversion of the old regime economy create the conditions for commercial society—for individuals interacting with one another as if traders in search of utility, and for luxury consumption percolating throughout France and down its society of orders. As Daudin showed, rather than irrigating the rural backwaters of *la France profonde*, overseas trade sucked capital out to the periphery of France and its empire. Vibrant hinterlands formed around port cities like Bordeaux and Marseille, fed by trinkets and baubles from the colonies and the profligacy of wealthy merchants. But this kind of Smithian growth usually ran up against the

¹⁸ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966 [1962]), 16-22.

stubborn segmentation of the domestic interior, with its regional prices, fairs, and taxes.¹⁹ One only needs to compare the colonial re-exports of France and Britain to get a sense of the relatively small size of the French internal market. As early as the 1730s, re-exports accounted for only 10.1 per cent of the goods Britain received from the colonies; in other words, nine out of ten colonial commodities shipped to the metropole were consumed there.²⁰ In France in the 1770s, on the other hand, roughly 75 per cent of colonial commodities were re-exported, usually to captive markets around northern Europe, the Levant and New Spain, where French merchants enjoyed a kind of informal empire.²¹

Adam Smith famously argued that Europe had developed in an “unnatural and retrograde order”: the country had been developed by the city, and trade acted as a solvent to the feudal regime. For the case of eighteenth-century France, that argument seems half right. It was not agriculture but overseas trade that was responsible for the unprecedented growth, and perhaps development, of certain regions. But if Daudin is correct, overseas trade diverted capital away from a scarcely viable domestic improvement. There is good reason to believe, then, that the global extension of merchant capital served not to undermine but to reinforce the pre-existing configuration of the economy. Silvia Marzagalli has claimed that the prosperous Atlantic economy, which supplied French ports and urban centers with coffee, sugar, tobacco, indigo, and mahogany furniture and which propped up France’s re-export trade with Europe, “probably

¹⁹ The fragmentation of French markets was the subject of much contemporary commentary, including from Melon, but also, notably, the abbé Galiani, who wrote in his *Dialogue sur le commerce des bleds* (1770): “All [France’s] wealth is concentrated on her frontiers; all her large and wealthy cities are on her borders; the interior is terribly poor.” Quoted in Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th–18th Century*, vol. 2: *The Perspective of the World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 339. For a classic account of the political consequences of uneven development in old regime France, see Charles Tilly, *The Vendée* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964).

²⁰ Jacob M. Price, “The Imperial Economy, 1700-1776,” in P. J. Marshall and Alain Low, *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. 2: *The Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 78-104.

²¹ Jean Tarrade, *Le Commerce colonial de la France à la fin de l’Ancien Régime: l’évolution du régime de l’exclusif de 1763 à 1789*, 2 vols (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1972), II: 753; Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery*, 445.

increased the differences between French provinces, rather than contributing to their integration,” because it left large segments of the interior untouched.²² In a similar fashion, the developing commodity chains of commercial imperialism tended to benefit socially conscribed networks of patrons and clients, investors and shareholders, financiers and well-connected philosophes—in a word, elites. Characteristic features of commercial modernity—high capital investment, the rational pursuit of profit, luxury consumption, global mobility—existed within, and even reinforced, traditional social forms.

The Science of Critique

Growth within an economy of finite adaptability proved intellectually generative. Impressive but irregular gains in “imperfect” markets produced theories of the guaranteed reproduction of capital and the widespread circulation of goods. Melon, for instance, inspired in part by the commercial success of the Compagnie des Indes in the aftermath of the Law affair, argued for the gradual removal of privileges and monopolies, as well as the dissolution of barriers to internal trade. What’s more, he made these arguments in an anonymous treatise addressed to a general readership, as an unnamed individual making claims in the public sphere. Over subsequent decades the concerted effort to generate value from the global bricolage of the old regime continued to produce similarly normative, abstract, and publicly oriented arguments about reform and improvement.

Both the public sphere and the science of political economy emerged, as Jürgen Habermas argued, during the “merchant phase of capitalism.” The expansion of global trade

²² Silvia Marzagalli, “The French Atlantic World in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” in Nicholas Canny and Philip Morgan (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Atlantic World c. 1450–c.1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 247-8.

engendered the “continuous administrative contact” between state and civil society in the form of taxes, duties, and regulations, which in turn “provoked the critical judgment of a public making use of its reason.”²³ Recently, historians have elaborated on this observation in order to overturn the venerable notion that enlightened discourse developed independently from and exclusively in opposition to the mercantile concerns of an “absolutist” state. Contrary to Tocqueville’s influential rendering of philosophes driven to abstract, literary politics by a repressive regime, the Enlightenment that has emerged out of this recent scholarship has been one of intellectuals who participated in the administrative functions of power, and who were obsessed with economic affairs.²⁴ The public sphere was not necessarily oppositional; rather, it facilitated a dialogue between state and society about issues of shared importance. Political economy was the form in which this dialogue was carried out. As Hegel argued, this science examined “the conditions of the modern world,” in which activities that had once been the concern of the private realm, such as labor, the satisfaction of needs and the exchange of commodities, had now become publicly relevant. Its task was to explain the “mass relationships and mass movements” that had caused this development, to extract from them simple principles and general laws, and to direct them towards more rational ends.²⁵ In other words, political economy was a mode,

²³ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989), 13-26.

²⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution*, trans. Gerald Bevan (London: Penguin, 2008 [1856]), 140-9. For variations on Tocqueville’s argument about the widening breach between state and society under absolutism, see Lionel Rothkrug, *Opposition to Louis XIV: The Political and Social Origins of the French Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965); Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988); François Furet, *Penser la Révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978). For the new economic and politically engaged Enlightenment, see, for example, John Shovlin, *The Political Economy of Virtue: Luxury, Patriotism, and the Origins of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006); Paul Cheney, *Revolutionary Commerce: Globalization and the French Monarchy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010).

²⁵ G.W.F. Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), §189, 186-7.

perhaps the quintessential mode, of Enlightenment critique. It was an inquiry into its own conditions of existence, in order, wherever possible, to reject, reform, or go beyond them.²⁶

The everyday operations of merchant capital provided the raw materials of political economy. But the partial, constrained perspectives of the marketplace did not constitute understanding; colonial reports, sugar prices, coffee imports, and interest rates amounted only to what Hegel called an “endless mass of details.” The point was to identify the hidden mechanisms behind commercial affairs so that they might be harnessed to certain ends—a prospect that ensured the attention of society and state alike. As a form of critique oriented towards creating orderly, rational markets, political economy was, in the global economy of old regime France, always potentially at odds with the uneven foundations of merchant capital upon which it was built. It resembled the science of “the engineer” that Lévi-Strauss placed in direct opposition to bricolage. Whereas the bricoleur accepts “the constraints imposed by a particular state of civilization,” “the engineer is always trying to make his way out of and go beyond” them.²⁷ From the perspective of political economy, the institutions, hierarchies, and values of the old regime were not necessarily structures to work within but, sometimes, obstacles to be overcome. They did not assure the circulation of wealth, and nor did they render French markets invulnerable to the contingencies of war, disease, and climate. Bricolage was an ongoing process, requiring constant regulation: new privileges granted to new combinations of elites to pursue new speculations in some distant corner of the empire. Political economy, claiming to have identified the “rationality” behind a “mass of contingencies,” promised an alternative to these haphazard interventions, and therefore a more assured, less fragile pursuit of empire.

²⁶ Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?” in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon, 1984). For a similar definition of political economy, as well as a claim for its centrality to Enlightenment thought, see John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment*.

²⁷ Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 19.

If the desire to “open up” and “go beyond” the existing circuits of merchant capital was one reason for the abstract idiom in which political economy was discussed, then another was the fact that this discussion took place in public. Antoine Lilti has argued that the novelty of Enlightenment thought lay in the fact of its publication, understood both as the wide circulation of discourses that had once been restricted to an institution or an elite, and also as “the constitution of a public, which takes form precisely through these new uses of critique.”²⁸ In commercial imperialism, the disclosure of what had previously been *arcana imperii* could serve several purposes: to attract public investment, or to persuade readers of the value of colonial institutions and commodities; to earn an administrative appointment by demonstrating talent, or to secure state protection for a private venture by showing its potential utility; or simply to vent frustration with the high-maintenance bricolage of the old regime economy. But in each case the argument needed to appeal to a public that, as Habermas argued, had emerged in large part due to the spread of commercial transactions. It is therefore possible to discern a homology between the normative arguments of political economy and the discursive context in which they were advanced. Abstract depictions of market activity resembled the impersonal exchange of information between author and general readership. Understandably, writers like Melon did not transparently describe the haphazard operations of merchant capital—the disorderly and lucrative collaborations between merchant elites, monopoly corporations, and the state—to argue for the credibility and value of imperial institutions. They instead presented the public with an idealized but nevertheless fathomable vision of commercial affairs. To Melon’s readership, the “progress of society” was far more legible than the profits of the Compagnie des Indes.

²⁸ Antoine Lilti, “Comment écrit-on l’histoire intellectuelle des Lumières? Spinozisme, radicalisme et philosophie, *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 64e Année, No. 1 (2009), 171-206 (196 for “publication”).

Political economy therefore provided normative direction to an imperial administration competing in a global economy, and “partial truths” to a public sphere built on commercial transactions. Both factors help to account for why theories that bore only passing resemblance to the phenomena they addressed could achieve the status of common sense.²⁹ Some historians have taken the disjuncture between merchant capital and its representations in political economy as an invitation to expose the latter as ideological mystifications, at best unable to acknowledge their own conditions of existence, at worst willing alibis for violent accumulation.³⁰ This dissertation pursues a different agenda by teasing out the interpenetration of theory and practice. It traces the concrete origins of Enlightenment abstractions back to the gum forests, coffee plantations and gunpowder factories of the French empire, and it shows how colonial projects and commercial ventures were in turn organized around discourses concerned with the removal of privilege, the conservation of value, and the civilization of nature.³¹ These projects had unintended consequences, or failed on their own terms; in some cases they exacerbated the very features of imperialism that they sought to reform, leading to yet more fragmentation of markets, elite capture of governing institutions, and degradation of colonial environments. The point of analyzing these episodes, however, is not to argue that Enlightenment political economy was

²⁹ This approach to understanding political economy is informed by Stuart Hall’s writings on ideology. See Hall, “The Problem of Ideology: Marxism Without Guarantees,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, vol. 10, issue 2 (1986), 28-44; idem., “The Toad in the Garden: Thatcherism Among the Theorists,” in Lawrence Grossberg & Cary Nelson (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 35-57; idem., *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2016), 127-79.

³⁰ For applications of this kind of argument to old regime France and early-modern imperialism, see, respectively, Jeff Horn, *Economic Development in Early Modern France: The Privilege of Liberty, 1650–1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 158-67, and Onur Ulas Ince, *Colonial Capitalism and the Dilemmas of Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

³¹ For the “concrete history of abstraction,” see Jean-Claude Perrot, *Une histoire intellectuelle d’économie politique* (Paris, Editions d’EHESS, 1992), 60; idem., “Histoire des sciences, histoire concrète de l’abstraction,” in Roger Guesnerie and François Hartog (eds.), *Des sciences et des techniques: un débat* (Paris: EHESS, 1998), 25-37.

wrong. Rather, it is to understand why, in particular contexts, certain theories were sufficiently appealing to effect structural changes, however unintended, in the French global economy.

The Method

Understanding commercial imperialism therefore requires sensitivity to the origins and influence of abstract ideas, and an appreciation of the contingent operations of overseas commerce.

Through research conducted in fifteen archives across three continents, this dissertation reconstructs the old regime's imperial bricolage out of colonial memoranda, trade statistics, merchant correspondence, company records, state policies, legal cases, censuses, maps, scientific experiments, textile swatches, *plans-terriers*, and *inventaires après décès*. It reads these documents alongside various public representations of, debates about, and interventions into the French global economy, including essays on commerce, treatises of natural history, botanical classifications, academic lectures, political speeches, and portraits. Taken together, this assortment of data makes it possible to track the dialectic of capital and critique, from its origins in the aftermath of the Law experiment to its unravelling in the revolutionary period at the end of the eighteenth century.

The analysis is grounded in case studies of particular commodities: the shares of the Compagnie des Indes, coffee on Ile Bourbon, the cochineal trade through Cadiz, Senegambian gum and its role in the French colonization of Guiana, and the production of gunpowder and sugar on Ile de France. Each commodity provides a granular perspective on specific modes of accumulation, showing us how capital was raised, wealth was produced, and profits were realized through the heterogeneous infrastructure of commercial imperialism. Cumulatively, they map out an economic geography that transcends arbitrary historiographical categories, such as

“Atlantic,” “Mediterranean,” or “Indian Ocean” worlds, or the core-periphery model of world-systems analysis.³² And each case study, focusing on successive stages of commercial imperialism, prompts us to think about value in both an economic but also anthropological sense. How and why did this society invest so much money, labor, energy and desire in these goods, and not others? What does this tell us about its shifting priorities and assumptions? Commodities are therefore the ideal objects through which to narrate and explain the tensions between the accumulation strategies of commercial imperialism and the ideas it produced in the public sphere of economic theory and debate.

Over the past three decades there have been many attempts to track “the global history of capitalism” through the biographies of itinerant commodities.³³ What follows has much in common with that scholarship, in both its methods and its geographical scope. On the other hand, it differs quite drastically in its theoretical underpinnings and narrative arc. The first wave of commodity histories, which emerged in the 1980s, were mostly concerned with the “consumer revolution” of eighteenth-century Europe, in which luxury goods circulated throughout society, transcending geographical distance, breaking down social hierarchies, and overcoming the restraints of politics.³⁴ More recently, commodity histories have focused instead on the violent processes of production that are hidden behind the impersonal world of exchange and the

³² On the core-periphery model of world-systems analysis, see Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System*, 3 vols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011 [1974-1980]). For a critique that highlights the unsuitability of this model for the French case, see Robert Duplessis, “From Demesne to World-System: A Critical Review of the Literature on the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism,” *Radical History Review*, 13, 3-41, esp. 28-31.

³³ For an overview of this literature, see Kate Smith, “Amidst things: New Histories of Commodities, Capital, and Consumption,” *The Historical Journal*, vol. 63, issue 3 (2018), 1-21.

³⁴ Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J.H. Plumb, *The Birth of Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Europe, 1982); Daniel Roche, *Histoire des choses banales: naissance de la consommation dans les sociétés traditionnelles (XVIIe-XIXe siècles)* (Paris: Fayard, 1997). Much of the historical scholarship on consumption was informed by economic anthropology. See in particular Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption* (New York: Routledge, 1996 [1979]); Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value” in Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 3-63.

illusions of market ideology.³⁵ Both approaches, however, are structured around a narrative of globalization.³⁶ Whether understood as emancipatory or exploitative, market relations extended across space, connecting previously distant societies into an ever more integrated world economy, and facilitating the spread of modern conceptions of freedom and coercion.

Commercial imperialism does not conform to that narrative. Overseas trade spawned new values and expectations, but at no point did Enlightenment ideology reshape society in its image. Old regime hierarchies resisted the solvent of commodification—in some cases they were fortified by the extension of trade through empire. And so rather than using commodities to index the universal unfolding of abstract, impersonal and ever more global market relations, the dissertation takes each commodity as a point of departure for inquiries into the social relations and aspirations that surrounded them. The task is not to follow gum, bugs, and gunpowder as they conquered the world, but to see what kinds of biographies, ideas, spatial configurations and institutions each commodity chain made possible.

An example might help to clarify the nature of this method and the arguments it enables. Take cochineal, the subject of the third chapter. Cochineal are beetles that, in the eighteenth century, were bred on cactus plantations by peasants in Oaxaca under the supervision of Spanish imperial authorities. Once plucked, the beetles were crushed, packaged, and sent, eventually, to

³⁵ Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A New History of Global Capitalism* (London: Allen Lane, 2014); idem., “Cotton and the Global Origins of Capitalism,” *Journal of World History*, vol. 28, no. 1 (2017), 107-20; Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). The theoretical basis of this literature can be found in Karl Polanyi’s notions of “fictitious commodities” and the destructive creation of “the market.” See Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957).

³⁶ It should be noted that not all commodity histories are committed to teleological narratives of connection. For relevant studies to this project that emphasize blockages, frictions, and the “lumpiness” of early-modern capitalism, see Maud Villeret, *Le Goût de l’or blanc: le sucre en France au XVIIIe siècle* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2017); Michael Kwass, *Contraband: Louis Mandrin and the Making of a Global Underground* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014); Margot Finn, “‘Frictions’ of Empire: Colonial Bombay’s Probate and Property Networks in the 1780s,” *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, vol. 65, no. 5 (2010), 1175-1204.

Cadiz, where merchants from around Europe would purchase the commodity at high prices before distributing it to manufacturing centers around the continent, where it was used as a red dye for luxury cloths. Each year, 5.2 billion individual cochineal insects were shipped across the Atlantic. Despite a Spanish monopoly on supply to Europe, the French dominated the immensely valuable cochineal trade from Cadiz, where a select group of wealthy merchant houses, with the active support of ministers in Versailles, secured cochineal for manufacturing partners in the Languedoc, who in turn produced cloths for the Levant and the Spanish Atlantic—both markets in which French textiles were dominant. The chapter excavates the surprising importance of cochineal and Cadiz to French hegemony in strategic areas of overseas trade. But it also recovers the political and intellectual ramifications of this hegemony, showing how Vincent de Gournay, a reformist minister in the 1750s and tireless supporter of “liberal” causes in the public sphere, owed his political career and intellectual influence to the formative years he spent as a merchant in Cadiz mastering the cochineal trade. Gournay’s expertise there made him appealing, if not essential, to the French state, while the cochineal commodity chain structured the geography, epistemology, and sociology of his mature political economy. Through cochineal, then, we gain a revised and enhanced appreciation of Gournay’s supposed “liberalism”: we get a better understanding of where it came from, what it actually meant, why it was persuasive to state and society, and how it transformed French imperial policy on the eve of the Seven Years War.

The chapter on cochineal is also representative of how reforms inspired by political economy could reinforce pre-existing features of the French global economy. As a minister Gournay dismantled regulations on production and barriers to market entry, and he popularized the figure of “the entrepreneur,” urging rich landowners to adopt the heroic cause of commerce for the French nation. But these policies and ideals ultimately led to the further fragmentation

and disarticulation of France's global markets, which increasingly fell under the control and worked to the benefit of an oligopolistic elite. This was a common theme in the course of commercial imperialism: the spread of markets and their attendant ideologies led to what the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, based on his observations of Indonesia and the Moroccan *suq*, called "the intensification of social forms."³⁷ In large part due to the unstable, indeterminate dialectic of capital and critique that lay at the heart of commercial imperialism, the method adopted in this dissertation is modeled less on commodity histories that evince the global spread of capitalism, and more on the anthropology of postcolonial societies and "development" economics, which focus precisely on places where narratives of commodification, the spread of the market, and globalization break down.³⁸ This scholarship is simply more helpful for understanding the commercial imperialism of old regime France, in which domestic and global economies were unevenly developed, access to markets was shaped by privilege and patronage, globally oriented mercantile centers existed alongside rural hinterlands, luxury consumption proliferated in a society that struggled to feed itself, and expectations of progress, improvement, and civilization exacerbated inequalities and discontent.

³⁷ For "intensification of social forms," see Clifford Geertz, *The Development of the Javanese Economy: A Socio-Cultural Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Center for International Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1956), 106; for commentary, Joel Isaac, "The Intensification of Social Forms: Economy and Culture in the Thought of Clifford Geertz," *Critical Historical Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2 (Fall, 2018), 237-66. It is worth noting that Michael Sonenscher likened the labor markets of eighteenth-century France to what Geertz labelled the "bazaar economies" of Indonesia and the Moroccan *suq*, where labor mobility, subcontracting and economic rationality coexisted with and intensified traditional patronage and kinship structures. See Michael Sonenscher, *Work and Wages: Natural Law, Politics, and the Eighteenth-Century French Trades* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

³⁸ See especially Chris Gregory, *Gifts and Commodities* (Chicago: Hau Books, 2015 [1982]); James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: "Development," Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); idem., *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meaning of Urban Life in the Zambian Copperbelt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, "Supply Chains and the Human Condition," *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture and Society*, 21:2 (2009), 148-76; idem., *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015); Laura Bear, Karen Ho, Anna Tsing, and Sylvia Yanagisako, "Generating Capitalism," *Theorizing the Contemporary, Fieldsights* (March 2015), and in particular Hannah Appel, "On Simultaneity," from the same series.

Finally, the commodity approach as it is adopted here uncovers neglected legacies of early-modern imperialism. Not only does it help us recover the genealogies of concepts that in the nineteenth century, unmoored from their material origins in the global circuits of French merchant capital, remained prominent in the social sciences (such as “the entrepreneur” in classical political economy) and colonialism (such as “civilization”), it also helps us account for the enduring vibrancy, after the collapse of the old regime, of French merchant capital at the colonial periphery. When the governing institutions in the metropole and the Antilles were overhauled by Revolution, infrastructure elsewhere in the French overseas economy stayed remarkably intact, in large part thanks to the centrifugal fragmentation of colonial sovereignty and mercantile activity that had gathered pace over the previous few decades. Each of the commodity chains considered here traversed regions that, under the Restoration and beyond, served as cornerstones of French global power: the Mascarene islands, the Levant, Senegal, and French Guiana. The spatial configuration of modern French colonialism has foundations in the commodities of commercial imperialism.

Engagement and Interventions

Both the archival research and the conceptual apparatus of this dissertation owe an enormous debt to venerable scholarship more often cited than read. At an early stage, the fine-grained studies of Louis Dermigny, Herbert Lüthy, Charles Carrière, Jacob Price and Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, as well as the synthetic analysis of Fernand Braudel, provided threads and traces for empirical, localized research that might help to ground an otherwise daunting investigation into the “mighty networks” of world commerce.³⁹ Marginal actors from their narratives (François

³⁹ Louis Dermigny, *Cargaisons indiennes: Solier et Cie, 1781-1793*, 2 vols (Paris: SEVPEN, 1960); idem., *La Chine et l'Occident: Le commerce a Canton au XVIIIe siècle, 1719-1833*, 3 vols (Paris: S.E.V.P.E.N., 1964); Herbert

Castanier, the Monneron brothers) have become protagonists in the following case studies. Aside from Braudel's opus, these were books about particular families, companies, diasporas, or cities, which perhaps conceals their true identities as global histories *avant la lettre*, providing a wealth of detail and sophisticated insights about the institutional forms and sociology of commercial capitalism. Inevitably, this dissertation has a different agenda than scholarship that was conceived in the mid-twentieth century, and that was therefore concerned, at least on some level, with a story of "modernization," in which the familiar world mercantile capitalism gave way to accumulation through industry and the bureaucratic, anonymous world of the firm.⁴⁰

While resisting that narrative, this dissertation also pays attention to the politics of merchant capital in old regime France. Commercial imperialism was situated within what Perry Anderson labelled the "field of compatibility" between the "nature and project" of the absolutist state on the one hand and the sustained accumulation of capital through trade on the other.⁴¹ What follows might therefore be considered as an inquiry into the imperial manifestations of an "absolutist state" that is best understood, following the work of William Beik, David Parker, and Marc Raeff, not as an obstacle to the emergence of capitalism in France, but as both enabling and expressing the particular form that capitalism assumed within the residually feudal constitution

Lüthy, *La banque protestante en France de la révocation de l'édit de Nantes à la Révolution*, 2 vols (Paris: S.E.V.P.E.N., 1961); Charles Carrière, *Négociants Marseillais au XVIIIe siècle: contribution à l'étude des économies maritimes* (Marseille: Institut historique de Provence, 1973); Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, *Les financiers de Languedoc au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: S.E.V.P.E.N., 1970); Jacob M. Price, *France and the Chesapeake: A History of the French Tobacco Monopoly and of its Relationship to the British and American Tobacco Trades*, 2 vols (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1973).

⁴⁰ This was a concern that Dermigny, Lüthy et al. shared with contemporary historians of French agriculture. For the mid-century relationship between modernization literature and the study of the old regime, see Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, "Voies nouvelles pour l'histoire rurale (XVIe–XVIIIe siècles)," *Études rurales*, no. 13-14 (1964), 81; Isser Woloch (ed.), *The Peasantry in the Old Regime: Conditions and Protests* (New York: Rinehart & Winston, 1970), 8. See also Mike Davis, "Taking the Temperature of History: Le Roy Ladurie's Adventures in the Little Ice Age," *New Left Review*, 110 (2018), 112-115.

⁴¹ Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: New Left Books, 1974), 41.

of old regime society.⁴² Like the consolidation of monarchical power, commercial expansion overseas was brought about through sporadic collaborations between the state and elites (financiers, semi-private institutions, merchant networks), lending the global economy a piecemeal quality that resembled the patchwork sovereignty of the interior. Accumulation through trade and colonialism also had to be made consistent with a labor-retentive domestic economy, in which agriculture was the main concern of peasant and statesman alike, and in which all hierarchical distinctions were made, in the last resort, by reference to landed wealth. Merchant capital in old regime France therefore assumed, as Jean-Pierre Hirsch, Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau, and Silvia Marzagalli have argued, a kind of hybrid disposition: dynamic, “adventurous,” and profitable, but often reliant on the state, land, and patrimony.⁴³ Focusing primarily on mercantile sociability, however, these historians tend not to elaborate on the intellectual ramifications capital’s ambiguous relationship with absolutist institutions.

Political economy did after all, like merchant capital, emerge from within the old regime. This dissertation’s understanding of the necessary structure of the French economy, and by implication the bricolage through which that economy was exported to the colonial periphery, is informed by the work of Steven Kaplan, Philippe Minard, and Jeff Horn, who have documented the strategic role of the state in generating pockets of activity and growth in French industry.⁴⁴

⁴² William Beik, *Absolutism and Society in Seventeenth Century France: State Power and Provincial Aristocracy in Languedoc* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Parker, *The Making of French Absolutism*; Collins, *The State in Early Modern France*; Marc Raeff, “The Well-Ordered Police State and the Development of Modernity in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Europe: An Attempt at a Comparative Approach,” *The American Historical Review*, vol. 80, no. 5 (Dec. 1975), 1221-43.

⁴³ Jean-Pierre Hirsch, “Les milieux du commerce, l'esprit de système et le pouvoir à la veille de la Révolution,” *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 30e Année, No. 6 (Nov. – Dec., 1975), 1337-70; Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau, *L'argent de la traite: milieu négrier, capitalisme et développement: un modèle* (Paris: Aubier, 1996); Silvia Marzagalli, *Bordeaux et les États-Unis, 1776–1815: politique et stratégies négociantes dans la genèse d'un réseau commercial* (Geneva: Droz, 2015); Paul Cheney, *Cul de Sac: Patrimony, Capitalism, and Slavery in French Saint-Domingue* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

⁴⁴ Steven L. Kaplan, *La fin des corporations* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2001); idem., *Provisioning Paris: Merchants and Millers in the Grain and Flour Trade During the Eighteenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 23-40; Philippe Minard, *La fortune du colbertisme: état et industrie dans la France des lumières*

But it takes issue with the opposition posed by these historians, inspired by Karl Polanyi, between the real, functioning, “embedded” markets of France and the fictitious “market” imagined by enlightened economists and reformers. This interpretation fails to explain where “liberal” ideas came from, and why they had such consistent appeal to state ministers and the readers of the public sphere. Jean-Yves Grenier, who also emphasizes the particularities of the old regime, offers a more nuanced appreciation of how Enlightenment political economy both abstracted from but also reflected the fragmented, patrimonial, aristocratic markets of France. And as a result he is able to demonstrate that canonical thinkers like Turgot, Cantillon, and Quesnay, far from espousing the liberal fantasy of “the market,” in fact struggled to develop theories of value, price formation, equilibrium, and circulation, and were often quite comfortable with imperfect market conditions and various social relations of exchange.⁴⁵ Following Grenier’s lead, this project situates political economy in the global markets of the old regime, not to expose and condemn its blind spots—where it failed to comprehend or deliberately obfuscated its conditions of existence—but to better understand its meaning and intellectual urgency.

Grenier’s “model” of the old regime economy is, however, a static one. By connecting ideas to the booming sector of overseas trade, the study of commercial imperialism can account for the role of the Enlightenment critique in effecting change—not, to be clear, in the form of ideas imposing rationality on the old regime, or anticipating future developments, but instead

(Paris: Fayard, 1998); Jeff Horn, *The Economic Development of Early Modern France*; Alessandro Stanziani, *Rules of Exchange: French Capitalism in Comparative Perspective, Eighteenth to Early Twentieth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁴⁵ Grenier, *L’économie d’Ancien Régime*, 19-59, esp. 59: “L’échange revêt une importance primordiale, absente chez les classiques, et l’élucidation de ses mécanismes est souvent remarquable... [L]es préclassiques insistent sur la variété de ce que l’on peut appeler les rapports sociaux d’échange. Elle repose en partie chez tous ces économistes, dont les œuvres ne peuvent être comprises si cet aspect est négligé, sur l’idée de concurrence imparfaite ou asymétrique. Au lieu d’une concurrence supposée pure et parfaite par leurs successeurs, ils prennent en compte un jeu complexe avec des degrés variables de monopoles dont les effets ne sont pas surimposés mais consubstantiels à la formation des prix.”

through consequential debates about commerce and empire. A great deal of historiographical attention has been afforded to political economy in the second half of the century, after the likes of Montesquieu and the physiocrats had stamped their authority on the public sphere. But as Lionel Rothkrug persuasively argued decades ago, critical modes of economic thought had already emerged in the contentious denouement of Louis XIV's reign—a theory recently corroborated by Arnaud Orain's investigation into the commercial, political, imperial and publicly disseminated ambitions that fermented in advance of the John Law system.⁴⁶ Starting from the fallout of the Law affair, this study of commercial imperialism tracks the mutually reinforcing escalation, from the 1720s onwards, of public debate about and of investment in the institutions of trade and empire—both of which accelerated the extroversion of Grenier's cloistered economy. Over time, competing visions, initially articulated in the idiom of political economy but also natural history and the natural sciences, pulled the overseas economy in different directions and, by raising expectations about the objectives and potential benefits of empire, created the conditions for fractious discontent.

This approach to the study of political economy departs from the method that is currently dominant in Anglo-American scholarship. According to the paradigm established by Istvan Hont, political economy emerged as a response to the contradictory implications of the rise of commerce, which at once promised to tame and provoke conflict between states. The works of canonical thinkers are mined for their contributions to a broader project, coordinated above all by the efforts of Hume and Smith, to ensure that the first of these two implications won out. Emphasis is placed on *political* solutions to “the jealousy of trade,” such as federalism, autarchy, and, above all, the modern representative republic. And the method of interpretation is strictly

⁴⁶ Rothkrug, *Opposition to Louis XIV*; Arnaud Orain, *La politique du merveilleux: Une autre histoire du système de Law (1695-1795)* (Paris: Fayard, 2018).

textual: the meaning of political economy resides in what its authors wrote, and how they influenced other theorists.⁴⁷ This overwhelming focus on texts and politics has two costs. The first is an impoverished understanding of “commerce.” We are left to assume that markets operated in the way that the likes of Smith or Melon claimed. Which in turn raises the second cost: the various intellectual and political functions of political economy, as a public discourse addressed to particular audiences, are obfuscated. Restricting our attention to how a text influenced other writers, we lose sight of how it might have influenced other actors, such as state ministers, colonial administrators, planters, investors, consumers, and readers—and not necessarily in a straightforward fashion. This dissertation takes the function of political economy within commercial imperialism seriously, but it refuses to take its claims at face value. Instead, it reads theories of commerce alongside archival research into the concrete operations of merchant capital, and it combines intellectual history with economic, environmental, and political history, precisely in order to capture the indeterminate role of ideas in early-modern empire.

There are, unsurprisingly, divergent accounts of the relationship between the Enlightenment and empire. Where some see a symbiotic relationship between scientific knowledge and colonial power being forged in the aftermath of the Seven Years War, others claim that the eighteenth-century intellectuals were uniquely critical of European expansion.⁴⁸ Evading either of these maximalist positions (that the Enlightenment was for or against empire), the latter chapters of the dissertation, which are concerned with the role of political economy but

⁴⁷ In addition to the literature cited above, see Isaac Nakhimovsky, *The Closed Commercial State: Perpetual Peace and Commercial Society from Rousseau to Fichte* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Iain McDaniel, *Adam Ferguson in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Roman Past and Europe's Future* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013); Paul Sagar, “Istvan Hont and Political Theory,” *European Journal of Political Theory*, vol. 17, issue 4 (2018), 476-500.

⁴⁸ See respectively James E. McClellan III & François Regourd, *The Colonial Machine: French Science and Overseas Expansion in the Old Regime* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), and Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003).

also natural sciences (botany, chemistry, engineering) in colonial improvement projects, tend to reinforce Michèle Duchet's more skeptical interpretation. Based on a near-exhaustive reading of colonial archives, memoranda, and theoretical treatises, Duchet argued that the *philosophes* coalesced around a "colonial ideology," according to which the worst excesses of slavery and exploitation would be mitigated but the imperial enterprise as a whole would remain profitable.⁴⁹ The stance of "the Enlightenment" on empire was therefore ambiguous, committed to the seemingly incompatible ends of humanity and (commercial) interest. As the following chapters show, colonial projects inspired by "enlightened" ideals were also ambiguous in their application. Attempts to "defeudalize" the overseas economy, or to conserve natural resources and improve environments, had the opposite effects—but even in failing, they generated interest in and attachment to an imperial infrastructure that was therefore able to survive through the upheavals of Revolution at the end of the century. Both the origins and the legacies of Enlightenment ideas, then, can be found in the global circuits of French merchant capital.

What follows is intended as a complement to the burgeoning literature on the empire of the old regime. Whereas earlier generations of historians dismissed the idea that such an empire existed, over the last decade a number of younger scholars have demonstrated that the global expansion of France, when understood on its own terms, had its own particular intellectual, institutional, legal, religious, and spatial dynamics.⁵⁰ For the most part, however, the

⁴⁹ Michèle Duchet, *Anthropologie et histoire au Siècle des Lumières: Buffon, Voltaire, Rousseau, Helvétius, Diderot* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995 [1971]).

⁵⁰ Danna Agmon, *A Colonial Affair: Commerce, Conversion, and Scandal in French India* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017); Røge, *Economistes and the Reinvention of Empire*; Manuel Covo, "Commerce, empire et révolutions dans le monde atlantique: la colonie de Saint-Domingue, entre métropole et Etats-Unis (ca. 1778-ca.1804)" (PhD Dissertation, EHESS, 2013); Gregory Mole, "Privileging Commerce: The *Compagnie des Indes* and the Politics of Trade in Old Regime France" (PhD Dissertation, University of North Carolina, 2016); Elizabeth Cross, "The French East India Company and the Politics of Commerce," (PhD Dissertation, Harvard University, 2017); Blake Smith, "Myths of Stasis: South Asia, Global Commerce and Economic Orientalism in Eighteenth-Century France," (PhD Dissertation, Northwestern University, 2017).

contributions of this scholarship have been supplemental: a global lens is provided on what were once deemed strictly domestic developments, such as state-formation, physiocracy, or Revolution, while colonies and institutions previously dismissed as marginal, such as the Compagnie des Indes, are shown to have been sites of experimentation that anticipated later, more consequential, developments. This dissertation has a different agenda. It adopts a global scale of analysis in order to provide a systemic account of the French economy and its political and intellectual dimensions—to discern what Blackburn called the “logic” of French empire. In doing so it is able to tell the story of the growth, fracture, and afterlife of a previously neglected phenomenon, the commercial imperialism of old regime France.

The Narrative

The story of commercial imperialism can be divided into two parts. In the “golden age of commerce” between 1720 and the 1750s, capital and critique worked largely in tandem. Unprecedented growth in overseas trade and discussions of commercial affairs in the public sphere encouraged French elites to recognize the value of colonial institutions, while commercial interests gradually shaped the state’s approach to empire. In the “age of imperial crisis” after the Seven Years War, latent tensions between capital and critique became more apparent, and more acute. Whereas enlightened colonial projects were increasingly ambitious, the traditional social forms of imperial bricolage were increasingly entrenched. Crisis was defined by incoherence and fragmentation: commercial imperialism generated competing and unattainable visions, and its commodity chains turned into semi-autonomous corridors of privilege and sovereignty. But it was precisely these features that created the dual legacy of commercial imperialism: in ideals that endured in the nineteenth century, divorced from their material contexts, and in an

infrastructure of merchant capital that, during the revolutionary period, flourished at the colonial periphery, orphaned off by a preoccupied metropole.

Chapter one establishes the origins of commercial imperialism in the Compagnie des Indes, as it navigated the fallout from the Law affair. The chapter explores the financial affairs of François Castanier and the ideas of Jean-François Melon to show how the company secured investment in its shares, and by extension, encouraged the public sphere to recognize the value of both the company and the trade it facilitated. But it also highlights the contradiction between Castanier's accumulation strategies and Melon's political economy—the basic contradiction between capital and critique that would define commercial imperialism throughout the century.

Turning to the colonial periphery, the second chapter examines the company's attempt to turn Ile Bourbon into the sole provider of European coffee by creating a plantation regime governed by seigneurial property laws. The experiment failed, exposing the limitations of a certain kind of bricolage, revealing the company as unsuited to governing global commodity chains, and producing interests and arguments that pointed beyond corporate monopoly.

Chapter three shows how Vincent de Gournay, drawing on his knowledge of the cochineal trade from his time in Cadiz, developed an alternative model of governance based on sporadic collaborations between the state and entrepreneurial elites, the domination of merchants over producers, and a mastery of the sphere of exchange. Thanks to his influence within the state and in the public sphere, Gournay's worldview became the common sense of commercial imperialism on the eve of the Seven Years War.

After 1763, however, colonial functionaries and intellectuals began to chafe at the restrictive Gournay model, demanding a return to land and labor and pursuing more ambitious improvement projects. The fourth chapter explores one unlikely consequence of this period of

postwar reform: the formation of a “Gum Atlantic” between Senegal and Guiana, a corridor of French empire held together by institutions, ideas, and, above all, the profits of the lucrative and geopolitically crucial Senegalese gum trade. Both poles of the Gum Atlantic were sites of enlightened speculation about the removal of privilege from overseas trade, the amelioration of slavery, and the improvement of natural resources. But the Gum Atlantic was also governed by a succession of trading companies owned by aristocrats in Versailles, who oversaw the intensification of privilege, arbitrage, and, increasingly, the trade of slaves, not gum.

The dissertation ends back in the Indian Ocean, where “two paths for commercial imperialism” were simultaneously pursued. The first aimed at the ideal of “the conservation of value”: natural resources would be protected, and accumulation would be rendered environmentally and commercially sustainable. The second was for more of the same: an empire that “leaked” value, and that relied on the extortionate, quasi-illegal, but ultimately necessary activities of privileged elites. The chapter alternates between the first path, represented by the establishment of a gunpowder factory on Ile de France, and the second, which was evident in the role of the Monneron brothers in coordinating a boom in French Indian Ocean trade in the 1780s.

Ultimately, both paths were abandoned: the Revolution led to a metropolitan disavowal of the old regime’s colonial knowledge, as well as its flourishing networks of overseas trade. But the paths converged in the creation of a sugar industry on an Ile de France neglected by revolutionary France. Both the Monnerons and the scientists, captives, and administrators behind the gunpowder project transferred their expertise, labor, money, and hopes to the production of sugar, as Ile de France served as a substitute for the Antilles, an outlet for Atlantic capital displaced by revolutionary upheaval. Like the ideals of commercial imperialism that had

preceded it, “conservation” lived on in the scientific and economic imaginations of Restoration intellectuals. Meanwhile, merchant capital ensured the persistence of the old regime overseas.

The Financier and the *Philosophe*

“By my work I will render the Indies superfluous,” John Law boasted to the French Regent, Philippe d’Orléans, in December 1715, as part of his pitch to reform state finances.¹ Law meant that Spanish-American silver, and the wars and infrastructure needed to procure it, could be made obsolete by credit-based money that would better stimulate France’s domestic resources. He was hired the following year by a Regent eager to make Louis XIV’s costly expansionism a thing of the past. Immediately the Scotsman set about emulating Great Britain’s financial revolution by establishing two institutions: a national bank issuing paper money to make up for a shortfall in specie, and a trading company offering shares to absorb unfunded public debt. The scheme failed dramatically in 1720. Law, disgraced, fled the kingdom, leaving rivals and protégés to dispute the remnants of his institutions.² The trading company—which under Law became more and more powerful, progressively incorporating monopolies on Louisiana, Senegal, the East Indies, China, and north Africa—was made insolvent in 1721 after being forced to assume the bank’s debts. Two years later, though, the Compagnie des Indes was reconstituted, inheriting the management personnel, monopolies, and trading infrastructure it had enjoyed at the height of the Law system.³ Over the next two decades the company contributed to an unprecedented growth in French overseas trade, and generated debates about commercial affairs that spilled out into the public sphere. In the long run, and contrary to his avowed

¹ John Law to Philippe d’Orléans, Dec. 1715, in John Law, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Paul Harsin, 3 vols. (Paris: Recueil Sirey, 1934), II: 266-7.

² Canonical texts on Law include Edgar Faure, *La banqueroute de Law, 17 juillet, 1720* (Paris, 1977); Antoin E. Murphy, *John Law: Economic Theorist and Policy-maker* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997). For recent reinterpretations, see Arnaud Orain, *La politique du merveilleux: Une autre histoire du système de Law (1695-1795)* (Paris: Fayard, 2018); John Shovlin, “Jealousy of Credit: John Law’s “System” and the Geopolitics of the Financial Revolution,” *The Journal of Modern History*, 88 (2016), 275-305.

³ For an overview of the company during and after the Law system, see Catherine Manning, *Fortunes à Faire: The French in Asian Trade, 1719-48* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1996), 19-45.

ambition, Law created an institution that became integral to a distinctly French form of commercial imperialism.

This chapter accounts for the unlikely imperial afterlife of the Law system through an examination of the careers of two figures inextricably linked to the Compagnie des Indes: the financier François Castanier and the *philosophe* Jean-François Melon. Appointed a director of the company by Law, Castanier notoriously made a fortune from the collapse of the system, earning him the moniker *le plus grand coquin de France*. He remained a director until his death in 1759, becoming one of Europe's richest men in the process.⁴ Castanier was the kind of portfolio capitalist who had thrived in the patrimonial institutions and geographically dispersed, fragmented markets of France's domestic economy. His accumulation strategies from within the Compagnie des Indes provide an insight into the bricolage through which those domestic institutions were successfully replicated in its overseas empire. There too state-backed monopolies were required to mobilize capital; disorganized markets allowed prominent actors to perform arbitrage; patronage shaped the value chains through which commodities circulated; and merchant capital always sought refuge, in the last instance, in the safer investments of land and offices. It has been customary to focus on the "archaic" or unproductive aspects of this old regime form of historical capitalism; yet it occasioned significant transformations in economic practice and thought, in France and beyond.

One such transformation can be found in the emergence of political economy in eighteenth-century France. Often this history is traced backwards from liberalism and more

⁴ The most sustained treatment of Castanier's career can be found in Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, *Les financiers de Languedoc au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: S.E.V.P.E.N., 1970), 140-7, et passim. Scattered references also exist in, among others, Louis Dermigny, *La Chine et l'Occident: Le commerce à Canton au XVIIIe siècle, 1719-1833*, 3 vols (Paris: S.E.V.P.E.N., 1964); Herbert Lüthy, *La Banque Protestante en France, de la Révocation de l'Edit de Nantes à la Révolution*, 2 vols (Paris: S.E.V.P.E.N., 1961); and Philippe Haudrère, *La Compagnie française des Indes au XVIIIe siècle (1719-1795)*, 4 vols (Paris: Librairie de l'Inde, 1989).

“scientific” economics, or seen as driven by a desire for the old regime to imitate the “commercial societies” to its north. French political economy is therefore the product of Reason, or England. Existing interpretations of Melon exhibit both of these tendencies.⁵ Instead, this chapter shows that Melon’s political economy owed its existence to an unprecedented growth in French overseas trade that he witnessed firsthand. In the 1720s he wrote a series of memoirs for the reconstituted Compagnie des Indes, as part of its campaign to secure capital investment and public legitimacy. Melon later repurposed some of the arguments of these texts in his celebrated *Essai politique sur le commerce* (1734), which, far from being an argument to turn absolutist France into a commercial society, or an anticipation of economic liberalism, was at once a product of and a commentary on the “golden age” of French commerce.⁶ Castanier’s Compagnie des Indes, then, facilitated the sophisticated discussion of commercial affairs in the public sphere. French political economy had its roots in French merchant capital.

Political economy, however, did not entail a straightforward reflection of how merchant capital worked. The *Essai politique* was not simply a case of Melon recapitulating material from his earlier memoirs, which had been addressed to statesmen and potential investors, and distributing it to a wider audience. Publication changed both the form and function of his ideas. Now addressed to a broad, impersonal audience—the public sphere of private individuals engaged in reasoned discussion—Melon’s account of commercial affairs became more abstract,

⁵ Catherine Larrère, *L’invention de l’économie au XVIIIe siècle: du droit naturel à la physiocratie* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1992); Simone Meyssonnier, *La balance et l’horloge: la genèse de la pensée libérale en France au XVIIIe siècle* (Montreuil: Editions de la Passion, 1989); John Robertson, *The Case for Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680–1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 325–76; Istvan Hont, *Jealousy of Trade*, 30–37; idem., “The ‘Rich Country–Poor Country’ Debate Revisited: The Irish Origins and French Perceptions of the Hume Paradox,” in Carl Wennerlind and Margaret Schabas (eds.), *David Hume’s Political Economy* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

⁶ For “golden age,” see François Crouzet, “Angleterre et France au XIIIe siècle: essai d’analyse comparée de deux croissances économiques,” *Annales. Economies, sociétés, civilisations*, 21, 2 (1966), 264. Dermigny, *La Chine et l’Occident*, i, 155–7; Lüthy, *La Banque Protestante en France*, II: 23–41; Haudrère, *La Compagnie française des Indes*, ii, 438–40.

focused less on the contingent bricolage of merchant capital and more on the supposed rationality of free and abundant commodity exchange. The story he told about development of commerce, while still designed to encourage his audience to value the institutions and luxury goods of France's developing global economy, became more normative, oriented towards the "progress of society." Encouragement could easily transform into critique, into what Hegel called the venting of moral discontent, if such progress failed to materialize. As subsequent chapters will demonstrate, the hopes and frustrations generated by political economy continued to shape the global operations of French merchant capital throughout the century.

By reading Castanier alongside Melon, the following chapter reveals how this necessary and dialectical relationship between capital and critique was established. It begins by following Castanier's rise during the Law system, in order to account for how a merchant from the Languedoc achieved such a prominent position in France's commercial empire. It then turns to the arguments Melon wrote the 1720s memoirs, in which he both advocated for the survival of the Compagnie des Indes and made suggestions for how the company should be organized, before considering how those arguments evolved into the *Essai politique*. Castanier's merchant capitalism and Melon's political economy were mutually generative. But by the 1730s, after the future of the company was secured and after Melon had turned to a public audience, the tensions between the two had become apparent. They were tensions that would determine the course of French commercial imperialism until the collapse of the old regime.

Le plus grand coquin de France

The initial accumulation of the Castanier fortune was a typical product of Colbertian policies that used privilege to encourage manufacturing for export. In 1696 François's father Guillaume III, a

merchant and magistrate, acquired the Trivalle factory in Carcassonne along with a royal privilege that carried the right to export textiles to the Levant; in 1701 the king ordered the Estates General of Languedoc to grant Castanier a loan of 30,000 l.t. without interest for ten years; the Trivalle factory enjoyed an exemption on import duties on wool from Roussillon, and was only obliged to pay half the usual export duties on linens leaving Marseille. Guillaume III's two sons, François and Guillaume IV, built on these foundations, extending trading networks through relationships with partners in Constantinople, Cadiz and Bayonne. The brothers were some of the first merchants from Languedoc to sell their textiles in Spanish America.⁷ By 1719, at the height of the Law system, Guillaume IV entered the ranks of the nobility, boasting the title *baron de Couffoulens, Cuxac et autres places*. He died at his chateau outside Carcassonne in 1725, leaving a fortune of 23 million l.t. shared between his own two sons.⁸

François, meanwhile, had left Carcassonne for Paris in 1710, and in September 1717 he was one of the few merchants nominated as a director of Law's reformed Compagnie d'Occident. Most of the directors were Parisian financiers and tax farmers, suggesting that initially the company was more an instrument for Law to wrest financial control away from rivals such as Antoine Crozat and the Pâris brothers than it was a genuine commercial venture.⁹ As John Shovlin has argued, Law used the company as bait for investors, something to "woo mercantile interests" and suck in the pools of French capital sloshing around overseas economic circuits.¹⁰ With Castanier as director, the company could benefit from the thriving merchant-

⁷ Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, *Les financiers de Languedoc*, 70.

⁸ J. Sarrand, "Deux milliardaires carcassonnais sous Louis XIV : Guillaume et François Castanier," *Mémoires de la Société des arts et sciences de Carcassonne*, 4^e série, tome II (1956), 81-101; Juliette Costeplane, "Sur les origines de la famille Castanier," *Bulletin de Société d'études scientifiques de l'Aude*, T. LXXV (1975).

⁹ Albert Girard, "La réorganisation de la Compagnie des Indes (1719-1723)," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine (1899-1914)*, Vol 11, No. 1 (1908/1909), 5-34.

¹⁰ John Shovlin, "Jealousy of Credit."

draper milieu of Languedoc; through Jacques Duval d'Eprémesnil and the Morin brothers it captured the commercial networks of Le Havre and Nantes.¹¹ Yet whatever the financial and factional motivations, the commercial consequences of this change in personnel should not be underestimated. Castanier and d'Eprémesnil were not typical Parisian rentiers, happy to leave their investments dormant in offices while siphoning off a fixed annual return. Instead they were prominent examples of what Chaussinand-Nogaret identified as the “merchant-banker-entrepreneur-shipowner-financier” that dominated the old regime economy.¹² They had amassed fortunes through trade long before Law promoted them, and they were unlikely to forego the opportunities to accumulate in a privileged trading company backed by state funds.

This much is made clear by the fact that until his death in 1759 Castanier remained a director of the Compagnie des Indes. One can, then, gain insight from Castanier's career into the way old regime France, with its fragmented domestic economy, pursued commercial imperialism. Just as the state extended itself juridically by operating through the *parlements* and courts of imperfectly assimilated provinces, it also sought to extend itself commercially through international networks that wealthy merchants like Castanier had cultivated.¹³ From Castanier's perspective, the state provided a way of bypassing the limitations imposed by the weakly integrated markets of the French interior. Entrepreneurs tended to restrict their activity to narrow markets in which their reputations were established and their investments secure, but which were resistant to scalability. The backing of the state in the form of privileges and monopolies enabled them to put their capital behind risky operations in unfamiliar but profitable overseas markets.

¹¹ Louis Dermigny, *La Chine et l'Occident*, 155-6.

¹² Chaussinand-Nogaret, *Les financiers de Languedoc*, 22, et passim; idem, *Gens de finance au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Bordas, 1972).

¹³ J.H. Elliott, “A Europe of Composite Monarchies,” *Past & Present*, no. 137 (1992), 48-71; James B. Collins, *The State in Early Modern France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Helen Dewar, “Souveraineté dans les colonies, souveraineté en métropole: le rôle de la Nouvelle-France dans la consolidation de l'autorité maritime en France, 1620-1628,” *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française*, v. 64, n. 3-4 (2011), 63-92.

The Compagnie des Indes that emerged out of the wreckage of the Law system was an expression of this way in which state and society collaborated to put capital to productive use in scalable enterprises.¹⁴

Castanier, then, was a beneficiary of the partial embrace of merchant capitalism by a “patrimonial state” that did not so much create markets as attempt to co-opt and encourage those that already existed. Weber argued that under such conditions traditional social relations were more often than not reinforced, since institutions such as the Compagnie des Indes lacked the “procedural predictability” required by sustained capitalist development. Yet he also allowed for the possibility that “a private individual, by skillfully taking advantage of the given circumstances and of personal relations, obtains a privileged position which offers him nearly unlimited acquisitive opportunities.”¹⁵ Certainly Castanier fully exploited his position in the Compagnie des Indes after the fall of John Law, sending his money and merchandise to the furthest corners of France’s commercial empire. This was not an enterprise that simply lined Castanier’s pockets: it also furthered the globalization of French markets. And so to understand the particularities of French commercial imperialism in the eighteenth century, it will help to consider where the financier’s fortune, and reputation, came from. How did Castanier emerge from the Law system as *le plus grand coquin de France*?

¹⁴ Jean-Yves Grenier, *L’économie d’Ancien Régime*, 96-101. See also Jeff Horn, *The Economic Development of Early Modern France: The Privilege of Liberty, 1650–1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

¹⁵ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An outline of interpretive sociology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 1092-6. See also Clifford Geertz’s discussion of the “intensification of social forms” in *The Development of the Javanese Economy: A Socio-Cultural Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Center for International Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1956), 106. For patrimonialism and old regime France see Gail Bossenga, “Divided Nobility: Status, Markets and the Patrimonial State in The Old Regime,” in Jay M. Smith, ed., *The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 43-75; Sharon Kettering, *Patrons, Brokers and Clients in Seventeenth Century France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Paul Cheney, *Cul de Sac: Patrimony, Capitalism, and Slavery in French Saint-Domingue* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2017). Julia Adams applies a Weberian reading of European trading companies in *The Familial State: Ruling Families and Merchant Capitalism in Early Modern Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

An answer can be found in the correspondence between Castanier and one of his associates, Tournier de Murel, an aspiring speculator who moved to Paris in 1715.¹⁶ Tournier sent updates on his life and affairs to his mother and brother—the latter, a magistrate in the parlement of Toulouse, had married Castanier’s niece, the daughter of Guillaume—reporting on his struggle to earn the financier’s patronage. For the most part Castanier gave Tournier a “frosty and indifferent reception,” but he also recognized the benefits of having a hinterland of associates to call on as investors in his own business interests. And so in October 1717 Tournier wrote to his brother urging him to invest in the Compagnie d’Occident, of which Castanier had just been named director. Through Tournier, Castanier was doing the work of Law’s system: transforming a rentier economy that tied up state debt in annual payments to officeholders into a more flexible system of paper money and transferable credit. For those who weren’t in Paris, however, the virtues of these new financial instruments seemed dubious. Tournier was constantly trying to dissuade his family members from such skepticism, reiterating Castanier’s personal assurances and pointing to the sizable investment of the king.¹⁷ Meanwhile, from Carcassonne Guillaume Castanier also exerted pressure on his son-in-law to relinquish his capital from offices and to invest it instead in company shares.¹⁸

Familial networks were an effective resource for Castanier. Having thought he had found a suitable marriage partner, Tournier later reported to his mother that “M. Castanier totally disapproves of the thought of marrying Mlle Fayard” because her father had “business interests with Samuel Bernard,” a rival financier. Castanier was wary of conceding access to his

¹⁶ The following story of the relationship between Tournier de Murel and Castanier is also told in Chaussinand-Nogaret, *Les Financiers de Languedoc*, 144-7.

¹⁷ Tournier to his mother, 25th September 1717, Archives Départementales de l’Aude (ADA) 3J 617; 2nd October 1717, ADA 3J 616.

¹⁸ Guillaume Castanier to François Tournier, 2nd August 1717, 16th August 1717 & 7th September 1717, ADA 3J 620.

Languedoc empire; “he would much prefer” that Tournier married “a girl from the province with an inheritance of twenty thousand écus than a girl from Paris with one-hundred thousand.”¹⁹

Personal relationships were central to the formation of capital during the old regime; as potential sources of investment, patrons and entrepreneurs such as Castanier had an interest in keeping clients like Tournier within their orbits of influence.²⁰

Tournier, for his part, was hoping to benefit from Castanier’s insight into the behavior of company shares. In 1717 he had converted his mother to the cause by arguing that “if the company is not succeeding, M. Castanier will be the first to know, and you will be able to take out what you’ve invested before anything bad happens.”²¹ He was half right. Between July and December 1719, when the rest of the financial world was buying company shares, Castanier cashed out. On 22nd July he sold a portion of his shares—the price of which had risen by 250 per cent—for 1.2 million l.t. in *billets de banque*, which he then sent to his brother in Carcassonne. By December of that year he had sent 9 million l.t., nearly four times the amount of his initial investment in the company. The price of shares had risen from 2,000 l.t. in 1717 to over 9,000 l.t.—a price that many recognized, but only by the turn of the year, to be unsustainable. When the corrections came, Castanier was covered. Guillaume had managed, thanks to a network of agents and touts, to reinvest his brother’s money in the safest commodity of all: land. By the end of the year he had purchased more than twenty-three seigneuries.²²

One of the touts Guillaume relied on to find “some land for sale around Montauban” was François Tournier. “If you could find a fair price,” he wrote in August to the magistrate, “you

¹⁹ Tournier to his mother, 1st May, 1718, ADA 3J 617.

²⁰ Grenier, *L’économie d’Ancien Régime*, 92-6.

²¹ Tournier to his mother, 25th September 1717, ADA 3J 617.

²² Louis Dermigny, “La Banque à Montpellier au XVIII siècle,” in *Annales du Midi: revue archéologique, historique et philologique de la France méridionale*, t. 93, n. 151 (1981), 17-49.

would please me greatly, because one of my friends wrote to me that he would like to employ five or six-hundred thousand livres on the acquisition of a nice bit of land.”²³ He neglected to mention that the “friend” was his brother, François, and that the money he was spending came from the sale of company shares. Over 200,000 l.t. of François Tournier’s own money, in the meantime, had been invested in the company by his own brother in Paris, and with the shares in May 1720 having halved in value over the course of the previous two months, the latter tried to convert their holdings into rents on the Hôtel de Ville in Paris, only to be convinced once more to hold on to them by Castanier.²⁴ By the end of July, though, the fate of Tournier’s investments—and that of the Law system as a whole—was sealed. Shares had plummeted and over-issued banknotes were losing value against silver and gold. The public had lost confidence in Law’s reforms. Tournier de Murel was left penniless, and Castanier was still not lending him any money. Resigned to returning to Toulouse “a ruined man,” Tournier expressed resentment towards his would-be benefactor. “Those who have been here the same time as me have made a lot,” he wrote, “and I could have done the same, if Castanier had wanted.”²⁵

With his fortune secured by an impressive landed property portfolio, Castanier remained as a director of the Compagnie des Indes. In 1727 he moved into a fabulous residence (designed by Michel Tannevot, the architect of the king) on the Rue Neuve des Capucines, adjacent to the offices of the company. He lived there until his death in 1759, leaving—to no descendants—a colossal fortune estimated at 43 million l.t..²⁶

²³ Guillaume Castanier to François Tournier, 3rd August 1719, ADA 3J 620.

²⁴ Tournier to his mother, 29th June 1720, ADA 3J 617.

²⁵ Tournier to his mother, 15th July 1720, ADA 3J 616.

²⁶ Sarrand, “Deux milliardaires carcassonnais.”

Glorifying Portfolio Capitalism

What are we to make of Castanier? His ascent seems to affirm that the marriage of a patrimonial state and commercial capitalism during the regency served only, as Weber might have expected, to reinforce traditional social relations. After 1720 Castanier became associated with his (possibly apocryphal) statement, *en terre mes billets*. Perhaps then his career was simply another example of “court capitalism,” and further support for G.V. Taylor’s argument that “the most spectacular operations of old regime capitalism were made possible by royal finance and political manipulation rather than industrial or maritime enterprise.”²⁷ Yet the traditional modes of acquisition in old regime France don’t account for the scale of Castanier’s fortune. Investments in land and rents kept his money safe, but they didn’t make it grow. During the Law affair Castanier had invested 9 million l.t. in Languedoc real estate; when he died, next door to the Compagnie des Indes, he had a fortune of nearly five times that amount. Clearly Castanier didn’t fail to take advantage of what Weber called the “unlimited acquisitive opportunities” provided by privileged access to colonial commerce.

Because spectacular operations *were* carried out in this sphere of the economy. In a memoir written in 1746, Castanier urged the controller general of finances to make widespread a practice he had already adopted—a form of arbitrage on a global scale in which merchandise was sent to Mexico and sold for silver, which in turn was shipped to China, where it was exchanged for gold at a markup of 40 per cent.²⁸ Through the 1740s Castanier placed money behind trade on the African coast, and in India, Manila and China. Raynal later marveled at the “dazzling

²⁷ G. V. Taylor, “Types of Capitalism in Eighteenth-Century France,” in *English Historical Review*, 79 (1964). James C. Riley describes this imbrication of public and private as “capitalism in public functions” in *The Seven Years War and the Old Regime in France: The Economic and Financial Toll* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 59-62; Herbert Lüthy opts for “regnicole capitalism” in *La Banque Protestante en France*, II: 43.

²⁸ AN Col C 2 f38.

circulation” opened up by “this shrewd man,” whose private wealth seemed to encircle the globe.²⁹ These entrepreneurial feats of Castanier must be read alongside the more “traditional” aspects of his portfolio. Indeed, the two were mutually constitutive. Land and rents gave Castanier’s fortune a solid foundation, allowing him to speculate on more risky ventures with relative impunity. As Chaussinand-Nogaret has argued, only those members of the plutocratic elite—those who were worth at least one million l.t.—could diversify investments between estates and commerce.³⁰ Someone like Tournier de Murel had to choose between offices and company shares; Castanier could have both.

With his *billets* buried in estates, his merchandise distributed around the world, and his interests dictating colonial policy, Castanier was “able to straddle the worlds of commerce and political participation.” In that sense he was a French contemporary of the “portfolio capitalists” that Sanjay Subrahmanyam and Christopher Bayly identified in the Indian Ocean world, a type who emerged thanks to the increasing sophistication of early-modern economies—the linking via long-distance trade of ecologically distinct regions and complementary production zones—and the commercialization of states. But whereas Subrahmanyam and Bayly see over the course of the eighteenth century the portfolio capitalist being marginalized by sovereign authorities because they were “overmighty subjects and potential threats,” Castanier, provincial descendant of sharecroppers and textile manufacturers, only assimilated further into the institutions and cultural forms of the old regime.³¹ To Castanier’s directorship of the state-endorsed Compagnie

²⁹ Guillaume Raynal, *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* (Amsterdam, 1773) IV, 243.

³⁰ Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, “Capital et structure sociale sous l’Ancien Régime,” *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 24e Année, No. 2 (Mar. – Apr., 1970), 462-76. See also Jean-Pierre Hirsch, “Les milieux du commerce, l’esprit de système et le pouvoir à la veille de la Révolution,” *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 30e Année, No. 6 (Nov. – Dec., 1975), 1337-70.

³¹ Sanjay Subrahmanyam & C.A. Bayly, “Portfolio Capitalists and the Political Economy of Early Modern India,” *The Indian Economic & Social Review*, vol. 28, issue 4 (1988), 401-24.



Fig. 1.1. Hyacinthe Rigaud, *François Castanier* (1728). Musée des beaux-arts, Carcassonne.



Fig. 1.2. Hyacinthe Rigaud, *Autoportrait d'Hyacinthe Rigaud peignant le portrait de François I de Castanier* (1730). Musée d'art Hyacinthe Rigaud, Perpignan.

des Indes and Raynal's celebration of his "dazzling" speculations in print, we can add his glorification on canvas by Hyacinthe Rigaud (Fig. 1.1), the portraitist of the Louis XIV. In fact, Rigaud afforded Castanier the honor of painting him twice, the second time in an autoportrait that, as Katie Scott has put it, "recorded Castanier's transformation from living being to cultural icon under Rigaud's brush." This remarkable painting (Fig 1.2), part of an installation in Castanier's mansion on the Rue Neuve des Capucines, was accompanied by Rigaud's portrait of

Charles Lebrun and Pierre Mignard, the juxtaposition casting the company director as both patron to and object of the heroic tradition.³² Far from being a potential threat or overmighty subject, Castanier, now an icon of merchant capital, was fully compatible with the norms and values of absolutism.

Attending to the way in which Castanier's fortune grew after the Law affair reveals not just who colonial commerce worked for, but also how it worked. In his study of the old regime economy, Jean-Yves Grenier distinguished between the two kinds of profit available to any commercial enterprise. The first, "profit 1," refers to the regular remuneration of expenses and monetary advances that took place within the stable honeycomb structure of the old regime, in which merchants stuck to familiar, reliable markets. This form of profit was not spectacular but it was predictable, enough to provide for future investments in agricultural and commercial enterprises. We might think of "profit 1" as covering the normal operations of harvests and small businesses. "Profit 2," on the other hand, was high risk, high reward. Often it required state encouragement, or at least the coordination of elites. Above all it was a feature of markets with deep and patient reserves of capital, in which information was scarce and the "circulation" of commodities was slow and complex, encompassing a range of environments and fiscal regimes.³³

Most colonial commerce carried out by the Compagnie des Indes in the 1720s and 1730s revolved around profit 2: it focused on developing markets and trading in new commodities, where the returns were potentially lucrative but far from guaranteed. Public suspicion of these kind of affairs—of exotic commodities and company shares—was precisely what had

³² Katie Scott, *The Rococo Interior: Decoration and Social Spaces in Early Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 27-9; Hannah Williams, *Académie Royale: A History in Portraits* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2015), 262-5.

³³ Grenier, *L'économie d'Ancien Régime*, 50-1 & 123-40.

undermined the Law system. To avoid the same fate, the Compagnie des Indes had to generate confidence in its affairs. It had to convince potential investors that the shares it issued and the commodities it traded had substance, that they were of real value. The speculative, unpredictable bricolage of profit 2 had to be rendered as if it were the familiar, domestic business of profit 1, much like the arriviste Castanier had been aestheticized as the inheritor of the heroic tradition.

Political economy, which promised to identify the rationality behind the contingencies of trade, was the ideal vehicle for this campaign for legitimacy and capital investment. The public sphere was already awash with other, more allusive genres that tended to satirize Law's institutions and the follies that animated them. Famously Montesquieu, in his *Lettres persanes* (1721), had resorted to mythical fable to ridicule the Scotsman as a charlatan: a "son of Aeolus" who had forced the inhabitants of the "kingdom of Betica" to exchange precious metals for sacks of wind.³⁴ To overcome residual associations with the speculative frenzies and upheavals of the Law system, the company enlisted well-informed, articulate writers who could advance more straightforward arguments about the commercial benefits of overseas trade and company shares. Chief among them was Jean-François Melon, who in the 1720s made a sustained case to the financial and political elite of Paris that the company was a medium through which the undeniable gains of overseas commerce could be made widespread. Over the short term the campaign was a success. The company survived, and colonial trade flourished. But victory came at a cost. In his argument for the general utility of the company, Melon set a normative standard that proved hard to live up to; in his cultivation of a public that recognized the value of overseas commerce, he invited upon the company the scrutiny and critique of that public. These were the

³⁴ Montesquieu, *Lettres persanes* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995 [1721]), L142.

unintended but, in retrospect, necessary consequences of the company's search for investment and legitimacy, of its attempt to turn profit 2 into profit 1.

Jean-François Melon and the Compagnie des Indes

Like Castanier, Melon enjoyed a meteoric rise under the Law system. Born in Tulle in 1675, he studied law as a young man, worked as an inspector for the General Farm in Dax, and in 1713 helped found, alongside Montesquieu, the Académie des Sciences in Bordeaux. Three years later he arrived in Paris, where he frequented the Café Procope and fell into a circle of savants surrounding the Comtesse de Verrue.³⁵ After a stint working for the Cardinal Dubois, he served as first secretary first to Law and then, after the Scotsman's dismissal, to the Duc d'Orléans. His ambition of becoming a director of the Compagnie des Indes was quashed when, in 1723, he was accused of having written a pamphlet that slandered one of the councilors of state charged with settling the accounts of Law's system.³⁶ Undeterred, Melon continued to work for the company. Between 1723 and 1727 he produced a series of memoirs that provided the basis for his celebrated *Essai politique sur le commerce*, written across two editions in 1734 and 1736.³⁷ When placed in the context of the reorganization of the company and the remarkable growth of colonial trade in the 1720s and 30s, this body of work prompts a reinterpretation of Melon's thought and, more broadly, of the role of the public discourse of political economy in the development of French commercial imperialism.

³⁵ Orain, *La politique du merveilleux*, 106-8.

³⁶ The pamphlet, written in verse, took aim at Louis Fagon, former *intendant des finances*, and was duly titled "La Fagonnade"—probably a reference to the "Mazarinades" of the Fronde. AN K 884.

³⁷ The edition I will be referring throughout is Melon, *Essai politique sur le commerce* (Caen: Presses Universitaires de Caen, 2014). A selection of Melon's company memoirs can be found in Jean-François Melon, *Opere I*, ed. O. Nicastro and S. Perona (Pisa: Jacques e i suoi quaderni, 1983), 2 vols. I am grateful to Rita Nicastro, who kindly sent me both volumes.

The *Essai politique* is primarily known for its opening parable, in which an island that produces only wheat achieves hegemony over two islands that respectively produce only wool and beverages. From this set-piece Melon asserted, like Fénelon before him and the physiocrats after, that agriculture is the basis of prosperity.³⁸ This was the fundamental “principle of commerce” that every legislator should heed. But it would be a mistake to conclude that Melon therefore thought the priority *for France in the 1730s* was internal improvement to create a favorable balance of trade. His prescription for Louis XV’s kingdom was not, as John Robertson has claimed, an “agriculture-based model,” and nor did Melon champion what Istvan Hont described as a “neo-Colbertian” strategy to promote domestic industry.³⁹ As the second chapter, “Of Wheat,” made clear, it was precisely because France already resembled the first, wheat-rich island that “this first care of government, the certainty of having bread, is very easily satisfied.” The rest of the *Essai* therefore had very little to say about agriculture or manufacturing. Instead, it dwelt at length—in chapters on colonies, slavery, trading companies, luxury commodities, and the “spirit of commerce”—on the institutions and norms of foreign trade. For Simone Meyssonnier, these are simply “mercantilist” remnants in a work that otherwise “anticipated” liberal political economy.⁴⁰ Yet these chapters had the same objective as the company memoirs, which was Melon’s abiding objective throughout his oeuvre: to make a public case for the continued development of French commercial imperialism.

This reinterpretation of Melon prompts a revision of broader narratives of political economy and its public functions, most of which suffer from anglocentrism. That the *Essai*

³⁸ On the origins of this tradition see Lionel Rothkrug, *Opposition to Louis XIV: The Political and Social Origins of the French Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965).

³⁹ John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment*, 364–71; idem., “The Enlightenment above National Context: Political Economy in Eighteenth-Century Scotland and Naples,” *The Historical Journal*, vol. 40, no. 3 (1997), 679; Istvan Hont, “The ‘Rich Country–Poor Country’ Debate Revisited,” 248.

⁴⁰ Meyssonnier, *La balance et l’horloge*, 68 & 114–6.

politique was the product of a sustained engagement with the affairs of the Compagnie des Indes is consistent with Jürgen Habermas’s argument that merchant capitalism caused the rise of the “bourgeois public sphere,” whose chief characteristic was the discussion of commercial affairs. But for Habermas this was first and foremost an English phenomenon, since the public in France struggled to “effectively institutionalize its critical impulses” until “roughly the middle of the eighteenth century.”⁴¹ Subsequent scholarship, however critical of Habermas’s causal claims, has accepted this chronological and geographical framework. Steven Pincus, for instance, proceeds on the assumption that “there was a more vibrant discussion of economic issues in England than in France” in constructing his argument that political economy was a debate between territorially minded Tories and trade-enthusiastic Whigs.⁴² The *Essai politique*, which grafted commercial expansion onto the agricultural stock of France, simply does not fit into these categories. Melon was not advising “France to challenge England at its own economic game and win,” as Istvan Hont has argued; he was providing a model of commercial development that was particular to economic capacities and institutions of post-Regency France.⁴³

Melon recognized that France had to cultivate its own “imperial repertoire.” Throughout the company memoirs he rejected the idea that existing European empires were models to be emulated. Spain’s Council of the Indies, which others saw as the “natural” form of colonial governance for an absolutist monarchy, was in fact incompatible, Melon argued, with the structure and principles of the Compagnie des Indes, which managed the property of its shareholders, not the property of the crown. In any case, history had shown that the Spanish

⁴¹ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 67-9. See also Robin Ives, “Political Publicity and Political Economy in Eighteenth Century France,” *French History*, vol. 7, issue 1, (2003), 1-18.

⁴² Steven Pincus, “The State and Civil Society in Early Modern England: Capitalism, Causation, and Habermas’s Public Sphere” in Peter Lake and Steven Pincus (eds.), *The Politics of the Public Sphere in Early Modern England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007); idem., *1688: The First Modern Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

⁴³ Istvan Hont, “The ‘Rich Country–Poor Country’ Debate Revisited,” 262.

approach was to be avoided.⁴⁴ Not that the “republican” companies of the Dutch and British were superior. Melon alleged that their apparent commercial superiority rested on “mere credit,” or “imaginary wealth,” which allowed them to procure merchandise for their consumers from all over the world, but which papered over the supposedly limited natural resources of their respective metropolises. The shares of the Compagnie des Indes, on the other hand, represented the “real wealth” not only of its colonial infrastructure but of France itself, which was both “better situated in relation to two seas than any state of Europe,” and, more importantly, blessed with fertile land that produces “all the necessities of life.”⁴⁵ This dual move—a distancing of France from its Bourbon neighbor on the one hand, and a celebration of the superiority of France’s resources over the commercial republics to its north on the other—allowed Melon to argue against the conventional wisdom of the time. With the right institutions, the agrarian, absolutist old regime would prove *especially* suited to commercial imperialism. France could replicate the localized achievements of Castanier, whose capital was at once landed and mercantile. Overseas trade would be underpinned by the tangible, “real wealth” of the domestic economy, just as Castanier anchored his more daring overseas speculations in twenty-three estates in the Languedoc.

Melon would go on to paint this fundamental argument on a broader canvas in his public writing in the 1730s. But the finer points of his analysis were the product of his work for the company in the decade before. Between 1723 and 1726 he helped the company secure investment and legitimacy amongst the financial elite of Paris. In doing so, he cultivated his understanding of French commercial imperialism. Melon’s mature political economy therefore

⁴⁴ Melon, “Réponse à un memoire touchant l’administration de la Compagnie des Indes,” October 1725.

⁴⁵ Melon, “Mémoire sur la Compagnie des Indes, fait en mai 1724,” AN K 1230.

needs to be read alongside this earlier body of work, and above all in the context of the company's reconfiguration after the Law affair.

By 1723 the royal commission charged with settling the accounts of the Law system concluded its work. Perhaps reflecting the Regent's enduring enthusiasm for Law's ideas, the company was afforded a remarkably generous settlement. To increase shareholder oversight, the number of directors was reduced. (Castanier survived, as he did subsequent culls in 1726 and 1730.) The company was valued at 112 million l.t., made up of 56,000 shares at 2,000 l.t. each. Each share would accrue a guaranteed 7.5 per cent annual dividend; any profits from trade would be distributed to shareholders on top of that amount. Crucially, the monopoly on tobacco sales was returned to the company from the General Farm to cover these fixed dividends. Financiers not associated with the company launched public attacks on these arrangements, which they saw as unjustifiable indulgence of Law's acolytes.⁴⁶ The company replied with its own propaganda, insisting that the terms of the settlement were necessary to rendering overseas commerce beneficial to the public at large. Over the next three years a debate ensued that determined what would survive of Law's system. In essence, it was a debate over value, in its broadest sense: over the institutions, markets, and goods that Louis XV's France would prioritize.

Melon had two objectives in this debate. First, he had to present the company as offering distinct and superior alternatives to existing financial instruments and institutions, notably rents and the General Farm. Second, he had to convince his audience—existing company shareholders, potential investors, and ministers—that risky overseas trade could become reliable: that profit 2 could be turned into profit 1. The first task was made easier by the factional divides

⁴⁶ Jacob M. Price, *France and the Chesapeake: A History of the French Tobacco Monopoly and of its Relationship to the British and American Tobacco Trades*, 2 vols (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1973), I: 277-83; Giles Y. Bertin, "Les aspects comptables et financiers du commerce colonial de la Compagnie des Indes entre 1719 et 1723," *Revue d'histoire économique et sociale*, vol. 40, no. 4 (1962), 449-83.

of Parisian finance. Longstanding opponents of Law were known collectively as the “anti-System,” and Melon ascribed their hostility to the company to self-interest. As creditors, they were staunch “bullionists.” They opposed paper money, shares, and the “augmentations” sought by the company (inflationary policies that lowered the silver content of the livre) because their contracts and rents were stipulated in money of account: the higher the silver content, the more they stood to gain. Against these “tyrants of the revenues of the king” Melon put the company on the side of all debtors. Its tradable shares and inflationary policies would increase the money supply, raise prices, wages, and tax revenues, and generate “*confiance pour les Effets Royaux*.”⁴⁷ As a result it would benefit not an oligarchy of rentiers but all peasants, laborers and entrepreneurs—and also, significantly, the king himself.⁴⁸ Each of the company’s assets, from shares to colonial infrastructure, was designed to stimulate “real wealth”: land, its cultivation, and the trade that allowed its products to flow.⁴⁹ The institution promoted what Melon would later describe in the *Essai politique* as “sound finance, which is to say, finance subordinated to commerce.”⁵⁰

This raised the second, more delicate task: how could Melon prove that the Compagnie des Indes enhanced “real wealth,” and not just wild speculation? A major objective in his memoirs was to reassure shareholders that they would soon receive not just their guaranteed dividend but also the profits on colonial trade. In a telling analogy, Melon claimed that “the expectation of an increase in dividends through the profits of commerce should today be taken to have a value as real as the fruits of a seeded field.”⁵¹ The production of exotic commodities was

⁴⁷ Melon, “Réponse à M. Pâris tendant à la diminution des monnaies,” AN K 884.

⁴⁸ Melon reiterated this argument in the *Essai politique sur le commerce*, 201-8.

⁴⁹ Melon, “Mémoire sur la Compagnie des Indes, fait en mai 1724,” AN K 1230.

⁵⁰ Melon, *Essai politique*, 325.

⁵¹ Melon, “Mémoire sur le commerce des actions, présenté en mai 1724,” AN K 1230.

as familiar and reliable as agriculture, safely within the realm of profit 1. The company's "fertile" colonies could be counted alongside France's agricultural endowment. In one memoir Melon boasted at length about the potential of the company's holdings. Trading posts in Africa were sending 8,000 slaves annually across the Atlantic, a rate that would increase along with the development of the Caribbean islands. Pondicherry and Chandernagore were "worth no less than the establishments of the English" in India. Ile Bourbon would soon provide Europe's entire supply of coffee. Louisiana promised the same for tobacco.⁵²

Boosterism of this sort was an established genre within the world of the Law system, and it often bore little relation to reality.⁵³ In this instance the company's arguments for its financial and commercial utility seem to have been quite successful. Most investors held onto their shares, despite being entitled to exchange them for *rentes viagères* or *billets de loterie*.⁵⁴ And the subsequent boom in French overseas trade, which began in earnest in the 1730s, indicates that Melon's claims about the value of the company's global possessions were not entirely bluster. During the Law system French aggregate trade activity had averaged just over 125 million l.t. per year; by the early 1730s the figure was over 200 million l.t., and it had doubled again by 1750.⁵⁵ The net profits of the company reflected this impressive trend: in 1726-30 they averaged £94,305 per year, or roughly 20 per cent of the profits of the English East India Company (EIC); in the 1730s the annual average was £359,474, around 67 per cent of the EIC.⁵⁶ Promising balance sheets were accompanied by the increased prevalence of colonial goods on French

⁵² Melon, "Mémoire pour la Compagnie des Indes en décembre 1726," AN K 1230.

⁵³ Orain, *La politique du merveilleux*, passim.

⁵⁴ The exchange had been available since 1723. Over a decade later just under 5,000 of the initial 56,000 shares had been lost to this mechanism—at 2,000 l.t. per share a substantial but not devastating loss of capital. See Dermigny, *La Chine et l'Occident*, 156.

⁵⁵ Ruggiero Romano, "Documenti e prime considerazioni intorno alla 'Balance du Commerce' della Francia dal 1716 al 1780."

⁵⁶ Manning, *Fortunes à Faire*, 35-6 & 44.

markets. Sugar imports rose from an annual average of 59 million lbs in the first half the decade to 86 million lbs between 1736 and 1743.⁵⁷ The company recorded a sevenfold increase in coffee imports over the decade.⁵⁸ Consumption of tobacco in France, which lagged behind other European countries, had trebled between 1670 and 1730, and then trebled again in the next sixty years.⁵⁹ This general expansion of overseas trade could only be partially attributed to the company, but it did nevertheless indicate that French consumers were willing to recognize the value in colonial commodities and, by extension, company shares as well.

We should not dismiss Melon's memoirs as mere propaganda on behalf of the company. They were that, to be sure; but they also described the intensification of production at the colonial periphery, and feasibly helped nurture a home market for colonial commodities. They also succeeded in their immediate task of securing the long-term existence of the *Compagnie des Indes*, which was practically assured by 1726. For the next four decades it would sit alongside the General Farm as an established institution in French finance. And in the 1730s, at least, it would contribute to an unprecedented growth in French overseas trade.

Yet there were also glaring discrepancies between Melon's memoirs and the form that the company would adopt after 1726. These discrepancies were especially apparent when it came to the charged issue of the tobacco monopoly, to which the company had managed to hold on and which in good years was providing the 8.2 million l.t. required to cover the high dividends. The monopoly was coveted because it brought assured income with minimal costs, since most tobacco was not produced domestically but purchased from the Chesapeake via Britain. The

⁵⁷ Robert Stein, "The French Sugar Business in the Eighteenth Century: A Quantitative Study," *Business History*, 22:1 (1980), 6.

⁵⁸ Donald C. Wellington, *French East India Companies: A Historical Account and Record of Trade* (Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books, 2006), 192.

⁵⁹ Price, *France and the Chesapeake*, 266.

company argued that it alone was capable of removing this dependence by encouraging production in Louisiana. Melon claimed in a 1725 memoir that private farmers had ruined the crop in Saint Domingue, and would do the same around New Orleans; only a company could supervise such an improvement scheme.⁶⁰ That same year another company writer promised that Louisiana would supply all of France's tobacco within four years.⁶¹ None of this came to pass. It soon became clear that the company's schemes in the lower Mississippi valley were a drain of wealth. Yields on British-sourced tobacco remained earmarked, alongside slowly improving coffee sales, to cover the crippling 7.5 per cent dividends on shares. Often even those revenue streams were insufficient, and the company was forced to dip into its trading funds (in 1727 to the tune of 1.5 million l.t.) or even borrow to make up the difference.⁶² The company maintained its commitment to such generous dividends at the expense of the colonial improvement schemes promised by Melon.

And so if in 1726 the company became entrenched within the French state, then this was also the year it succumbed, at least in part, to the rentier logics that had traditionally governed old regime finances. Nothing symbolized this better than the newly assertive Louis XV, now sixteen, banishing those sympathetic to the company's more ambitious schemes and appointing his tutor Cardinal Fleury—conservative, septuagenarian, and associate of anti-system kingpin Samuel Bernard—as de facto first minister. The company eventually leased out the tobacco monopoly to the General Farm in 1730 for a fixed 8 million l.t. a year. This covered the all-important dividends, and kept the company in sound financial health through to the War of

⁶⁰ Melon, "Mémoire pour examiner quels sont les contradicteurs de la Compagnie des Indes, pourquoi ils en demandent la suppression, et de quelle utilité cette compagnie est à l'état," AN K 884.

⁶¹ Price, *France and the Chesapeake*, 284.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 287-92.

Austrian Succession.⁶³ But it was a financial arrangement remarkably similar to those Melon had criticized in his memoirs: one that benefited a small group of office-holders (or, in this case, shareholders), against which the company was supposed to provide a more productive and equitable alternative. And ultimately it was this kind of hypocrisy that caused lasting damage to the company's reputation in the public sphere. As the Abbé Morellet wrote in his fatal denunciation of 1769, "the Compagnie des Indes has obscured the distinction between the profits of commerce and those of finance; it has turned its shareholders into rentiers."⁶⁴

From Instruction to Critique

By the standards of Melon's arguments in the company memoirs, the post-1726 settlement was an awkward compromise. High dividends had been crucial for achieving his first objective in the post-Law debates: securing capital investment in the company. Now they were jeopardizing his second: diverting that capital towards productive overseas trade. Relying on the receipts of British-sourced tobacco to pay for crippling dividends was a species of fiscal arbitrage. This was not "finance subordinated to commerce," but the other way around. There was a tension, then, between the company that had emerged in reality and the normative claims that had been generated on its behalf between 1723 and 1726.

Melon's subsequent writings betrayed that tension. He remained committed to the company, and kept shares until his death.⁶⁵ Long passages of the *Essai politique* championed the benefits it had bestowed on France—notably in the chapter on exclusive companies and in a

⁶³ Ibid., 287-301.

⁶⁴ Abbé Morellet, *Mémoire sur la situation actuelle de la Compagnie des Indes* (Paris, 1769), 33, quoted in Manning, *Fortunes à Faire*, 31.

⁶⁵ "Inventaire après décès de Jean-François Melon, 28 février 1738," AN MC ET I 387.

thinly veiled orientalist fable in the final chapter of the first edition.⁶⁶ Yet he was no longer obliged to convince financiers and statesmen of the company's legitimacy. Instead, his analysis became more systematic, his tone more critical, his audience more public. Increasingly Melon's writing was focused less on what the company was doing and more on how French commerce ought to develop. His one memoir of 1727 consisted of a commentary on French statesmen since Colbert, and a polemic aimed at rich, self-interested businessmen (read: members of the General Farm) who lobbied and corrupted ministers (read: Cardinal Fleury).⁶⁷ Two years later he published *Mahmoud le Gasnévide* (1729), a derivative picaresque about the economic development of a variety of fictional oriental regimes.⁶⁸ And then in 1734 he released the *Essai politique sur le commerce*, his defining work. Four French editions had been issued by 1764, and in the five decades after its publication the *Essai politique* was translated into English, German, Spanish, Italian, Swedish, Danish, and Russian.⁶⁹ In France it immediately sparked debates about monetary policies, luxury, and the global economy serving European fancies.⁷⁰ Diderot and other *philosophes* of the high Enlightenment recognized it as one of the founding texts of the new science of political economy.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Melon, *Essai politique*, 59-78 & 307-9.

⁶⁷ Melon, "Mémoire sur la situation present des affaires," Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, MS 4500, 89-103.

⁶⁸ For insightful readings of *Mahmoud*, see Yves Citton, "Les comptes merveilleux de la finance: Confiance et fiction chez Jean-François Melon," *Féeries*, No. 2, (2005), 125-60; Erik Leborgne, "Le régent et le système de Law vus par Melon, Montesquieu, Prévost et Lesage," *Féeries*, No. 3, (2006), 105-35.

⁶⁹ Kenneth E. Carpenter, "The Economic Bestsellers Before 1850," *Bulletin of the Kress Library of Business and Economics*, Harvard Business School, 11 (1975), 14. For Melon's influence in Spain see Jesús Astigarraga, "La dérangeante découverte de l'autre: traductions et adaptations Espagnoles de l'*Essai politique sur le commerce* (1734) de Jean-François Melon," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 57-1 (2010), 91-118; in Italy, see Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment*, 325-76.

⁷⁰ On the latter, see especially Voltaire's Melon-inspired *Le Mondain*. For monetary debates, see Nicolas Dutot, *Réflexions politiques sur les finances, et le commerce*, 2 vols (La Haye: Frères Vaillant et Nicolas Prevost, 1738). Voltaire, "Observations sur Melon et Dutot; sur le commerce, le luxe, les monnaies, et les impôts" (1738) in *Œuvres de Voltaire*, T XXXVII (Paris: Lefevre, 1829), 527-44.

⁷¹ Diderot, *Oeuvres complètes*, IV (Paris: Garnier, 1875), 81-82; Maupertuis, *Oeuvres*, III (Lyon: Jean-Marie Bruyset, 1756), 416.

The differences between the *Essai politique* and Melon's earlier writings are suggestive of what made the former a work of political economy, as opposed to memoranda written for a narrow, elite audience. Certainly there were common features. Long passages of the *Essai* were lifted wholesale from the memoirs, especially in the chapter on exclusive companies and the chapters on monetary policies. Melon claimed that he was motivated to publish the *Essai* because adulterated versions of the memoirs had been circulating, and he feared his arguments were being misrepresented. He also worried, somewhat cryptically, that "Instruction might soon be transformed into Critique."⁷² That distinction was not so easily made. Inviting public scrutiny on the previously obscure workings of state finance and overseas trade was, in many respects, tantamount to critique. Even if the *Essai* had been identical to the memoirs, the very fact of its publicity, its disclosure of previously exclusive ideas, lent it a potentially radical valence.⁷³ In any case, it wasn't identical—in large part because of its discursive context, its act of communication between an anonymous author and an equally impersonal audience. The Compagnie des Indes still played a prominent role in the text, not only in chapters dedicated to exclusive companies and colonies, but also in chapters dealing with the freedom of trade, luxury, and the balance of commerce. But the discussion was cast less in terms of debates with financiers hostile to the company—creditors, bullionists, the Pâris faction—and more in general categories. Commerce was an affair of "citoyens," "négociants," "marchands," "ouvriers," and "matelots." Shares were passed "from hand to hand" and goods circulated around abstract markets, just as Melon's *Essai politique* circulated in the public sphere.⁷⁴ There was a homology, then, between the market society imagined by Melon's political economy, a generalized depiction of what

⁷² "Extrait d'une Lettre de Paris au Libraire, le 15 Mars 1734," in Jean-François Melon, *Opere II*, 120.

⁷³ Lilti, "Comment écrit-on l'histoire intellectuelle des lumières?" 195-6.

⁷⁴ Melon, *Essai politique*, 68 & 152-3.

Hegel later referred to as the “mass relationships and mass movements” of modern society, and the context in which that political economy was articulated: a public sphere of unnamed individuals who were equally concerned with and affected by the issues under discussion.

Publicity changed both the form and the ideological function of Melon’s arguments about French commerce. From participating in the global bricolage of the old regime, he was now, like Lévi-Strauss’s engineer, reflecting on it from a point of abstraction, judging the performance of existing French institutions against the standard of rational market behavior. The sections of the *Essai politique* that Melon repurposed from the memoirs were presented alongside new material that threatened to prompt readers into unfavorable judgements about the French economy. From the first chapter, with its abstract model of the three islands, Melon’s *Essai* sought to expose the “principles” of commerce to which all societies ought to conform. As with the memoirs, his fundamental purpose was to show that France could pursue its own version of commercial expansion overseas—that the institutions of agrarian, absolutist France were capable of developing markets in the Indian Ocean, Louisiana, and on the coasts of Africa. Now, though, his arguments assumed a more normative dimension against which those pursuits could be judged.⁷⁵

That normative dimension was evident in the structure of the *Essai*. Historians have tended to isolate the notorious passages of the text: the arguments for slavery, luxury, the “spirit of commerce,” or the opening thought-experiment. In doing so they have overlooked Melon’s systematic approach. It is clear enough that the eighteen chapters of the first edition of the *Essai*, published in 1734, can be divided into two halves: the first nine chapters discussing the

⁷⁵ As Susan Buck-Morss has argued, there was a necessary relationship between the abstract nature of eighteenth-century political economy and its normative and critical implications. Buck-Morss, “Envisioning Capital: Political Economy on Display,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Winter, 1995), 434-67.

institutions of the “real economy,” the second nine discussing the monetary economy.⁷⁶ The first half included sustained commentaries on the global expansion of the French economy, and as a whole it amounted to a narrative of the progress that French commercial imperialism could and should take—much as *Mahmoud le Gasnévide* had narrated the economic development of various fictional kingdoms. It is revealing that in the expanded 1736 edition, which included seven new chapters that dealt with both colonial and financial matters, Melon left this initial nine-chapter sequence completely intact; it expressed his vision of the progress of society, his understanding of the “principles of commerce” and their implications for old regime France.⁷⁷

The first three chapters (“Principles,” “Of Wheat,” “Of the Increase of Inhabitants”) establish the priorities of any legislator: to ensure the provision of primary necessities through agriculture, and an adequate money supply for a growing population. Commercial expansion can be pursued once these objectives have been secured, and so the next three chapters provide a sustained defense of “Colonies,” “Slavery,” and “Exclusive Companies.” This section includes criticisms of imperialism: migration to colonies to the detriment of the metropole; reliance on imports for manufactured goods; the counterproductive “spirit of conquest.” The chapter on colonies even concluded with a call to settle and improve land in France, rather than overseas—a passage that some historians have taken as evidence of Melon’s antipathy to empire. But these were all imperial strategies that had been deployed by other European powers, and in particular by Spain.⁷⁸ As the seventh chapter, “Of Military Government,” made clear, France was developing its own approach to empire, one that rejected the settlement of vast tracts of land by

⁷⁶ Loïc Charles, “Jean-François Melon, *Essai politique sur le commerce*, Préface de Francine Markovits, Caen, Presses Universitaires de Caen, Bibliothèque de philosophie politique et juridique, 2014, 464 p,” *Population*, 2015/4 (vol. 70), 826-8.

⁷⁷ The seven new chapters of the second edition, all dispersed throughout the second half of the original essay, were: “De l’exportation et de l’importation”; “De la liberté du commerce”; “Diverses observations sur les monnoyes”; “De l’agio”; “De la balance du commerce”; “De l’arithmétique politique”; and “Des systèmes.”

⁷⁸ Jesús Astigarraga, “La dérangeante découverte de l’autre,” 96.

Frenchmen, and that replaced the “spirit of conquest” with the “spirit of commerce.” Melon remained focused on France’s particular model of overseas development, which explains the frequency with which Ile Bourbon, Ile de France, Madagascar, Louisiana, and comptoirs in Senegambia, Bengal, and the Coromandel coast are mentioned in the first nine chapters, and indeed throughout the *Essai*. Thanks above all to the commodities they brought to the French economy, each of these overseas establishments could generate “Industry” and “Luxury” (the respective subjects of the eighth and ninth chapters) amongst the French population without inviting the domestic ruination that had afflicted the Iberian peninsula.

It was therefore in the final installment of this nine-chapter “narrative” of the progress of commerce, in the famous chapter on luxury, that Melon rounded out his vision of how France’s empire ought to hang together. Luxury, for Melon, was a fungible category. Its meaning shifted with the development of society: what was luxury for one generation became a necessity for the next. But luxury was also a motor of development, because ever-renewing desires for luxury goods “destroyed idleness,” inducing people to work harder to earn more disposable income.⁷⁹ This argument was familiar from Mandeville. Alongside it, though, was a demonstration of how the consumption of luxury commodities was at least in part made possible a global economy and its institutions: colonies, slavery, and exclusive companies. Where Melon wrote that “the Legislator should think about luxury as he does about colonies,” he did so because they were aspects of the same phenomenon. The inhabitants of colonies “work only for luxury,” producing “sugar, silk, coffee, and tobacco” to satisfy metropolitan fancies. Slavery—or more specifically the trade in slaves from Africa, Madagascar, and South India to French colonies—factored into the dynamic of luxury as a source of labor that would not diminish a domestic agricultural

⁷⁹ Melon, *Essai politique*, 105-30.

workforce cultivating primary necessities. Colonies and the luxury commodities they produced had become “necessary to the nation,” just as slaves had become necessary to the colonies.⁸⁰ Each element ensured the global expansion of the French economy without jeopardizing its domestic resources. Each could be understood as the “consequence of every *société bien policée*.”⁸¹

The *Essai politique* immediately generated debate after the publication of the first edition in 1734. Nicolas Dutot, a former *commis* of the Compagnie des Indes, published a sympathetic critique, taking exception to Melon’s arguments for manipulating the currency, but generally endorsing the *Essai*’s approach and outlook.⁸² Feedback from the public sphere encouraged Melon to elaborate his argument with seven new chapters added to a second edition, published in 1736, which in turn drew further approbation, including a lengthy, generous review in the *Journal des Sçavans*.⁸³ The new chapters only reaffirmed Melon’s conviction that overseas trade was crucial to the progress of society. Given the consistency with which he made this argument in print across two decades, as well as the sheer preponderance of references throughout the two editions of the *Essai politique* to the global infrastructure of the French empire, it is somewhat mystifying that historians have presented Melon as an advocate of strictly domestic improvement through manufacturing. Certainly contemporaries like Dutot did not fail to notice the importance of global commerce to Melon’s ideas and to the phenomena he discussed. Voltaire’s *Le Mondain* (1738), which satirized the hypocrisy of moralists who condemned the proliferation of luxury

⁸⁰ Ibid., 51-7.

⁸¹ Ibid., 122.

⁸² Dutot, *Réflexions politiques sur les finances, et le commerce*. See François Velde, “The Life and Times of Nicolas Dutot,” *The Journal of Economic History*, 34, no. 1 (2012), 67-107. John Shovlin has argued that “Melon was aware of Dutot’s critique as early as 1735, and encouraged him to elaborate it.” See Shovlin, *Commerce Not Conquest: Political Economy, Capitalism, and the Franco-British Global Rivalry, 1688-1788*, forthcoming.

⁸³ “Essai politique sur le commerce. Nouvelle édition, augmentée de sept chapitres,” *Journal des Sçavans* (Aug. 1736), 496-507.

indulging in its consumption, was famously inspired by the *Essai politique*.⁸⁴ Melon's influence was evident not only in the poem's case for the public benefits of consuming frivolous and costly goods like coffee, sugar and porcelain—consumption that while it “destroys a state/ That's poor, enriches one that's great”—but also in its evocation of the global division of labor that made such indulgence possible.⁸⁵ The poem was not only an “apology for luxury” and a characteristic lampoon of religious moralists, but also as a lyrical recognition of the global economy at the service of European fancies—a recognition inspired by Melon's political economy. Voltaire, at least, appreciated the imperial framework of the *Essai politique sur le commerce*.

Melon welcomed public discussions, even criticisms, of his work; he saw the proliferation of ideas and perspectives as essential to educating readers and statesmen alike. In the penultimate chapter of the second edition, “Of Systems,” he celebrated the fact that commerce, police, and finance were no longer “secrets of the state” but affairs that could be discussed in the public sphere.⁸⁶ No single thinker or minister could master the mass relationships, the “mess of contingencies,” in Hegel's terms, of modern commercial affairs. Political economy had to reflect the complexity of its object: the dispersed yet interdependent factors of domestic agriculture and colonial plantations, the changing fashions of luxury consumption, international competition for markets, and the monetary policies of states. These were the filaments of “society,” a new concept in French discourse, one peppered throughout the *Essai politique*, and one that would become the central object of eighteenth-century political

⁸⁴ In a reply to the poem's critics (“Defense du Mondain: ou l'apologie du luxe”), Voltaire attached a letter written by Melon to the comtesse de Verrue, a mutual acquaintance, justifying luxury. See Jeremy Jennings, “The Debate about Luxury in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century French Political Thought,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 68, No. 1 (Jan., 2007), 86.

⁸⁵ Voltaire's narrator points out to his interlocutor, the virtuous bigot, that he was himself drinking wine from the Canary Islands and coffee from Arabia, and eating from porcelain plates from China with silverware “dug from Potosi's rich mines”: “For thee the world at work has been/ That thou at ease might vent thy spleen/ Against that world, which for thy pleasure/ Has quite exhausted all thy treasure.”

⁸⁶ Melon, *Essai politique*, 390-2.

economy.⁸⁷ In the very first chapter, as if to acknowledge his daunting task, Melon conceded that “there is such an intimate connection between the different parts of Society that one cannot strike one part without its having repercussions on the others.”⁸⁸ He remained committed, though, to understanding and—crucially—revealing the hidden forces that held these parts together.

It was already evident in the *Essai politique* that the language of political economy, with society as its category of analysis and the anonymous interactions of the public sphere as its discursive context, did not correspond exactly to the existing bricolage of France’s global economy. As Keith Baker has argued, the language of “society” was capacious; it had “the capacity to efface understandings of collective existence traditional to the old regime.”⁸⁹ Melon’s political economy was rooted in the institutions of French empire, but it was oriented to the autonomous processes of society, where knowledge could be shared, wealth could be easily exchanged and commodities could, for the most part, freely circulate. If this political economy was hostile to the compromise the company had made in 1726 with the rent-seeking logics of French finance, then it was equally at odds with the practices of someone like Castanier, who stubbornly maintained privileged access to the volatile world of arbitrage and force, and whose accumulation strategies relied on the absence of transparency—as Tournier de Murel discovered during the crash of the Law system. These were productive tensions, at least during the golden age of commerce: the markets furrowed by Castanier and his company brought luxury commodities to French ports, while Melon’s arguments persuaded a burgeoning public sphere to see the value of global trade and its institutions. Together, they established the economic and

⁸⁷ See, among others, E.J. Hundert, *The Enlightenment’s Fable: Bernard Mandeville and the Science of Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Daniel Gordon, *Citizens without Sovereignty: Equality and Sociability in French Thought, 1670-1789* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

⁸⁸ Melon, *Essai politique*, 9.

⁸⁹ Keith Michael Baker, “Enlightenment and the institution of society: notes for a conceptual history” in Sudipta Kaviraj & Sunil Khilnani, *Civil Society: History and Possibilities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

intellectual dynamics of French commercial imperialism, as unprecedented growth was accompanied by the increasingly public and provocative discourse of political economy. Such was the dialectical relationship between merchant capital and the old regime: compatible, to be sure, but also contradictory.

Between Profit 2 and Political Economy

In 1739 Castanier wrote a memoir on the state of the Compagnie des Indes. His arguments strongly resembled those of Melon. He railed against “Parisian financiers” who fetishized precious metals. He exalted the recent deluge of “merchandise from the Indies,” the intensification of the Atlantic slave trade, and the successful development of coffee production on Ile Bourbon. He echoed Melon’s disavowal of military aggression and territorial aggrandizement. In the current “system” of international competition, he argued, “it can no longer be the question for the state to turn to conquest to increase its frontiers”; only through commerce and “the cultivation of land (*la culture des terres*)” could France achieve hegemony. And he insisted upon the essential, “indivisible” relationship between dividends on shares and profits from trade. The argument that Melon had advocated in the mid-1720s—that shares represented the “real wealth” of colonial commodities, that dividends accrued not just from arbitrage but from the material increase of trade, and that they were as reliable as a “seeded field”—was still viable at the end of the following decade, long after the company had secured the tobacco monopoly to cover its high dividends, and long after Melon had stopped writing for the company.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ “Mémoire de Castanier sur l’état de la compagnie en 1739,” BNF NAF 9354.

That Melon and Castanier could espouse the same arguments across fifteen years is testament to the scope and endurance of the post-Law ideology of French commercial imperialism. It should also draw our attention to the contradictions within this ideology. A closer look at the immediate circumstances around Castanier's 1739 memoir reveal that the concerns of the political economist had diverged significantly from those the financier and his company. In the previous year the leases for the tobacco monopoly had come up for renewal. Since the company had dropped all pretense of developing Louisiana, its right to 8 million l.t. a year from the monopoly came under attack. Castanier's memoir was principally a response to one such attack that had urged the king to buy himself out of the commitment of tobacco sales to the company, and to reduce the dividends to 50 l.t. per share. He was at pains to point out that the proposed refinancing would save the king very little, and that the company was owed the monopoly in compensation for costs sunk into projects (including those in Louisiana) that private merchants had been unwilling to finance. Cycling through the entire repertoire of claims for the company's utility, Castanier's ultimate objective was to ensure the rentier origins and guaranteed status of its high dividends. One way or another, the argument worked: the company kept the monopoly until 1747.⁹¹

Perhaps this was simply the case of a director making the necessary defense of his institution. Yet the company's understandable attachment to income from rent was not the only source of tension with Melon's publicly acclaimed arguments. The ideology of commercial imperialism contained more egregious contradictions—or, if we take Castanier at his word, hypocrisies. And such contradictions were most apparent in the lucrative trades that Castanier was able to pull off thanks to his position of influence. These trades were undeniably the stuff of

⁹¹ Price, *France and the Chesapeake*, 362-4.

profit 2, and therefore precisely the kind of commercial activity that Melon's political economy was intended to scale up, to render legible, to reform out of existence. As much as Melon's ideas had developed within the Compagnie des Indes, taken to their logical conclusions they were at odds with the practices facilitated by that institution and the economic structures in which that institution belonged.

Take for instance Melon's frustration with the persistent features of composite monarchy in France. As Catherine Larrère has argued, there is a strongly statist impulse to many of the arguments put forward by Melon, who thought commercial society would both benefit from and reinforce central authority. The proliferation of debate on economic affairs would enlighten a grateful legislator, just as the heightened exchange of commodities would generate "*confiance pour les Effets Royaux*."⁹² Already in the 1734 edition of the *Essai politique*, in the second chapter on the grain trade, it was clear that Melon thought that France would only benefit from these centralizing effects of commerce if it abolished its confounding array of weights, measures, prices, taxes and "unequal values."⁹³ Such obstacles to market society became a preoccupation of the 1736 additions. In a new chapter, "Of the Liberty of Commerce," Melon expressed frustration that Guyenne, Brittany, and Languedoc—the "*provinces réputées étrangères*"—retained customs frontiers that had existed before they had been integrated with France.⁹⁴ In the revised penultimate chapter, "Of Systems," he returned to this critique of French fragmentation characterized by financial and jurisdictional divides, by tax exemptions accorded to the Five Great Farms, and by the erratic application of the salt tax, the notorious *gabelle*. Systematic reform could overcome such impairments. But bringing a note of foreboding to the concluding

⁹² Catherine Larrère, *L'Invention de l'économie au XVIIIe siècle*, 108-16.

⁹³ Melon, *Essai politique*, 18-25.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 164.

passages of the second edition of the *Essai politique*, Melon warned that prosperity would be squandered if France failed to overcome the lineaments of tradition, privilege and disunity on which so many of its institutions were built, and which threatened to destabilize the proper functioning of commercial society.

Far from dissolving these residual fault lines of old regime society, though, merchant capitalism was just as likely to flourish within them. We have already seen how Castanier's seigneurial investments, which he had made by exploiting patrimonial networks, provided security for the more speculative affairs of overseas trade. And in these affairs the trading networks of the Compagnie des Indes also provided ample assistance. In 1745, for instance, Castanier enlisted the aid of Casaubon & Béhic of Cadiz—a corporation that, as the company's privileged trading partners, was afforded exemptions on duties owed to the Spanish crown—to organize the expedition of the *Condé* for Peru; the ship returned four years later with 2.5 million piastres.⁹⁵ The global amplification of Castanier's influence also reverberated back down the provincial value chains of the Languedoc. Since Colbert, successive versions of the Compagnie des Indes had exported the woolen manufactures of Carcassonne. But thanks to Castanier the link was solidified, to the great benefit of the region's merchant-drapers—chief among them the Fornier family that had purchased the Trivalle factory at Carcassonne off Guillaume Castanier in 1714.⁹⁶ What was true of exports was true of imports, too. Provincial distribution of the company's commodities flowed primarily through the furrows of personal relations surrounding directors: the Forniers purchased porcelain through Castanier, and the Audibert and Hugues

⁹⁵ E.W. Dahlgren, *Voyages français à destination de la mer du Sud avant Bougainville (1695-1749)*, Extrait des *Nouvelles archives des missions scientifiques*, t. XIV (1907), 544.

⁹⁶ Dermigny, *La Chine et l'Occident*, 715-18.

families of Marseille, who supplied the company with oil and soaps, acquired silk and porcelain in the same fashion.⁹⁷

Such examples suggest that luxury consumption was not something that all of “society” participated in, with each generation becoming successively accustomed to a more sumptuous definition of necessary wants, as Melon hypothesized in the *Essai politique*. Rather, it took hold in those areas that, thanks to patrimonial relations, were already oriented to overseas commerce—those areas of France where deep pools of capital formed but did not necessarily spread to neighboring provinces.⁹⁸ Most colonial goods were in fact not domestically consumed but re-exported.⁹⁹ French merchants profited from their resultant domination of European luxury markets, but as Robin Blackburn has argued, this phenomenon “reflected not only the productivity of the French colonies but also the comparatively small size of the French internal market.”¹⁰⁰ As a result, regional differentiation, a key aspect of the fragmentation Melon complained about, was probably exacerbated by merchant capital.¹⁰¹ The progress of Melon’s society relied on the circulation and democratic consumption of commodities; but the old regime functioned according to different logics.

Something like this conclusion was reached by Melon’s friend Montesquieu, who in the *Esprit des lois* argued that it was the very internal divisions Melon wanted to see abolished that made luxury trade possible. Societies with broad, integrated markets, like England and the Dutch Republic, could support “economy” trades with low profit margins but high turnover of

⁹⁷ Ibid., 578-9.

⁹⁸ For a similar argument about Spanish economic development over the long eighteenth century, see Regina Grafe, *Distant Tyranny: Markets, Power, and Backwardness in Spain, 1650–1800* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012).

⁹⁹ Tarrade, *Le commerce colonial de la France à la fin de l’Ancien Régime*, II: 753; Michel Morineau, “La vraie nature des choses et leur enchaînement entre la France, les Antilles, et l’Europe (XVIIe-XIXe siècle),” *Revue française d’histoire d’outre-mer*, t. 84, n. 314 (1997), 3-24.

¹⁰⁰ Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery*, 445.

¹⁰¹ Marzagalli, “The French Atlantic World in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries.”

merchandise. In France, however, where consumption was shaped by social hierarchy and where commodities were distributed across variegated markets, *only* “luxury” trade was possible, and this trade was conducted with high profit margins and the low, irregular turnover of goods.¹⁰² Montesquieu therefore agreed with Melon’s emphasis on the centrality of luxury trade to French development, but his distinction between the political economy of a commercial republic and that of a monarchy was, if true, devastating to Melon’s hope that returns on overseas commerce could ever become predictable, as assured as the fruits of a seeded field. Profit 2 could not so easily turn into profit 1. Yet the belief that it could was central to Melon’s political economy. Trade would be liberated and the people would become enlightened, their needs and desires satisfied; guilds and monopolies that stood in the way of the circulation of commodities would be dismantled. But Melon never reckoned with the fact that, since these were institutions on which commercial profits relied, there were powerful interests who had a stake in ensuring their continued existence throughout the French empire.¹⁰³ And there were few more powerful interests than Castanier.

In 1740, just one year after he had written his memoir detailing the rude health of France’s colonial establishments, Castanier pulled his money out of India and China. War had broken out between Spain and England, making silver inaccessible. As a solution to the company’s liquidity problems, Castanier instructed the governors of Pondicherry and Chandernagore—who had combined their functions with private trading on Castanier’s behalf—to gather all the capital he had invested in Asia. They would then “donate” that money,

¹⁰² Cheney, *Revolutionary Commerce*, 67-71. For an alternative argument that Montesquieu did see trade as a potential solvent to the inequalities of monarchy, see Michael Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge: Public Debt, Inequality, and the Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 166-70.

¹⁰³ Hirsch, “Les milieux du commerce,” 1345.

amounting to 1,375,000 l.t., to the *Conseil supérieur* of Pondicherry, while the company would pay Castanier an equivalent sum in France. The *Conseil* would use Castanier's money to purchase Indian goods that would be sent to France, where Castanier would receive an additional 20 per cent on the price of sale.¹⁰⁴ A fine fix to a crisis for *le plus grand coquin de France*, but a reminder once again of the gap between the avowed ideology of French commercial imperialism and the acquisitive habits of its foremost practitioners.

Castanier's career tracked the global extension of French merchant capital in the eighteenth century, and demonstrated that wealth with roots in the Languedoc could branch out to Pondicherry and Peru. His fortune grew, endlessly, even—perhaps especially—when wars broke out and markets crashed. It is understandable that some contemporaries might have hoped that this was a model to be emulated, scaled up to the level of the corporation, or even France itself. In retrospect it is clear that the institutions and markets that structured French overseas trade particularly favored entrepreneurs like Castanier whose capital and connections afforded him the flexibility either to take risks and make large surpluses or to reallocate investments at the first sign of trouble. This fueled the growth of French commerce, but it was not the kind of progress Melon had in mind, and nor was it the kind of market behavior that political economy envisaged. It was a thoroughly old regime form of merchant capitalism, an enterprise of partial monopolies, unequal competition, and sporadic but spectacular profits.

*

Both Melon and Castanier maintained an interest in the Compagnie des Indes, and both kept their sights on the productive global periphery of the French economy. In February 1735 the *philosophe* enlisted his friend Charles Marie de La Condamine, who was due to set sail for South

¹⁰⁴ BNF NAF 9147. See also Manning, *Fortunes à Faire*, 99-105.

America to measure the longitudinal arc around the equator, to make some inquiries “while in Saint Domingue or any other islands in America,” into the “the people and wealth belonging to Sieur De Lagarde, whether under that name or any other that he might have taken.” If La Condamine was to find his man in Saint Domingue, he was authorized to “demand payment and restitution of eighteen shares of the Compagnie des Indes” that Lagarde had stolen in July 1723 from “his uncle... Sieur Melon.”¹⁰⁵ Lagarde, it seems, remained elusive—or at least Melon was never reunited with his shares. In a brief preamble to his testament, written in January 1738, on the eve of his death, Melon devoted a lengthy paragraph to the outstanding fortune that the theft of the shares had denied him.¹⁰⁶ Castanier, altogether more successful at extracting value from the Compagnie des Indes, remained a lifelong director of the institution, surviving successive state-imposed administrative culls. In 1751 Rigaud’s iconic portrait was replicated once again, this time in an engraving by René Gaillard (Fig. 1.3), paying homage to the financier’s enduring prominence in France’s imperial institutions. A drawn curtain reveals Castanier standing by his desk, tight lipped and inscrutable, a letter from Cadiz in his hands, a globe by his side, and a ship in the background: the coquin returned to his mercantile milieu.

The Compagnie des Indes continued to uphold the ideology of commercial imperialism formulated by Melon and espoused by Castanier. In 1752 Étienne de Silhouette, recently appointed royal commissioner of the company, reprimanded Joseph François Dupleix for his persistent attempts to expand French military presence in the Indian Ocean. “We do not want to become a political power in India,” Silhouette wrote; “we want only a few establishments to aid and protect trade.” The new commissioner concluded by making the company’s priorities as clear as possible: “No more victories! No more conquests! Lots of merchandise, and some

¹⁰⁵ AN MCN, étude XLVIII (Patu), 10th February 1735.

¹⁰⁶ “Inventaire après décès de Jean-François Melon, 28 février 1738,” AN MC ET I 387.



Fig. 1.3. René Gaillard, *François Castanier, d'après Rigaud et extrapolé avec marine* (1751). Harvard Art Museums/ Fogg Museum, Gift of William Gray from the collection of Francis Calley Gray.

augmentation of the dividend!”¹⁰⁷ Silhouette, at least, still believed in the idea that there was a connection between trade and dividends, that company shares represented the “real wealth” of colonial commodities.

This ideology did, however, require overseas commitment on the part of the company, even if that commitment did not extend to territorial conquest or colonial settlement. Securing a reliable supply of merchandise did entail some form of “political power” at the colonial periphery—some commitment of resources, some investment of fixed capital. Melon had understood this in 1726 when he advocated the improvement of tobacco cultivation in Louisiana. And when those hopes were quashed, he spelled it out in public, in the *Essai politique*’s consecutive chapters on colonies, slavery, and exclusive companies: these were the necessary costs that had to be paid abroad in order to generate luxury and industriousness at home.

Despite its near capitulation to the rentier logics of the French state—signified above all by its ongoing reliance on the tobacco farm to cover its dividends—the Compagnie des Indes was not totally averse to such commitments. Into the 1730s it remained the main vehicle of French commercial imperialism; there was, at the time, no institution within the old regime’s imperial repertoire better suited to developing markets and commodity chains on a global scale. The next chapter will look at one such development project: the attempt to turn Ile Bourbon into the sole provider of coffee to European markets. But as that episode demonstrated, the company’s commitment to development was equivocal, its ability to manage the volatile affairs of global commerce limited. And as Castanier’s increasing fortune and Melon’s ever more public, ever more abstract ideas suggested, the Compagnie des Indes was already struggling to contain the economic and intellectual energies it had helped to generate. In the short term, the

¹⁰⁷ BNF NAF 9150, fols. 266–67, Étienne de Silhouette to Dupleix, 13 September 1752. Quoted in Shovlin, *Commerce Not Conquest*.

mutual expansiveness of capital and critique could only help the broader project of commercial imperialism; in the longer term, the tensions between them threatened to undermine its governing institutions. Nowhere was this potentially unstable dialectic more apparent in the 1730s than on Ile Bourbon, an Indian Ocean coffee island where new conceptions of self-interest and commercial activity emerged from within the imperial bricolage of old regime institutions.

The Coffee Island

As Castanier amassed his fortune and as Melon developed his principles of political economy, on Ile Bourbon the Compagnie des Indes embarked on a self-conscious attempt to place feudal institutions in the service of global capital. Situated 6,000 miles away from the metropole in the Indian Ocean's Mascarene archipelago, Ile Bourbon (now Réunion) had existed in ecological isolation until the sixteenth century brought glancing contact with Portuguese and Dutch trading ships seeking refuge and resources. At the turn of the eighteenth century it remained practically deserted, occupied by handful of French settlers and depicted in travel literature as a temperate cornucopia, ripe for colonization.¹ Law's reforms encouraged colonial officials to turn these utopian visions into reality. They championed Ile Bourbon as the potential source for all the coffee sold in France, and even in Europe—markets that were bound to grow as metropolitan consumers cultivated the taste for colonial drugs and stimulants. In 1723 the restored Compagnie des Indes acquired a monopoly on all French imports. The ensuing coffee experiment concentrated people and resources to Ile Bourbon from around the Indian Ocean and beyond: captive laborers from Madagascar, Mozambique, and Senegambia; weavers and cloth (to package coffee for export) from southern India; capital and institutions from France; and the coffee bean itself from Arabia. By the 1740s Ile Bourbon boasted a population of 15,000 and produced 2.5 million lbs of coffee a year. Within two decades the company had turned a tropical island Eden into a plantation economy.

¹ Henri Du Quesne, *Recueil de quelques mémoires servant d'instruction pour l'établissement de l'Isle d'Eden* (Amsterdam: H. Desbordes, 1689); François Léguat, *Voyages et aventures de François Leguat, & de ses compagnons, en deux îles désertes des Indes Orientales (1690-1698)* (Amsterdam: Jean Louis de Lorme, 1708).

Ile Bourbon's transformation during the coffee experiment proved that the Compagnie des Indes could, contrary to the skepticism of many historians, be an effective vehicle for overseas empire. As we have seen, in the long run directors proved more comfortable with tax-farming than with colonial investment. But in the immediate aftermath of the Law settlement the company displayed genuine ambition to develop its global assets. Like its English and Dutch counterparts, the Compagnie des Indes exercised "corporate sovereignty" in distant territories. Philip Stern has compared the officials of the East India Company in Madras to "manorial lords, who could alienate land, administer justice, exact fines, and control populations within the bounds of their estates."² On Ile Bourbon this was literally the case: the island was not a royal colony but a concession by the crown to the company. Throughout their correspondence with officials on Bourbon, Parisian directors explicitly referred to their rights over the island and its inhabitants by evoking metropolitan custom, demanding *capitation* and *hommage* from colonial vassals and likening Mascarene plantations to French estates. From the 1720s on Ile Bourbon corporate sovereignty assumed the form of a seigneurial regime: the Compagnie des Indes enjoyed the private ownership of public power, and land was subject to hierarchical, divided claims of ownership.³ The coffee experiment showed that even the agrarian social relations and seigneurial legal regime of the metropole belonged within the old regime's imperial repertoire.

Despite the intentions of the company, France could not simply be replicated on Ile Bourbon. Combining seigneurial institutions with slave labor to compete on global markets led to unforeseen developments. In a seminal article on the paradoxical role of absolutism in the modernizing process, Marc Raeff explained how early modern European states were undermined

² Philip J. Stern, *The Company-State: Corporate Sovereignty and the Early-Modern Foundation of the British Empire in India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 24.

³ Rafe Blaufarb, *The Great Demarcation: The French Revolution and the Invention of Modern Property* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1-5.

by using traditional estates and institutions to try and encourage the productive capacity of their populations. The attempt worked—existing corporations and hierarchies proved capable of maximizing resources—but not without generating ideas about self-interest and the autonomous processes of society that ultimately challenged the legitimacy of the absolutist state.⁴ A similar logic, foreshortened and on a global canvas, was at work in the coffee experiment. The state worked through the Compagnie des Indes, and the Compagnie des Indes through the seigneurial legal regime, to successfully turn Ile Bourbon into a coffee factory. By the middle of the 1730s, several million coffee trees covered the island; consumers in European re-export markets finally approved the quality of their fruits. In isolation, the experiment had worked: Ile Bourbon had been made productive, potentially profitable. But in a global context the experiment was doomed. Bourbon coffee was undercut in Europe by a closer, and therefore cheaper, strain from Martinique. The company was left with an island full of coffee that nobody would buy—and, perhaps more consequentially, with an island full of ambitious habitants who had grown accustomed to the single-minded pursuit of productivity. Some of these habitants managed to profit from the transition away from coffee, before abandoning Bourbon and returning home with new wealth and arguments about how to reform French commercial imperialism. The main legacy of the coffee experiment was not Ile Bourbon's capture of European markets, but instead the creation at the colonial periphery, from within the Compagnie des Indes's own island estate, of ideas that would ultimately pose a challenge to the company and, potentially, the broader corporate structure of the old regime.

⁴ Marc Raeff, "The Well-Ordered Police State and the Development of Modernity in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Europe: An Attempt at a Comparative Approach," *The American Historical Review*, vol. 80, no. 5 (Dec. 1975), 1221-43.

The rise and fall of the coffee island coincided with the metropolitan developments examined in the last chapter. Melon and Castanier demonstrated, respectively, that the Compagnie des Indes was both intellectually and commercially generative in the decades after the Law affair. But the ideas of the one and the affairs of the other had come to transcend the company towards the end of the 1730s. On Bourbon, in the meantime, the company had successfully established productive plantations in the French Indian Ocean. And yet fledgling conceptions of self-interest and anti-corporate sentiment emerged out of its seigneurial regime. If the former demonstrated the old regime's capacity of imperial bricolage, then the latter confirmed structural changes in French commercial imperialism that were vaguely discernible in Melon's mature political economy and in Castanier's quasi-independent speculations. The failure of the coffee experiment exposed the limitations of corporate sovereignty in a global economy made up of increasingly complex commodity chains. And the ensuing period of reform in the Mascarenes hinted at what might replace the Compagnie des Indes in the governance of France's overseas economy—namely, market practices that were more attuned to the flexibility of merchant capital, accompanied by sophisticated arguments for entrepreneurial endeavor made in a commercially literate public sphere.

The chapter narrates the story of the coffee island in the long 1730s, drawing comparisons throughout to other French colonies, both in order to show what was exceptional about Ile Bourbon and also to situate its role in the global expansion of old regime France. It begins by considering the ecological, demographic, and logistical challenges to constructing a plantation society in an obscure corner of the global economy, before exploring the institutional dimensions and practical manifestations of the company's corporate sovereignty. The second half of the chapter revolves around Mahé de la Bourdonnais and Pierre-André d'Héguerty, two

figures who were pivotal in reorienting the Mascarenes after 1735, when the failure of the coffee experiment became inevitable. Together, La Bourdonnais and Hégarty provide an insight into the future of French commercial imperialism beyond the Compagnie des Indes.

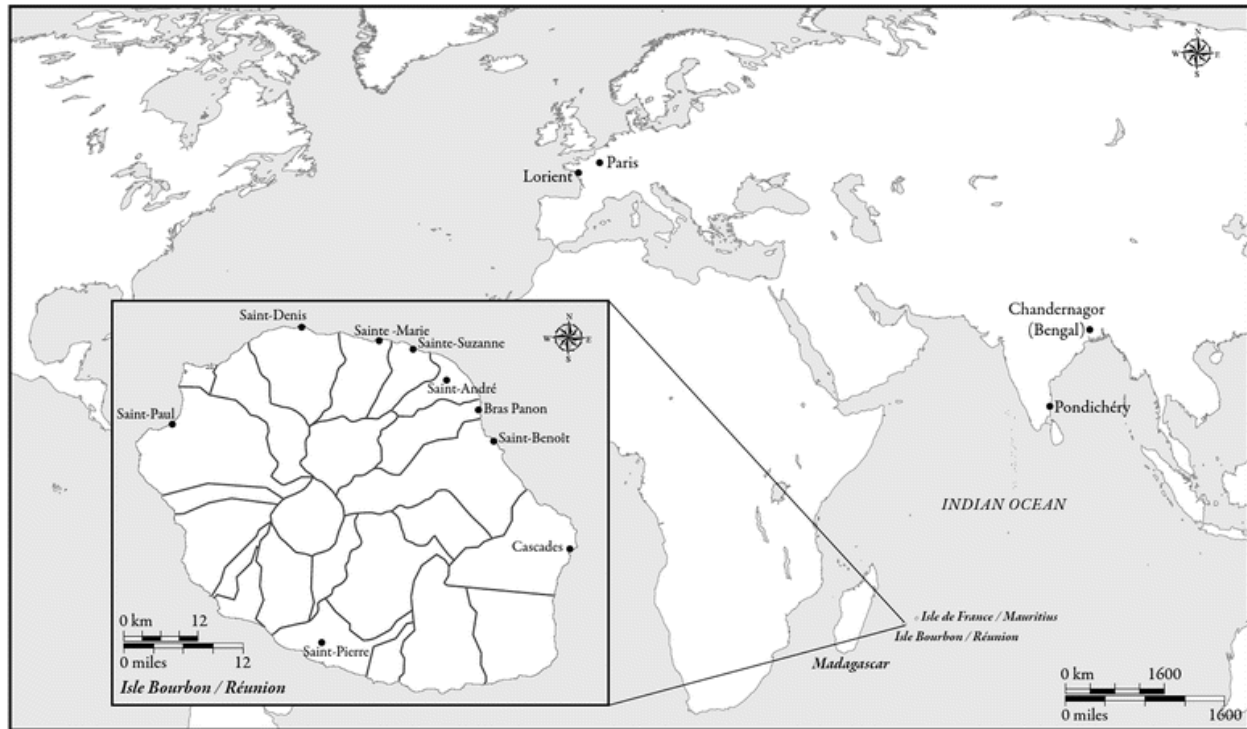


Fig. 2.1: Map of Ile Bourbon (Réunion) in relation to the French Indian Ocean.⁵

Assembling the Coffee Island

The plagues arrived in the spring of 1729. By the end of the year a smallpox epidemic had killed eight or nine hundred people, or something like 20 per cent of the island's population. A priest in Saint-Louis, a parish on the western coast, complained that he was too overwhelmed to attend most burials or to read sacraments to the majority of the dying.⁶ Colonists thought the disease,

⁵ From Sue Peabody, "A Local View on Global Climate and Migration Patterns: The Impact of Cyclones and Drought on the Routier Family and Their Slaves in Île Bourbon (Réunion), 1770–1820," in Gwyn Campbell (ed.), *Bondage and the Environment in the Indian Ocean World* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 123–42.

⁶ Prosper Ève, *Naître et mourir à l'Île Bourbon à l'époque de l'esclavage* (Saint-Denis: Université de La Réunion, 1999), 142–6.

the likes of which they had never experienced, came from the “noirs Malabars” who had arrived for the first time from southern India the previous year.⁷ As the plague of boils descended from the north, a plague of locusts arrived from the west. Over the past two years the conseil supérieur had financed several trading voyages to Madagascar to purchase captives as well as livestock and rice. Locust eggs hidden in the soil attached to some of the cargo had been shipped back to Bourbon—or at least that’s what one colonist hypothesized several years later, when the resulting plague was a traumatic memory.⁸ Once the eggs hatched the locusts multiplied in biblical fashion. The governor Pierre-Benoît Dumas said they “resembled a blizzard” when they took flight, and that they devoured every crop in sight once they descended.⁹ The only plant the insects spared was the coffee tree.

And yet coffee was probably the underlying cause of the twin plagues. It was certainly the reason for the dramatic transformation of the island after 1717. Spurred on by its ambition to turn Ile Bourbon into the principal source of Europe’s coffee, the Compagnie des Indes imported labor from such far flung and diverse locations as Madagascar and southern India, where the French had otherwise been reticent to engage in the slave trade. It drew upon expertise from across the globe to grow an Arabian coffee plant on an Indian Ocean island, all according to European tastes.¹⁰ The project was carried out so quickly, and on such a vast geographic and infrastructural scale, that ecological crisis and social unrest were almost inevitable. In the 1720s,

⁷ Dumas to Compagnie des Indes, 14 March 1730, AN Col C 3 5 f 104; Dioré to Maurepas, 24 April 1730, AN Col C 3 5 f 110; Conseil provincial of Ile de France to Ile Bourbon, 29 August 1729, ADR 306.

⁸ According to Jean-François Charpentier de Cossigny in 1732, quoted in Anthony Cheke and Julian Hume, *Lost Land of the Dodo: An Ecological History of Mauritius, Réunion and Rodrigues* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 105.

⁹ Dumas to Compagnie des Indes, 14 March 1730, AN Col C 3 5 f 104.

¹⁰ Sue Peabody, *Madeleine’s Children: Family, Freedom, Secrets, and Lies in France’s Indian Ocean Colonies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 35-6.

the principal obstacles to the company conquering European coffee markets lay in the rapidly changing natural and human resources of Ile Bourbon.

The coffee experiment was carried out in an ecology that had developed in almost perfect isolation. Ile Bourbon had been vacant as recently as 1646, when the commander of France's trading post in Madagascar dispatched a handful of dissidents to "Mascareigne," six hundred miles to the east. Smatterings of Frenchmen and enslaved women from Madagascar followed those unlikely pioneers over the next couple of decades, accompanied by cattle, pigs, and cats that played havoc with native fauna that had evolved in isolation from invasive species. Ibises and tortoises were the main victims of this early colonization, the latter regularly massacred to provide vitamin-rich food for passing crews afflicted by scurvy, or simply for their fats, which were used to make candles or as a butter substitute.¹¹ Despite these ecological upheavals, Ile Bourbon remained a modest colonial affair when Law's Compagnie des Indes decided to align the island's future with Europe's boundless appetite for coffee. In 1713 there were 1,176 people on the island, which was over four times the population of neighboring Mauritius when the Dutch had abandoned it three years previously, but scarcely capable of satisfying the company's ambitions.¹²

What Ile Bourbon needed above all was labor. From the outset it was clear that workers would not emigrate from France. The domestic economy was labor retentive, thanks in part to inheritance laws that parceled up land between descendants and encouraged the proliferation of peasant smallholdings.¹³ Under the Law system the Regency Council instructed provincial

¹¹ Cheke and Hume, *Lost Land of Dodo*, 83-8.

¹² *Ibid.*, 84.

¹³ Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, "Structures familiales et coutumes d'héritage en France au XVIe siècle: système de la coutume," *Annales. Economies, sociétés, civilisations*, 27e année, n. 4-5 (1972), 825-46; *idem.*, *The French Peasantry, 1450-1660* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1987), 410.

intendants to send vagrants to Louisiana, but they were thwarted by opposition from landlords who feared being deprived of manpower.¹⁴ If Frenchmen couldn't be made to cross the Atlantic, they were unlikely to round the Cape. Very soon this became a source of contention between the Compagnie des Indes and the labor-hungry elites of the conseil supérieur—essentially a high court that mediated between company directors and the planter elite, implementing laws devised by the former and representing the interests and complaints of the latter.¹⁵ In 1729 the company reminded the conseil that it “was not as easy as you think to send you good workers [from France], because that type of person is not inclined to transport themselves so far”—and in any case the company refused to sponsor the passage to Ile Bourbon.¹⁶ As Melon later made clear in his *Essai politique*, in the company's model of commercial imperialism the labor for colonial luxuries would necessarily be carried out by slaves purchased beyond France. Heeding that stipulation, the governors of Ile Bourbon were otherwise indiscriminate in their search for captives, almost regardless of geographical distance and human cost. In addition to slaving voyages to south India and Madagascar, some ships from west Africa that typically served France's Caribbean colonies were rerouted to the Indian Ocean, a lengthy journey that could only have hideous consequences. Four such voyages were carried out between 1728 and 1730, resulting in 1,119 captives being purchased in Senegambia and the Guinea coast. Over 300 of them died before they reached the Mascarene islands.¹⁷

¹⁴ Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery*, 317-8.

¹⁵ James Pritchard, *In Search of Empire: The French in the Americas, 1670–1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 247; Pernille Røge, *Economistes and the Reinvention of Empire: France in the Americas and Africa, c. 1750–1802* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 27.

¹⁶ AN Col F 3 206 f 51.

¹⁷ Houdoyer de Petival, Fort St Louis de Gregory, Royaume de Juda, Cote de Guinea, to Ile Bourbon, 12 February 1729, ADR C 633; Vijaya Teelock & Thomas Vernet, “Slave trade, 1720s–1820s,” *Truth and Justice Commission, Volume 4: History, Economy, Society and Memory* (2011), 37-8; Philippe Haudrère, “Projets et échecs de la Compagnie des Indes dans le commerce des esclaves au XVIIIe siècle,” in Haudrère, *Les Français dans l’océan Indien, XVIIe-XIXe siècles* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2014), 79.

Ile Bourbon's population nevertheless grew rapidly as a result of its demand for slave labor. By 1735 it had climbed above 8,000. The white population, 507 in 1708, over half the island's total, remained below 600.¹⁸ Most had therefore arrived under various forms of captivity and coercion, and from a range of locations around the Indian Ocean, creating both hierarchies and cultural divisions within the majority non-white population. Captives from Madagascar, where the slave trade was cheapest, were usually subjected to work on plantations, whereas indentured laborers from southern India tended to work in ports and on ships. Those who were valued for their skill and experience might manage to remain within their communities and even earn modest wages and respect once they arrived in Bourbon. This was often the case with Indian "Lascars" (sailors and militia men) brought to Bourbon from around Pondicherry. In 1731 a commander named Barthélemy arrived from Senegal along with his troop of soldiers, the company having agreed to send his wife and family after him the following year.¹⁹ But most endured the "social death" characteristic of colonial slavery, suffering the powerlessness, native alienation and dishonor that resulted from being taken from one's community, shipped thousands of miles, and claimed as someone's property.²⁰

Under conditions of social death, political life took the form of *marronage*. As Prosper Ève, the pre-eminent historian of slavery on Ile Bourbon, has argued, the consolidation of the coffee economy around 1730 marked the onset of decades of internal war between planters and escaped slaves. In the disastrous year of 1729 alone, the number of escaped captives was registered as 279.²¹ The following year the governor Dumas discovered a plot amongst "almost

¹⁸ Cheke and Hume, *Lost Land of Dodo*, 104.

¹⁹ Ile Bourbon to the directors of the Compagnie des Indes, 26 December 1731, ADR C 642 f 30.

²⁰ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982); Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to the American Diaspora* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

²¹ Prosper Ève, *Les esclaves de Bourbon: la mer et la montagne* (Paris: Karthala, 2003), 174

all the *noirs* of Saint-Denis and Sainte-Suzanne to kill all the French and to make themselves masters of the island.” The supposed leniency of his punishment—he pardoned all but “thirty of the most culpable”—did little to stem the tide of *marronage*: over the next four years a further 349 captives into the mountainous forests of Bourbon.²² By the second half of the decade maroon societies were sufficiently numerous and organized to conduct a series of attacks on the habitations of Saint-Pierre and Saint-Paul. Eight such “*descentes*” took place between 1735 and 1738.²³ Throughout the 1730s, the apogee of the coffee experiment, white planters lived in fear of desertion and the destruction of their property.

The demographic expansion that produced *marronage* also produced scarcity, which was all the more acute on an island that still relied overwhelmingly on external resources. Drought and famine occurred in 1728 and again in 1734, prompting planter and enslaved alike to hunt whatever native fauna still survived.²⁴ Investments in agriculture and infrastructure heightened settlers’ losses from annual cyclones that reliably arrived between January and March. Four storms tore through Bourbon in 1734 alone, destroying the majority of crops and houses. Rats were ubiquitous. In 1731 they devoured, with the help of locusts, 95 per cent of the harvest.²⁵ The 1730s also saw the inadvertent arrival of the larger and carnivorous Norwegian rat (“as big as little cats,” according to one colonist). Back in France two decades later, Hégouerty recalled in horror how this “new species” dragged chickens to their burrows, “where they make a kind of warehouse,” and how they would invade farmyards to eat grown sheep and pigs.²⁶

²² Dumas to Compagnie des Indes, 14 March 1730, AN Col C 3 5 f 104. Ève, *Les esclaves de Bourbon*, 148.

²³ Ève, *Les esclaves de Bourbon*, 174 & 192-4.

²⁴ For 1728 see AN Col F3 207 f 347, July 1728. For 1734, see Cheke and Hume, *Lost Land of Dodo*, 104.

²⁵ Cheke and Hume, *Lost Land of Dodo*, 104-6.

²⁶ Hégouerty’s description of the rats’ predation of larger livestock was especially gruesome: “They attach themselves to the crown of their heads, and suck out the brain.” Pierre-André d’Hégouerty, “Discours prononcé devant le Roi à la séance du 26 mars 1751,” *Mémoires de la société royale des sciences et des belles lettres de Nancy, Tome Premier* (Nancy: Pierre Antoine, 1754).

By the 1730s the island was unrecognizable from the paradise that early settlers had reported in the middle of the previous century, when the air was pure, game was abundant, and even honey could be gathered at will.²⁷ But like the threat of slave rebellion, plagues, droughts, rats and cyclones were the necessary costs of France's attempt to create a cash-crop producing colony in the middle of the Indian Ocean. They should not be seen as ecological externalities, but instead as products of a concerted effort to integrate Ile Bourbon into the world economy.

Nevertheless, these upheavals were deemed worthwhile because of the natural advantages of Ile Bourbon. An indigenous strain of coffee grew at high altitudes, but it was deemed too bitter for European tastes. After 1717 the island's director of commerce Antoine Desforbes-Boucher supervised the introduction from Mocha, in present day Yemen, of a strain to which European elites were more accustomed. The plant thrived in the volcanic island's fertile soil. Encouraged by the first samples of "creole Mocha coffee" sent to Paris in 1723, the crown bestowed a monopoly for the commodity on the Compagnie des Indes. Desforbes-Boucher was promoted to governor, and the island's resources were dedicated to propagating the Mocha coffee tree.²⁸ For all of the ecological upheavals that had been brought about by settlement, the island had the ideal climate and topography for coffee cultivation. Heavy rainfall, coupled with the mountainous terrain, created natural irrigation and also provided the cooler temperatures at middling altitudes in which the coffee tree thrived. Two large mountains offered shelter from high winds. And above all the crop was well suited for a colony trying to develop quickly. Compared to sugar, for instance, coffee was not overly capital or labor-intensive. A successful

²⁷ Cheke and Hume, *Lost Land of Dodo*, 85.

²⁸ Albert Lougnon, *L'Ile Bourbon pendant la Régence: Desforbes Boucher et les débuts du café* (Paris: Larose, 1956); Elisabeth de Cambiaire, "Enlightened Alliance. Botany and France's Expansion to the East Indies: the colonization of the Mascarenes (1665-1775)" (PhD thesis, University of New South Wales, 2016), 98-101; Emma Spary, *Eating the Enlightenment: Food and the Sciences in Paris, 1670-1760* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 83-91.

plantation covered a relatively small plot and required no investments in machinery and the labor of only a dozen captives.²⁹ As a result, coffee quickly took root in the soil of Bourbon. The island shipped 300,000 pounds to France within five years of the company gaining the monopoly.

Despite the promising start, long-term success was by no means guaranteed. Saplings, which took three years to produce mature berries, were highly vulnerable to cyclones. And quality proved hard to control. Well into the 1730s—by which point coffee trees covered most of island’s north and west coasts, in a band that extended six-hundred meters up the mountainside from the shoreline—the colonial government continued to rely on extensive guidance from agents in Mocha about cultivation and harvest, encompassing the plant’s ideal altitude (about 400 meters), the need to plant trees nearby to provide shelter from the sun and wind, how to know when the berries were ripe, and the techniques and material required to dry, package and ship the coffee so it didn’t contract moisture and the off-putting odor of the sea. Experienced “*emballeurs Arabes*” were sent by the company from Mocha to teach Malabar workers in Bourbon how to package coffee, while the conseil supérieur tried to procure weavers from Bengal. Fabrics from Pondicherry arrived on a regular basis.³⁰ Quality was also monitored on the consumer end, with agents in Hamburg and Amsterdam, France’s principal reexport markets, sending frequent reports back to Bourbon detailing customers’ reactions. Bad reviews prompted

²⁹ The advantages offered by these relatively low labor requirements become more obvious when compared to the labor required on sugar plantations. Michel-Rolph Trouillot has estimated that on Saint Domingue in 1790, “the average number of slaves on a *caféterie* did not surpass 40 and that in the 1760’s and 70’s it was much closer to twenty, while most sugar plantations had counted at least 100 slaves since the middle of the century.” See Trouillot, “Motion in the System: Coffee, Color, and Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Saint-Domingue,” *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, vol. 5, no. 3 (Winter, 1982), 347, and 343-4 for respective plantation sizes.

³⁰ On “*emballeurs Arabes*” and fabrics from Pondicherry, see Ile Bourbon to Compagnie des Indes, April 19 1734, AN Col F 3 206 f 131. On weavers from Bengal, see “Memoire concernant le caffè envoyé par Messrs au conseil de l’isle bourbon aux employés du comptoir de Moka en l’année 1731,” AN Col F 3 161 f 92. See also “Méthode qu’on observe dans l’Arabie pour cueillir et erainer le café,” ADR C 2813.

long disquisitions from Paris on methods used in Arabia and insistent descriptions of the bean's desired attributes ("*bien mûr, bien sec, et bien bien conditionné*"), which it was up to the colonial government to relay to planters. In short, the coffee experiment was a truly global endeavor. If the production of coffee enlisted enslaved labor from a remarkable range of locations—west Africa, Madagascar, south India—then it also mobilized knowledge from a geography that was no less impressive in scope, spanning Arabia, Bengal, Pondicherry, and northern Europe.

And yet the institutions that carried out the experiment, that shaped its progress and ensured its (partial) success, were quintessentially French. Tocqueville argued that “the physiognomies of governments can be best detected in their colonies,” and in the case of Ile Bourbon he might have extended the claim to social structures, not just governments.³¹ Isolated, never before populated, and relatively undeveloped, the island was a blank canvas upon which the company projected old regime assumptions about land distribution, property, labor, and social hierarchy. As a result, the coffee experiment offers a singular case study of the imperial bricolage of the old regime—of how the residually feudal institutions of France responded to the demands of the world economy.

Exporting the Old Regime

Ile Bourbon in the 1730s occupied a hybrid space relative to other French colonial regimes at the time. Its laws resembled those of New France, its economy was analogous to the Antillean plantation complex, and as a result it was distinct from both. The company insisted upon its status as seigneur of the island, regarding the colonists as its vassals who occupied “concessions” *en fief* or *en cens*, and who rendered *hommage* in the form of coffee deposited in the company's

³¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution*, trans. Gerald Bevan (London: Penguin Classics, 12008 [1856]), 248-9.

warehouses. In that respect the company imitated the colonial methods adopted in New France: agrarian relations were structured by the fact that the island was constituted as a fief and settlements within that larger whole broke down into subordinate fiefs, generating a multiplicity of obligations and rights with respect to the land.³² Just as previous colonial ventures had exported French customs across the Atlantic, the Compagnie des Indes dispatched to the Indian Ocean the medieval land laws that still obtained in eighteenth-century France itself, where, as Marc Bloch famously argued, a single field could be the subject of a range of overlapping claims of ownership—from a tenant, his village, his immediate lord, and the lord of his lord, “and so on, right up the feudal scale.” Between habitant, conseil supérieur, company, and king, there were a number of persons on Ile Bourbon and beyond who could claim, “each with as much justification as the other, ‘That is my field!’”³³

One person who could not make that claim was the slave, whose presence in Bourbon both distinguished the island from New France and exposed the peculiarity of the company’s imposition of feudal laws on a plantation society. After 1717 the company made a concerted effort to increase the slave population for one reason: to generate the kind of productivity recently achieved in France’s Caribbean islands. But there a plantation economy had only been constructed by reforming French institutions and laws, or by ignoring them altogether. As Edith Géraud-Llorca has demonstrated, the Coutume de Paris—the body of civil laws that governed property, inheritance, marriage communities, and land tenure—was altered beyond recognition in the Antilles in order to create the right conditions for large-scale commodity production. Planters held land in *franc alleu*, or allodial tenure, meaning they were free of obligations to a

³² Allan Greer, *Property and Dispossession: Natives, Empires and Land in Early Modern America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 161 *et passim*.

³³ Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1965), I: 116.

seigneur. Colonial governments promoted the indivisibility of property upon inheritance, in an attempt to resist the division of land into small parcels that was encouraged by the Coutume de Paris but that undermined the concentrations of labor and resources required for plantation agriculture, and especially for sugar cultivation. And labor was carried out not by peasants who owed allegiance to a lord but by enslaved people who were deemed to be *meubles*: moveable property that could be sold and treated as collateral by their “owners.” According to Géraud-Llorca, an “agrarian individualism” and a “speculative appetite” took hold in the Caribbean colonies, which, at least in terms of property rights, spawned “a liberalism that was unknown in metropolitan law.”³⁴ France’s agrarian property regime had therefore been restructured to meet the economic demands of the plantation.

The Compagnie des Indes proved unwilling to accommodate in the same fashion on Bourbon, despite its objective of developing an Antillean-style plantation economy on the island. This much is suggested by a series of maps produced in the early nineteenth century by Antoine-Denis Selhausen, detailing the history and geography of property distribution in the colony (Figs. 2.2 & 2.3). According to Selhausen’s maps, most concessions were granted at the height of the coffee experiment, between 1725 and 1735. The preponderance of contiguous fields belonging to different members of the same families is clear testament to the inheritance laws of the Coutume de Paris. But what is especially striking is the division of these plots in long strips, as if the entire island had been raked over and its land divided up into giant furrows—a configuration that was reminiscent of the long open-fields of northern and western France. Upon the virgin soil of Ile Bourbon, the Compagnie des Indes sought to impose, without compromise and within a short period of time, the legal regime and landholding practices of the metropole.

³⁴ Edith Géraud-Llorca, “La Coutume de Paris outre-mer: l’habitation antillaise sous l’Ancien Régime,” *Revue historique de droit française et étranger* (1922-), vol. 60, no. 4 (avril-juin 1982), 207-59.

Bloch argued that the “elongated parallelograms” of the pays d’oil were tailored to the local environment and the customs of peasant society (see Fig. 2.5). They were material manifestations of “deeper social realities” that had been forged over the course of centuries, expressing the “rudimentary communism” of the village, which demanded communal grazing, compulsory crop rotation, and the dispersal of plots so that “everyone shared the same risks and enjoyed the same opportunities; everyone had his share of the different type of soil; everyone had some hope of avoiding the full impact of the natural or human disasters—hail storms, plant diseases, devastation—which might descend upon a place without destroying it completely.” At a yet more rudimentary level, Bloch also identified the wheeled plough as a causal factor in the distribution of “property” into long strips.³⁵ Neither the plough nor the wheeled plough was deployed in Ile Bourbon—the soil was too rocky and the inclinations too steep—and there was certainly no communitarian village unit dictating access to the land. For similar reasons, but primarily because of economic necessity, plantations in the Caribbean took the form of larger consolidated plots. We need only to consult a cadastral map of Guadeloupe from 1732 (Fig. 2.6), or one of Dominica from 1776 (Fig. 2.7), to note the stark contrasts of property holdings with those found in Selhausen’s maps of Bourbon. Why, then, were the long furlongs of north-western France deemed suitable for the budding plantation economy in the Indian Ocean?

Perhaps because, as Bloch and more recently Allan Greer have argued, it was a pattern of land distribution that was favored “in the ‘frontier zones’ of forest clearance.” This was the case in both medieval Europe and in New France, where long lots stretched out from the bank of the

³⁵ Marc Bloch, *French Rural History: An Essay on Its Basic Characteristics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 35-56; Marc Bloch, Svend Aakjar, Hubert Hall, A.-H. Tawney, Walther Vogel, “Les plans parcellaires: Allemagne, Angleterre, Danemark, France,” *Annales d’histoire économique et sociale*, 1e année, no. 1 (1929), 60-70.

St. Lawrence river into the uncultivated horizon (Fig. 2.4).³⁶ A closer look at Selhausen's maps reveals a similar confrontation with the tree line, with concessions extending aspirationally into the undergrowth. Quite possibly, then, the long furlongs were simply an attempt to ensure that the burden of clearing the forest was shared equitably. We should also bear in mind that all cadastral surveys, especially in colonial settings, were rhetorical documents, and as such tended to depict what the state and property owners wanted to see rather than what existed on the ground. According to Selhausen's map of Saint-Benoît (Fig. 2.3), Pierre Robert's strip of property encompassed "all land from the sea front to the summit of the mountain," some 3,000 meters high. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that Ile Bourbon was unique in combining both the agrarian property regime of northern France and the Coutume de Paris with a colonial plantation economy.

This was a conscious project. Another way of explaining the "open-field plantation" unique to Bourbon is to take the ideology of commercial imperialism at face value. In accordance with Melon's 1720s memoirs, which insisted that the institutions of the old regime were compatible with overseas commerce, the Compagnie des Indes implemented a seigneurial regime to govern Indian Ocean coffee plantations. In justifying its policies to the conseil supérieur, the company made explicit and repeated reference not to the Antilles as a model, but to rural France. Since 1723 the company had been demanding the annual provision in its warehouses of four ounces of coffee per arpent of cultivable land. For the next decade it remained committed to this resented stipulation, which the colonists saw as unrealistic for an island that was still sparsely populated and a crop that was still maturing. "It's quite a light imposition," the company's directors wrote dismissively to Bourbon in 1729, "and moreover the

³⁶ Greer, *Property and Dispossession*, 338-9; Bloch et al, "Les plans parcellaires," 68-9.



Above: Fig. 2.4. *Carte depuis Kébec jusque au cap de Tourmente* (Jean Bourdon, 1641) BNF GED-8070 (RES). The prevalence of Bloch's "elongated parallelograms" in New France were in part due to the need for access to the St Lawrence River, but they were also symptomatic of the colony's seigneurial legal regime—a stark contrast to France's plantation colonies in the Caribbean, where the Coutume de Paris was largely neglected due to economic necessity.



Left: Fig. 2.5. Map of Bras (Calvados, in the Plain of Caen), from Marc Bloch's *French Rural History*, showing the long open-fields and fragmentation of property characteristic of northern and western France.



Fig. 2.6. *Plan de l'Isle Grande Terre Guadeloupe, représentant les terres telles qu'elles ont été arpentées* (1732). Unlike on Ile Bourbon, the Coutume de Paris was largely ignored in France's Caribbean territories, allowing colonists to maintain large units of property required for intensive plantation agriculture.



Fig. 2.7. Plan of the Island of Dominica laid down by actual survey under the direction of the honorable the commissioners for the sale of lands in the ceded islands by John Byres chief surveyor 1776. Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library (JCB C 6712). France ceded Dominica to Britain at the Treaty of Paris in 1763; the distribution of property depicted here was the product of over a century of French rule prior to that date.

company is only doing what is still practiced in France, where one sees seigneurs demand rents in wheat, even if the terrain on which the rents are established have never had a connection to wheat and are covered in trees, and those who owe these rents do not complain, and pay what they must.”³⁷ For company directors, long-open fields and seigneurial obligations were natural arrangements for agrarian production. The four ounces of coffee per arpent was “*hommage* due to a seigneur”; habitants were vassals of the company who owed the *corvée* labor of their captives to improve the island’s infrastructure and to capture maroons. Failure to oblige would lead to “the feudal seizure of their lands.”³⁸ Seigneurial institutions belonged to the “common sense” of commercial imperialism.

Finally, we might account for the enduring similarities between the landholding patterns of Ile Bourbon and the metropole by the fact that former’s integration into the world economy remained incomplete. According to Géraud-Llorca, the feudal property regime of the Antilles, an epicenter of Atlantic markets, was eroded over the course of the eighteenth century due to demand for productivity and the economic gains to be made from consolidated plantations. On Bourbon, as we shall see, the coffee experiment was abandoned before the middle of the century. And in any case the island, compared to Guadeloupe, Martinique, and Saint Domingue, was at a relative remove from both European markets for consumption and from nearby centers of production and exchange. Selhausen’s maps, then, might represent a plantation complex frozen at an early stage of development, from a period in which the Mascarenes was marginal to the world economy.

Cracks in the seigneurial regime appeared in the early 1730s, as some on the island began to question whether French customs of land distribution and inheritance were suitable for the

³⁷ Compagnie des Indes to conseil supérieur, 24 July 1729, AN Col F 3 206 f 51.

³⁸ Compagnie des Indes to conseil supérieur, 22 September 1731, AN Col F 3 206 f 87.

endless production of coffee. “There are three kinds of people in the colony,” the conseil supérieur informed the company in 1732. The lowest rung was occupied by new arrivals who had only just started cultivating their plots, and the middling classes were those who had been on the island for six or seven years, who had been most affected by the recent storms, droughts, and plagues, and who, as a result of captives purchased on credit, collectively owed the company around 10 million l.t.—a sum that the conseil supérieur guessed would take around nine years of good coffee harvests to pay off.³⁹ This was worrying news for the company’s directors, who had instructed their representatives in Bourbon to try and limit debts to 2,000 l.t. per habitant, and repeatedly insisted that captives were only to be provided to settlers who seemed industrious.⁴⁰ As far as the conseil supérieur was concerned the problem was not profligacy or easy lending, but the subdivisions of land caused by the Coutume de Paris. “Before, when a creole came to establish himself,” the conseil wrote in 1731, “he would have been able to rely on his patrimony. That resource no longer exists. Fathers and mothers die, their children share their land, and subdivide it in three, four, five, or six *pieds de terre*.” Instead of growing coffee, aspirational planters only had room to grow vegetables for their own subsistence.⁴¹ The company had wanted to govern an island of productive vassals, but it ended up turning Frenchmen into peasants.⁴²

While partible inheritance and the resultant *morcellement* of land created an underclass of debt peons and peasants, other, equally *ancien régime* customs of patronage and favoritism had

³⁹ Conseil supérieur to Compagnie des Indes, 1 April 1732, ADR C 642 f 34. Clearing and cultivating a habitation required, at minimum, the labor of “twelve *noirs*,” which a settler could secure from the conseil supérieur by incurring a debt of around 4,000 l.t., at 350 l.t. for a man and 300 l.t. for a woman, if the captives came from Madagascar. See Remonstrances des habitants de l’Ile Bourbon, 1731, AN Col F 3 206 f 123

⁴⁰ Remonstrances des habitants de l’Ile Bourbon, 24 July 1729, AN Col F 3 206 f 51; Compagnie des Indes to Ile de France, ADR C 73, 12 January 1737.

⁴¹ Consultation, Saint Paul, Ile Bourbon, 23 October 1731, AN Col F3 f 115.

⁴² In that sense, the company’s project on Bourbon resembled the earlier settlement of Canada. See Leslie Choquette, *Frenchmen Into Peasants: Modernity and Tradition in the Peopling of French Canada* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

led to the formation of a powerful plantocracy. The top tier in the hierarchy reported by conseil supérieur in 1732 were “old habitants, who have owned slaves for a long time and in a number sufficient to develop their habitations.” Thanks to the amount of coffee they were consistently able to deposit in the colony’s warehouses, some members of this class had even become creditors to the company.⁴³ Directors in Paris blamed the emergence of this coffee elite on the colonial government’s corrupt distribution of captives.⁴⁴ Whatever the reasons, a 1735 census confirmed that a polarized society had developed on Bourbon in just over a decade. Two dozen large planters employed around a fifth of the colony’s captives and produced nearly half of the island’s coffee.⁴⁵ Distinctions of wealth and power, based solely on the ownership of enslaved labor and the ability to produce coffee, had formed within the company’s seigneurial regime.

These disruptions to the seigneurial institutions and social relations that the Compagnie des Indes had transplanted to Ile Bourbon were the costs of success. In 1723, when the company received the monopoly, coffee exports from Bourbon had averaged around 3,400 lbs a year. By 1730 they averaged 300,000 lbs, and the figure kept growing: up to 500,000 in 1735, 1.5 million in 1740, and 2.5 million in 1745.⁴⁶ A 1746 census recorded a population of more than 15,000, most of them captives transported from around the Indian Ocean and west Africa to tend over 4 million coffee trees.⁴⁷ By a basic measure of production, the coffee experiment had worked.

As a result, coffee mediated practically all social relations on Ile Bourbon. The conseil supérieur complained to the company in 1734 about the lack of specie in the colony, reporting

⁴³ Conseil supérieur to Compagnie des Indes, 1 April 1732, ADR C 642 f 34.

⁴⁴ Compagnie des Indes to conseil supérieur, 24 July 1729, AN Col F 3 206 f 51.

⁴⁵ Claude Mazet, “L’Ile Bourbon en 1735: les hommes, la terre, le café et les vivres,” in Claude Wanquet (ed.), *Fragments pour une histoire des économies et sociétés de plantation à la Réunion* (Saint-Denis: Publications de l’Université de la Réunion, 1989), 32-3; Claude Wanquet, “La café à la Réunion, une ‘civilisation’ disparue,” in *ibid.*, 59.

⁴⁶ Wanquet, “La café à la Réunion,” 57; Mazet, “L’Ile Bourbon en 1735,” 31.

⁴⁷ Recensement général, 1746, ADR C 774.

that coffee was “now the most common money on the island... All purchases and sales, whether of property or slaves, are carried out by the habitants in coffee.”⁴⁸ The commodity played a role in Bourbon’s economy not unlike that performed by sugar in Saint Domingue: to borrow Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s formulation, “it had become the universal equivalent and had consequently acquired a *social character*: the socially drawn monopoly to subject to its refraction all other commodities and human beings themselves.”⁴⁹ Sustained growth in both the enslaved population and the coffee crop, coupled with a social hierarchy determined purely by these specific forms of wealth, demonstrated that capital could operate within, and even break out of, the carapace of old regime institutions. To a certain extent, then, the coffee experiment vindicated the architects of commercial imperialism; but it also suggested a more dynamic and unpredictable relationship between the metropole and the colonial periphery than they had anticipated. The old regime could be exported overseas to generate growth, but only at the cost of being transformed in the process. In a society in which wealth, distinction, and political power were determined by a single commodity, new social relations and new ideas of property and interest had emerged that, as the coffee experiment confronted the changing conditions of global markets, would only further undermine the seigneurial authority and commercial policies of the Compagnie des Indes.

The Limits of Corporate Sovereignty

The census of 1735 was a product of the company’s desire to get a better handle on the society it had helped create on Ile Bourbon.⁵⁰ Similar surveys had been carried out periodically since 1708,

⁴⁸ Ile Bourbon to Compagnie des Indes, 19 April 1734, AN Col F 3 206 f 131.

⁴⁹ Trouillot, “Motion in the System,” 372, emphasis in original. For a similar argument that coffee had come to dominate not only the economy of Ile Bourbon but also the population’s *mentalités* and everyday life, see Claude Wanquet, “La café à la Réunion,” 55-73.

⁵⁰ A trait shared with other colonial censuses carried out in the French empire in the eighteenth century. See Fanny Malègue, “L’empire en tableaux: recenser et gouverner les colonies antillaises après la guerre de Sept Ans,” *Histoire et Mesure*, 33, no. 2 (2018), 93-114.

but they were either quickly rendered obsolete by the rapid development of the colony, or they were dismissed by company directors for poor methods and faulty categories. The 1732 census, for instance, had used differing lengths of *gaulettes* to measure habitations—sometimes ten, other times twelve *pieds*, rather than the standard fifteen *pieds de Roi* demanded by the company.⁵¹ It had also failed to record the number of coffee trees, an indication perhaps of bureaucratic foot-dragging on the part of the conseil, which detested the company's demand of four ounces of coffee per cultivable arpent.⁵² No such oversights marred the 1735 census. Names, ages, and birthplaces of property owners were listed alongside those of their spouses, children, and “free employees,” followed by rudimentary details (first name and age) of each of the habitation's slaves, classified by sex and ethnic origin. After this demographic inventory came documentation of the concession's purchase, and then a thorough assessment of the land, quantifying its size and counting its mature coffee trees and saplings, subsistence crops (rice, wheat, corn), as well as any resident cattle, sheep, chickens, turkeys, ducks, or pigeons.⁵³ It would be naïve to take the census as an accurate representation of the population and resources of Bourbon; no doubt some habitants managed to hide their possessions from the surveyor. But it can be understood as an attempt by the company to account for its property—to gauge the capital worth of its rightful estate, down to the last duck.

Unfortunately for the company, the census evinced a slightly more complicated set of property relations. Although all colonists owned their land as concessions (in other words, it had been loaned to them by the company free of charge, on the condition that they “make it valuable” through cultivation), and although many could only register small plots that had been parceled up

⁵¹ Mazet, “L’Ile Bourbon en 1735,” 22.

⁵² Recensement Saint-Denis and Sainte-Suzanne, 1732, ADR C 785.

⁵³ Recensement générale, 1735, ADR C 770. For a detailed analysis, see Mazet, “L’Ile Bourbon en 1735.”

through succession, some owned huge plantations. Charles Feydeau Dumesnil occupied 871,000 *gaulettes carrées*, or 2,069 hectares; Philippe Letort owned 270 captives and 160,000 coffee trees.⁵⁴ Members of the plantocracy governed their concessions like fiefdoms, creating pockets of “domestic sovereignty” within the company’s supposed island estate.⁵⁵ Some had prisons on their plantations, where they were largely given a free hand by the conseil supérieur to exercise private justice over their enslaved workers.⁵⁶ In that regard both planters and the colonial government were simply following French custom and law. Since 1685 slavery in France’s colonies had been governed by the Code Noir, which theoretically restrained but in practice reinforced the power of plantation owners. On Bourbon as in the Caribbean, torture and even murder went unpunished. And by Article 23 of Code Noir (revised in 1723), slaves were prohibited from taking legal action or bearing witness against their masters. In all colonial contexts these measures were a product of demographic imbalance and fear of insurrection. Out of a total population of 9,905, there were 430 property owners and over 7,000 captives on Ile Bourbon in 1735. Marronage, as well as the periodic theft of crops and property by “fugitive slaves,” inflicted damaging losses to the company’s accounts. It was in the interests of securing its investment in the island that the company endorsed the tyranny of masters over slaves.

Large coffee habitations were therefore subject to the same disciplinary regime as plantations in France’s Atlantic colonies. Yet Ile Bourbon was unique in that its land was subject

⁵⁴ Mazet, “L’Ile Bourbon en 1735,” 22; ADR C 795.

⁵⁵ For domestic sovereignty, see Yvan Debbasch, “Au cœur du ‘gouvernement des esclaves’: la souveraineté domestique aux Antilles françaises (XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles),” *Revue française d’histoire d’outre mer*, tome 72, no. 266 (1985), 31-53; for “pockets of sovereignty,” see Malick W. Ghachem, *The Old Regime and the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 51. On prisons in French colonies in general, see Marie Houllémare, *Vivre dans l’empire: expériences judiciaires coloniales et administration impériale française au XVIIIe siècle* (Habilitation à diriger des recherches, Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2019).

⁵⁶ Robert Bousquet cites the case of Henry Justamont’s plantation, where 143 captives worked. See Bousquet, “Les esclaves et leurs maîtres à Bourbon, au temps de la Compagnie des Indes, 1665-1767” (<http://www.reunion-esclavage-traite-noirs-neg-marron.com/>), 637. See also ADR C 2521 f 130.

both to the corporate sovereignty of the Compagnie des Indes and the domestic sovereignty of the planter, adding an extra layer to the nested sovereignties that—recalling Bloch’s contested field, owned by peasant, village, lord, and king alike—were characteristic of seignorial property regimes. Whenever these competing authorities clashed, as they inevitably would, the ensuing disputes were mediated by the conseil supérieur, the company’s representatives on the island who nevertheless also owned plantations. As a result, the colonial government often acted as a sympathetic advocate of planters’ interests to the company. In 1733 its members objected to the imposition of a *capitation* tax that would be levied according to the number of captives a habitant owned, because although each colonist “was a vassal of the company” they were also “subjects of the king,” and such a policy required royal approval.⁵⁷ The company could do little to enforce obedience in such cases, just as it could do little about colonists’ disregard for the stipulations of the Code Noir. One planter, George Noël, could therefore get away with allowing his habitants to “live together as man and woman,” which the company condemned as an “illicit” and “shameful” “prostitution,” “an inexcusable contempt of a sacrament instituted by the Creator that only a minister could preside over”—but from Paris the directors could only express disgust.⁵⁸ Likewise brutal punishments were overlooked, especially when an influential colonist had a vested interest. In 1741 Lisandre, originally from Sri Lanka but by then a “slave belonging to Sr George Bourgeois,” was found guilty of stealing some cutlery and porcelain from the house of Henriette Juppin, the wife of Hélie Dioré de Perigny, a former governor of the island and member of the conseil supérieur. The authorities subjected Lisandre to 200 lashes of the whip,

⁵⁷ Correspondence between conseil supérieur and the Compagnie des Indes, 1734, AN Col F 3 206 f 131.

⁵⁸ Ordonnance du conseil supérieur, January 1733, AN Col F 3 208 f 457.

branded his right shoulder with the fleur de lys, and condemned him to work in chains as the company's prisoner for the rest of his life.⁵⁹

Examples like this—and there were many—spoke to the political influence of plantation owners, but also to an anxiety about maintaining the value of property that was shared by colonist and company alike. As the directors had made clear, what mattered above all disputes of morality and seigneurial obligation was that coffee was being produced, and that there were enough enslaved people to produce it. And so the domestic sovereignty of planters generally took precedence over the corporate sovereignty of the Compagnie des Indes. As far as the most powerful habitants were concerned, there was no confusion about who owned the land: it was *their* field—their cutlery, their coffee, their captives—rather than the company's or the king's. The ability of the company to dictate affairs in Bourbon was therefore thwarted in part by its own success in creating a coffee island—a society in which coffee was economically and culturally hegemonic. Driven to attain wealth and power through the one sure means of cultivating coffee, planters governed their plantations like fiefdoms, ignoring company directives and colonial law with the tacit encouragement of the conseil supérieur.

If the Compagnie des Indes's control over the coffee experiment was constrained from below by the domestic sovereignty of its vassals, then it was undermined completely by events that happened beyond its jurisdiction in the Antilles. In 1727 Martinique was struck by an earthquake that destroyed its entire crop of cacao, with an estimated value of over 8 million l.t.. Administrators argued that the only way for affected colonists to recover was to switch to growing coffee—a crop that was already renowned for needing little capital investment, and for being capable of growing on the most unforgiving terrain.⁶⁰ It had been a longstanding ambition

⁵⁹ Arrêt du conseil, 4 February 1741, AN Col F 3 208 f 545.

⁶⁰ AN Col C 8 39 ff 51-201.

of some colonists to bring coffee to Martinique; one report in 1724 even mentioned that samples were arriving “bit by bit” from Ile Bourbon, presumably without the consent or knowledge of the company.⁶¹ The loss of cacao provided the opening for coffee to take root in the Caribbean. By the early 1730s planters in Martinique were reporting impressive harvests. Panicked, the company tried to arrogate the new grain to its existing monopoly, which technically covered all coffee imported to France regardless of where it came from. But market forces worked against the company and against Bourbon. Since the route across the Atlantic was shorter than the seven-month journey around the Cape, coffee from Martinique was both cheaper and better than its Indian Ocean competitor. French consumers and merchants in Marseille and other ports that hosted the re-export trade advocated on behalf of Martinique. Maurepas, the influential minister of the navy, also welcomed the ready availability of cheap coffee within France’s commercial empire, seeing it as a vessel to further capture European markets. In 1732, just as the experiment in Bourbon was proving successful, Martinican planters won the right to supply coffee for re-exports to Amsterdam and Hamburg. Five years later the company lost its monopoly on coffee imports to the kingdom.⁶²

Bourbon’s capitulation to Martinique exposed the difficulties that institutions like the Compagnie des Indes faced in trying to pursue commercial imperialism. The coffee island had been designed to create a self-contained circuit of merchant capital within France’s global economy. In isolation, the experiment might have worked. European re-export markets began to approve of the quality of Bourbon coffee by the 1730s; in Amsterdam the commodity sold for

⁶¹ For the early 1720s ambitions, see AN Col C 8 26 f 325, AN Col C 8 27 f 254, and AN Col C 8 32 f 194. See AN Col C 8 33 f 43 for samples from Bourbon.

⁶² Charles Carrière, *Négociants marseillais au XVIIIe siècle: contribution à l’étude des économies maritimes* (Marseille: Institut historique de Provence, 1973), 360-9.

almost the same prices as that of Mocha coffee imported via the Levant.⁶³ But the company could do little to resist broader changes in the division of labor of the French plantation economy, as Atlantic markets prospered in the golden age of commerce. Supply from the Antilles was simply cheaper and more secure. The Compagnie des Indes consciously developed Bourbon through corporate sovereignty, controlling the intricacies of production and exchange in a distant and fast-growing society. As Melon had argued in the *Essai politique*, such autocratic, monopolistic measures were perhaps necessary for fledgling colonies. But they left corporations ill-equipped to respond to, never mind co-ordinate, developments in global capitalism that were happening beyond their jurisdiction. The way in which Martinique undercut Bourbon in the French coffee economy was a clear indication that the sunken costs and fixed capital investments of corporate sovereignty were vulnerable to the global promiscuity of merchant capital. Henceforth, commercial imperialism would have to find more flexible ways to develop colonies, protect pioneer crops and commodities, and stimulate overseas markets.

The irony for Ile Bourbon was that by 1733, just as the coffee experiment began to bear fruit, it had become clear that the colony could not justify its existence by coffee alone; it would have to offer something else to the state's strategic needs. Eventually, change was foisted upon the Mascarene islands in the form of Mahé de la Bourdonnais. A Breton sea captain who made a fortune as a merchant in southern India, La Bourdonnais won the patronage of Orry upon his return to France in the early 1730s. Orry duly named him governor of Ile Bourbon and Ile de France in 1734, at once creating a new office of executive power in the colonies and bestowing it to a total outsider. The decision was met with consternation amongst company employees and settlers.⁶⁴ But it was a clear sign of intent on the part of Orry to reorient the Mascarene islands

⁶³ Spary, *Eating the Enlightenment*, 87.

⁶⁴ Manning, *Fortunes à Faire*, 67-9.

away from the now doomed coffee experiment, and to wrestle power away from the coffee plantocracy on Bourbon and their representatives in the conseil supérieur in the process.

No mere puppet of Orry, La Bourdonnais had his own ambitious plans for the islands, which he explained at great length in a 1733 manifesto for the reform of French commerce in the Indian Ocean. The governor would reside in the hitherto neglected Ile de France, 140 miles to the east of Bourbon and deemed by La Bourdonnais a superior as a base of operations because of its deep-water port. Slaving voyages to Madagascar and Mozambique—a new market for the Mascarene islands, but one with which La Bourdonnais had plenty of experience—would provide a cheap labor force to produce agricultural goods (wheat, corn, manioc) and new cash crops (indigo and cotton) on Ile de France. The manifesto had relatively little to say about Bourbon. La Bourdonnais disparagingly remarked that the “real wealth [*le bien réel*] of Ile Bourbon consists solely in the production of coffee,” but he didn’t go as far as to say that the crop should be abandoned. He did, however, suggest that the company’s experiment needed a new objective. With an eye on Martinique’s capture of metropolitan markets, La Bourdonnais argued that colonists should produce coffee without worrying about finding consumers for it, because “if they can be found in Europe, they can be found in India.”⁶⁵ The idea of a plantation-based country trade, while ambitious, was a sign of things to come, as La Bourdonnais sought to diversify the economy of the Mascarenes by extending French merchant capital beyond the bounds of its formal empire, and integrating it into the vibrant markets of the Indian Ocean.

To do so, however, he needed to break the hegemony of coffee on Bourbon—to strip the commodity of its socially mediating qualities. After over a decade of coffee’s empire, this was no easy task. “It didn’t take me long to realize that on Ile Bourbon and Ile de France people

⁶⁵ “Copie d’une lettre écrite par M de la Bourdonnais à M de Morau concernant les affaires de la Compagnie de la France dans les Indes orientales,” 1733. AN Col C 2 25 ff 151-94.

dream only of coffee,” he wrote to Orry in 1740; that same year, after half a decade under his reformist administration, the coffee harvest reached 1.5 million lbs, its largest ever, and it only grew larger in subsequent years. “I tried to make the habitants understand,” he continued, “that it was in their interests to apply themselves to the culture of indigo and cotton, but nobody wants to put their efforts into a new object of commerce that seems so uncertain.”⁶⁶ And who could blame them? For nearly twenty years the company had forced them to grow coffee, making it the principal form of tribute and currency on the island. Now they were being told not to bother. The company lowered the price to 5 sous per pound in 1738, and again to 4 sous in 1744.⁶⁷ A sense of disorder and frustration took hold of the habitants, who had organized their society around a commodity that both the company, their absentee landlord, and the metropole in general increasingly saw as valueless.

It was La Bourdonnais’s task to provide order and new purpose to the Mascarenes. The company’s monopolistic regime was evidently no longer fit for purpose. Another tactic within the old regime’s imperial repertoire was required. What’s more, La Bourdonnais had to grapple with the legacies of the coffee experiment: an island covered in a crop that, at best, needed to find new markets; a plantocracy accustomed to the wealth and power associated with domestic sovereignty; and an enslaved population, already prone to marronage and rebellion, whose primary function—to produce coffee—was no longer economically viable. Fortunately for the new governor, these necessary reforms could be carried out under conditions of relative autonomy from the Compagnie des Indes, which, chastened by the now inevitable failure of the coffee experiment, proved open to the prospect of alternatives being generated at the colonial

⁶⁶ Mahé de la Bourdonnais, *Mémoire des Iles de France et de Bourbon*, ed. Albert Lougnon & Auguste Toussaint (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1937), 12-13.

⁶⁷ Wanquet, “La café à la Réunion,” 61.

frontier. Amidst the slow unwinding of the coffee island, the Mascarenes became a site of experimentation for new, more flexible approaches to commercial imperialism.

Between Justice and Interest

After five years of governing the Mascarenes from Ile de France, La Bourdonnais sent a memoir to Orry, explaining the reforms he had introduced. The failure of the coffee experiment had exposed the tensions in the way the islands had been governed. As La Bourdonnais put it in 1740, the Compagnie des Indes was always caught between two roles: that of the seigneur, and that of the négociant. As a seigneur, the company has to try to put the internal trade of the colonies “into abundance, to render its people happy by just laws that maintain them in their rights.” But as a négociant, “it must profit from its privileges” and take all possible benefits from any commercial activity. These competing perspectives were bound to put company and colonist at odds. By upholding its monopoly, the company committed itself to buying all goods the colonists produced and to providing for all of their needs. If the colonists produced too much, relative to what could be sold in Europe, then the company was forced to reduce the prices it would pay them, “which was to act contrary to its engagements” of keeping its subjects happy. Likewise, if the “habitant does not find an abundance of all he wishes”—if the company did not provide sufficient merchandise “to satisfy the different tastes of the colonists”—then the habitant had a right to complain, and even to break the company’s monopoly by seeking satisfaction on other markets. Conflict was therefore inevitable. The company would always be forced “to choose between its justice and its interest.”⁶⁸

⁶⁸ La Bourdonnais, *Mémoire des Iles de France et de Bourbon*, 75-6.

La Bourdonnais's solution was to make life in the Mascarenes more "*agréable*." Infrastructure and construction expanded dramatically during the five years of his tenure. Public works concentrated around Port Louis on Ile de France, including a hospital, stores, and a *salle de spectacle*: all built so that habitants could "attend to their *commodité*."⁶⁹ With a thriving town on Ile de France and a productive countryside on Ile Bourbon, the Mascarenes, La Bourdonnais hoped, could attract a thriving international commerce. Whereas the company saw Ile de France as only an *escale*, a stopover for ships heading to India, the governor wanted to turn it into an entrepot, a thriving market at the crossroads of the Indian Ocean. Ignoring the company's wishes, La Bourdonnais set about constructing a harbor at Port Louis, a project that required the labor of 158 slaves imported from southern India: "carpenters, caulkers, coopers, sailmakers, ropemakers, and sailors."⁷⁰ The goal was to open the Mascarenes up to the world and to bring the world to the Mascarenes. Diverse merchandise from France, India and China would gravitate there, enough to satisfy the tastes of the most capricious consumer. Boats could be sent to "Guinea, to the Gold Coast," where one could establish trade with Portuguese merchants coming from Brazil. Trade with Buenos Aires and voyages to the South Seas "would be easy to carry out." Gold, silver, and other precious minerals could be taken from Mozambique. "This continent," La Bourdonnais argued, could become a new "coast of Brazil" for France.⁷¹ In short, the governor's plan was to compensate for the failure of the coffee experiment by making the Mascarenes an epicenter of new circuits of merchant capital, rather than a commodity producing hinterland for the metropole and its European re-export markets.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 6-7. On the urban bias of La Bourdonnais's reforms, see Megan Vaughan, *Creating the Creole Island: Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Mauritius* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005) 34-48.

⁷⁰ Vaughan, *Creating the Creole Island*, 40.

⁷¹ La Bourdonnais, *Mémoire des Iles de France et de Bourbon*, 78-80.

Delivering the fruits of global commerce to the islands' fortunate habitants required that the company abandon its monopoly. Rather than making onerous demands on its subjects and guarding its privileges, the company would judiciously intervene to promote both industriousness but also happiness and "well-being." With their emphasis on urban life, market exchange, and an *agréable* environment for colonists, La Bourdonnais's reforms can be understood in terms of Foucault's analysis of the "science of police" that emerged in seventeenth-century Europe. In that context, police meant the set of techniques that states deployed to ensure that their subjects were not just living but that they were "better than living." The state encouraged the circulation of goods and the "more than living" of urban existence because the cohabitation and *commodité* of its subjects came "back to the state as a growing set of forces." A large, healthy, productive population in which the world's goods circulated could produce an advantage in the balance of power between European states, in the international sphere of "competitive growths."⁷² Clearly La Bourdonnais understood the seigneurial regime of the Compagnie des Indes would no longer secure such an advantage, but he did not seek to replace it with the rule of market forces. After all, markets forces had undermined the coffee experiment, and stripped the Mascarenes of their function within the French global economy. Instead, he replaced corporate sovereignty with the science of police, an "art of government" he deemed more capable of governing, perhaps even generating, global circuits of merchant capital.

Police promised a synthesis of justice and interest: a reconciliation of the competing roles of the seigneur and the négociant. The company would uphold its responsibilities as seigneur by providing abundance, guaranteeing the happiness of its subjects by turning them all into négociants, allowing them each to pursue their "particular interests" on the market. For Foucault,

⁷² Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 311-38.

these were, in the eighteenth century, incompatible logics. *Homo juridicus* and *homo æconomicus*, he argued, “are absolutely heterogeneous and cannot be superimposed on each other.” The former was a subject of contracts, who “says to the sovereign: I have rights, I have entrusted some of them to you, the others you must not touch.” The latter was a subject of interests, who objects on a completely different basis: that the sovereign “cannot know the totality of the economic process,” just as the company had confronted the economic limits to its power when developments in the Antilles thwarted the coffee experiment.⁷³ Neither an expert in jurisprudence nor a budding theorist of political economy, La Bourdonnais nevertheless spoke in the language of both. On the one hand, the company had a duty to observe the habitants’ rights to abundance. On the other, under the “natural law” of free trade, “the habitant, by his own interest, will be constrained to cultivate” whatever found the most consumers and the best prices.⁷⁴ Perhaps La Bourdonnais, a merchant, was trying to further his own commercial interests by cynically appealing to the seigneurial vanity of the Compagnie des Indes. Or perhaps his use of the languages of both rights and interests reflected the hybrid nature of the company’s sovereignty in the Mascarenes, a discursive complement to the coffee plantations stretched out in characteristically gallic long open-fields on the slopes of Ile Bourbon. In which case, La Bourdonnais simply spoke the language of French commercial imperialism: part old regime bricolage, part market abstraction.

The company, however, remained suspicious of the possibility of creating an industrious, commercial, urban and happy population on the foundations of a plantation society. From Paris, the rights and duties of seigneurialism, with its bonds of personal authority and dependence,

⁷³ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 276-83.

⁷⁴ La Bourdonnais, *Mémoire des Iles de France et de Bourbon*, 77.

seemed far more stable than a society of négociants guided by their own particular interests. “If you unite all the habitants in a town,” the company wrote to its governor in the Mascarenes in 1740, “what will become of their habitations, where the presence of the master is so essential? Who will guard the habitations when the master is absent? The maroon slaves will have free reign.”⁷⁵ La Bourdonnais’s police state, after all, was not designed to make life *agréable* for the enslaved population, which far outnumbered the habitants, and whose interests were unlikely to be satisfied in commercial affairs.

War offered an alternative to potential disorder. La Bourdonnais had credentials in the combat against marronage. In the 1733 manifesto he submitted to Orry he had proposed training mastiffs to hunt and devour fugitive slaves, and as governor he organized enslaved militias to wage a *guerre intestine* against maroons in the mountains of Bourbon.⁷⁶ Beyond the Mascarenes, in the early 1740s hostilities from the War of Austrian Succession threatened to spill beyond the Cape from the Atlantic sphere. The prospect of fighting on two fronts—against marronage and invasion—provided La Bourdonnais with an opportunity to institutionalize his incipient police state, and to overcome the company’s skepticism towards his reforms. Resources would be protected, even maximized, through the militarization of society.

In 1741, a year after the company had expressed its concerns about La Bourdonnais’s attempt to bring towns and markets to Ile de France, the governor circulated a memoir to the conseil supérieur of Ile Bourbon, in which he proposed introducing a system of orders that would distinguish the habitants according to their “merits and faculties,” and above all according to their demonstrated commitment to “the defense of their *patrie* and the honor of their nation.” All

⁷⁵ Quoted in Vaughan, *Creating the Creole Island*, 38.

⁷⁶ “Copie d’une lettre écrite par M de la Bourdonnais,” AN Col C 2 25 ff 164-5; Ève, *Les esclaves de Bourbon*, 173-8.

free members of Mascarene society were to be classified into six “ranks,” the distinctions made visible through the transformation of captives into baroque, symbolic forms of power.⁷⁷ The first rank would be the “Gendarmes.” They would fight on horse and foot, they would be “permitted to carry the plume and the sword,” and they would “have in their entourage four or five of their loyal *noirs*, carrying billhooks, pickaxes and stakes (*serpettes, pioches, et piquets*).” The second rank were the “Dragoons,” who were allowed only two *noirs* carrying axes. Next came the “Grenadiers” (one *noir* with an axe), followed by “good habitants” (arms and uniforms, but no *noirs*), “poor habitants” (neither arms nor uniforms, except on express permission) and, in the bottom rank, the lazy, who would be conscripted into public works and who could “carry neither gold nor silver nor arms.”⁷⁸

This explicit translation of slave wealth into social distinction could be construed as an attempt to make “police” legible to both planters and the company. Like the application of landholding patterns of northern France to Ile Bourbon, La Bourdonnais’s ersatz society of orders was a gesture to the metropolitan familiar when faced with the colonial exotic. And like the company’s corporate sovereignty, the police state was also a form of imperial bricolage, the deployment overseas of a form of governance that already existed in the metropole. European governments, as both Raeff and Foucault have demonstrated, were by the early eighteenth century establishing control over and maximizing the resources of their populations by appealing

⁷⁷ Robin Blackburn has used the category of the baroque to capture the often incongruous social, economic, and cultural forms that developed in the new world where European elites—especially Catholic, post-Tridentine European elites—deployed “old world” techniques of power to govern indigenous Amerindian populations and plantations worked by captives from Africa, all in the service of the “modern” goal of productivity. As a term of analysis, it “illuminates the transitional character of colonial slavery, allowing it to be seen as an ancient and traditional form of domination transformed and thrown forward.” Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery*, 20-4.

⁷⁸ Mahé de la Bourdonnais, à messieurs les Conseillers des Isles de France et de Bourbon, August 1741, AN Col F 3 208 f 573.

to private interests and working through traditional corporations and existing hierarchies.⁷⁹ La Bourdonnais was attempting the same on the Mascarenes, working through the plantocracy to generate commerce and keep property secure, now that the organizing motivation of coffee production had subsided. The labor of captives would be reallocated from coffee production to maintaining discipline and fighting wars; the ownership of captives would signal industriousness and patriotism. With their wealth and social standing secured, planters were now encouraged to find value in other goods and activities. The company could therefore be assured that its investments were safe, that its colonies were productive, while habitants could pursue their “natural” interests without risking disorder.

To support his argument that free trade would satisfy the natural inclination of colonists, La Bourdonnais took the brazen step of admitting, in his 1740 report to Orry, that he had already personally contravened the company’s monopoly, having arranged in 1737 for a shipment of plates from a private source to make up for company’s failure to satisfy demand. “Fraudulent” commerce was already happening, so it might as well be made legal.⁸⁰ The admission only scratched the surface of the governor’s involvement in illicit trade. In 1736 he had set up a company with Picot de Closrivière, his partner in Saint Malo, and Lemery-Dumont, the new commander of Ile Bourbon, to provide merchandise to the Mascarene islands beyond the supervision of the company. La Bourdonnais and Lemery-Dumont would sell French and Asian goods amounting to 12,000 l.t each year in the Mascarenes at a healthy mark-up, and then return the profits to Picot in France in bills of exchange. The contract stipulated that the sales would only take place after the company had distributed its own merchandise in the colonies. But in the seventh article there was a suggestion that the partners, although their intentions “were exempt

⁷⁹ Raeff, “The Well-Ordered Police State,” 1235-9.

⁸⁰ La Bourdonnais, *Mémoire des Iles de France et de Bourbon*, 39.

from blame,” knew their arrangement was less than legitimate: “the present treaty would not be approved by the company, if it had any knowledge of it, because it would persuade itself that private interests were taking precedence over its own. In the event any of the associates are suspected of private commerce, he commits by word of honor to do his best not to implicate the others.”⁸¹ As much as it was an argument for a new path to development beyond the company’s monopoly, La Bourdonnais’s advocacy of free trade and the provision of urban comforts—plates, wines, linens, books—was also an attempt to normalize practices he had already pioneered.

Did these partial interests make the prospect of a well-ordered police colony any less viable? For La Bourdonnais, the fact that he had personally benefited from the measures he was proposing simply proved that they would work. It was an open secret that La Bourdonnais sold captives from his private slave-trade at inflated prices, and that he performed arbitrage on company provisions—that in general he was, in the words of one accusation levelled at him, “susceptible to a vile interest.” Defending himself, La Bourdonnais claimed that the accusations did him honor. “If people think I’ve gotten so rich then it only serves my reputation,” he boasted, shortly after pointing out that none of his predecessors had left the islands “as liquid with the company,” which still owed him some 80,000 l.t. for the purchase of some of his captives.⁸² Without the company’s onerous monopoly, enterprising habitants might follow the governor’s example. What La Bourdonnais left unsaid in his memoir to Orry, however, was that his own capital did not stay long in the Mascarenes. He brought luxuries to the colonists, which feasibly helped markets develop in the developing towns of Ile de France, but the profits he made on those trades were quickly repatriated. His correspondence to Picot de Closrivi re reveals that

⁸¹ AN 94 AQ 1 9 f 2.

⁸² La Bourdonnais, *M moire des Iles de France et de Bourbon*, 59.

from 1737 La Bourdonnais was sending 50,000 l.t. back to France each year, most of which went into purchasing “a plot of land near Tourraine” for 200,000 l.t.⁸³ Beneath the rhetoric of his proposals, in the finer details of his affairs, it is clear that La Bourdonnais meant for his reforms to serve only a few particular interests. Rather than develop its towns and markets, a police regime would ultimately strip the Mascarenes of its wealth.

Nevertheless, La Bourdonnais’s reforms had the support of the plantocracy. Militarization and the proposed new system of ranks helped win them over, but so, above all, did the fact that the coffee economy was afforded a stay of execution. At the bidding of La Bourdonnais and his men on the conseil supérieur, who each took a three per cent commission on exports, the company agreed in 1738 to pay for Bourbon coffee at the discounted price of 5 sous per pound, even though it struggled to find consumers in Europe. As a result, there were novel opportunities for planters and entrepreneurs to emulate their governor: to speculate on the slave trade and make private fortunes out of the managed transformation of the colonies. La Bourdonnais also had powerful backing beyond the Mascarenes. Along with his partner in France and his protector in Versailles, he also acted on behalf of powerful figures at the head of the Compagnie des Indes—including one François Castanier. Picot de Closrivière, his Saint Malo partner, was instructed to check in with Castanier before trying to buy land in Tourraine, in case the company director wanted to be repaid for the “10,000 piastres [around 50,000 l.t.] that he sent me.”⁸⁴ Wealth escaped from Bourbon and made it back to France, where it poured into the private accounts of the directors (if not the balance sheets) of the Compagnie des Indes. Privately, Castanier speculated on the unwinding of the coffee experiment; publicly, he reassured

⁸³ Correspondence between Picot de Closrivière and Mahé de la Bourdonnais, 20 February & 22 March 1738, AN 94 AQ 1 10 f12.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

shareholders in his 1739 memoir that since Ile Bourbon was “entirely inhabited and cultivated in coffee” it would soon be realizing its value to metropolitan consumers.⁸⁵ Just as he had during the Law affair, Castanier made sure to profit from one of the company’s failures.

In the second half of the 1730s, La Bourdonnais supervised the replacement of the corporate sovereignty of the Compagnie des Indes, which had been exposed as unable to control global commerce, with an ambitious project that sought to transform the Mascarenes into urbanizing, well-ordered colonies, open to the world’s trade. La Bourdonnais did not stay long enough to complete such sweeping changes, although he did not leave before making a small fortune for himself and his associates. But neither fact implies that the transition from corporate sovereignty to police state was inconsequential for the Mascarenes. The so-called “justice” of the seigneur—to provide abundance, guarantee happiness, stimulate productivity—would no longer be fulfilled through the company’s monopoly and its strict control of island trade from 6,000 miles away. But nor would it be secured through so many colonial négociants acting on their natural self-interest, as some of La Bourdonnais’s more optimistic rhetoric had suggested. Instead, it would be enabled by the shrewd manipulation of merchant capital through patronage, through flexible investments, and through social hierarchies of value—which, on Ile Bourbon, remained stubbornly oriented around coffee and the slave plantation. The company’s seigneurial regime on the Mascarenes was succeeded by the business practices of its infamous director, *le plus grand coquin de France*. Government by police would work to the benefit of colonial Castaniers.

⁸⁵ “Mémoire de Castanier sur l’état de la compagnie en 1739,” BN NAF 9354.

The Luck of Pierre-André d'Héguerty

On Bourbon, habitants with the right connections followed the governor's example. Fortunes could still be made there, provided one wasn't too attached to the land or the doomed coffee experiment. Aside from La Bourdonnais, no one typified the speculative energies that had been released after 1735 more than Pierre-André d'Héguerty, the Barry Lyndon of French commercial imperialism. Descended from Irish nobility, Héguerty was an enthusiastic Jacobite, participating in James Stuart's failed 1715 invasion of Scotland at the age of fourteen. Throughout the 1720s he gambled himself to bankruptcy playing lansquenet, the card game of choice amongst courtiers at the time. His father's solicitations to Cardinal Fleury and Philibert Orry earned him a shot at redemption in the colonies, in the form of a 3,000 l.t. appointment as a member of the conseil supérieur of Ile Bourbon.⁸⁶ Penniless, Héguerty left France in 1734 for the Mascarenes on *La Reine*, where he made the chance acquaintance of Lemery-Dumont, La Bourdonnais's partner and the new commander of the colony. This was his first stroke of luck: before he had set foot on the island Héguerty was already part of the clique in charge of reforming the coffee island. And he wasted no time in capitalizing on his new connections.

Héguerty was initially stationed as a police commander in Sainte-Suzanne, a district on the north-east coast of the island that, thanks to its fertile soil and the gentle gradients of its terrain, was ideal for coffee cultivation. In 1735 the region had 365,000 coffee trees, over a third of the island's total. Demographically it was a microcosm of the inegalitarian effects of the coffee experiment. Out of 105 planters, 82 ran small habitations that employed under 20 captives. And yet six of the island's largest plantations were also situated in Sainte-Suzanne.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Jack Chollet, *Les O'Hegerty: Francs-maçons et agents secrets à la cour de Stanislas* (Haroué: Gérard-Louis, 2015), 65-6.

⁸⁷ Mazet, *L'Ile Bourbon en 1735*, 32-3.

Saint-Denis, the administrative center of Bourbon, was just over ten miles away, and so transporting coffee to the company's warehouses was relatively inexpensive, while provisions arriving to the island were readily accessible. In short, for an ambitious new arrival, Sainte-Suzanne was the ideal place to learn about the economy and social hierarchies of Ile Bourbon.

After two years fulfilling his administrative responsibilities and assimilating into the local plantocracy, Hégerty made his move. "Thanks to divine providence, I have found the secret to do something with nothing," he reported home in December 1737.⁸⁸ In May of that year he had purchased two adjacent plots of land, situated between the Rivière des Roches and Bras Panon, belonging respectively to Denis and Etienne Robert. These brothers were members of a wealthy family that were among the first settlers of Ile Bourbon, their ancestors having arrived on the island in 1671. The Roberts owned large lots of territory along the north coast, including on both sides of the Dumas river, just to the east of Sainte-Suzanne. Most of it had been subject to the *morcellement* characteristic of the Coutume de Paris (see Figs. 2.2 and 2.3 for Saint-André and Saint-Benoît respectively), and as a result many of the strips lay neglected. This presented a speculator like Hégerty with an investment opportunity. He purchased the land largely with captives that he owned "on credit" from the company: "three *noirs* and three *négresses*" of adult age ("*pièces d'Inde*") for Etienne Robert, "three *noirs* and two *négresses*" for Denis, as well as 100 piastres (around 500 l.t.) for both brothers. Hégerty estimated the total value of the transaction as 10,000 l.t., meaning he considered each of the eleven captives to be worth about 800 l.t.. These prices were not out of the ordinary in a market of labor-hungry planters, but it is worth pointing out that captives were purchased by the company and private traders in Madagascar for 15 piastres—which is to say 75 l.t.. Even allowing for transportation costs and

⁸⁸ "Mémoire pour M. Pierre Charles-Daniel O'Hégerty, contre M. François Bernard O'Hégerty," BM Nancy, Fonds Lorraine, MS 7596, 11.

mortality, this constituted a vast discrepancy between purchase and resale—a discrepancy that was the basis of the fortune La Bourdonnais made out of his private trade. And it is unlikely that a company employee like Hégueury, who had the protection of both La Bourdonnais and Lemery-Dumont, would have paid Bourbon rates for the merchandise he owned “on credit.”⁸⁹

Hégueury spent the first six months after buying the land from the Roberts supervising captives—probably also borrowed from the company—in the planting of 4,000 coffee trees.⁹⁰ This was late 1737: Hégueury, in the orbit of the colony’s new political elite, would probably have known that Bourbon coffee was bound to lose out in Europe to Caribbean competitors in the long run. But it was never his ambition to join the plantocracy. In April 1738, with the terrain now covered in coffee saplings, he sold part of the property, along with thirteen slaves, back to Denis and Jean-Baptiste Robert. Hégueury received 25,600 l.t. for reselling a fraction of the land that he had bought the previous year for under half that amount. (It is unclear why exactly the Roberts agreed to such a terrible deal.) Two months later, at the beginning of June, he sold a tranche of the same property, along with another thirteen Malagasy slaves *pièces d’Inde*, to Jacques Pitou (an island notable, “*dit le Marquis*”) for a total of 40,966 l.t.. And he wasn’t finished. After two years of ascending through the colony’s bureaucracy, appointed by La Bourdonnais director general of commerce (which came with a commission on coffee exports) and then commander of Ile Bourbon, Hégueury set about ridding himself of any fixed capital that remained trapped in coffee and land. To a Sieur Calvert he sold yet another plot of the Robert land and eighteen captives (from Senegal, Madagascar, and Mozambique) for 43,500 l.t.. Finally, on 3 May 1741, Hégueury sold the last remaining portion of the habitation for just over 35,200

⁸⁹ Ibid., 6-7.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 11.

l.t. to a Sieur Justamont.⁹¹ Within four years Hégerty had made just short of 150,000 l.t. off a plot of land that he bought for 10,000 l.t., and that he had improved with enslaved labor that he probably never really owned, who planted coffee trees that would never be valuable.

Immensely lucrative, the Robert speculation was just one aspect of Hégerty's approach to realizing the "happy prospect of a reasonable fortune" that he had mentioned in December 1737, when he reported having found "the secret" of making something out of nothing.

Throughout 1738 he bought up land elsewhere on the north coast, including one plot in Sainte-Marie that he bought in partnership with a Sieur Guichard, and another in Saint-Denis, where he owned 66 captives.⁹² In September of that year he married the sixteen-year-old Marie Françoise de Verdières, whose parents, both members of the Breton nobility, had been on Bourbon since 1722.⁹³ Her father, Charles de Verdières, owned a large habitation across the Dumas river from Hégerty's Robert property (see Fig 2.2); according to the 1735 census he owned 70 captives and 60,000 coffee trees (as well as 80 pigeons and twelve ducks).⁹⁴ There is no record of the bride's perspective, but her father saw the marriage as good business, acknowledging on the eve of the nuptials in a letter to his mother in Brittany that although Hégerty was "not rich," he was "in a position to make a rapid and considerable fortune."⁹⁵ Verdières was soon vindicated.

Through a combination of property speculation, an advantageous marriage, a 15,000 l.t. salary from his governorship, and inside access to the dependable slave trade, Hégerty left Bourbon in 1744 with his wife and newborn son and, at the very least, 500,000 l.t. to his name, having arrived with nothing.⁹⁶

⁹¹ Ibid., 32-6.

⁹² Ibid., 37.

⁹³ "O'Hégerty," BM Nancy, Fonds Lorraine, MS 7597, 10.

⁹⁴ ADR C 770 f 173.

⁹⁵ "Mémoire pour M. Pierre Charles-Daniel O'Hégerty, contre M. François Bernard O'Hégerty," BM Nancy, Fonds Lorraine, MS 7596, 12.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 42.

The success of Hégerty's gamble depended on a number of factors that were specific to Ile Bourbon in the 1730s. Without a property market, which was in large part created by partible inheritance, Hégerty would have been unable to buy and "improve" disused tracts of land. La Bourdonnais's patronage gave him easy access to a rigged private slave trade, which in turn was made more lucrative by the renewed emphasis on slave wealth generated by the governor's baroque reforms. And crucially, the decade after 1735 was the perfect time to profit from the failing coffee experiment. The Compagnie des Indes, no longer sufficiently invested to uphold its seigneurial rights over the island, welcomed new interests and projects. Planters, however, remained committed to coffee, having devoted all of their energies in the crop for two decades. La Bourdonnais claimed to have tried to persuade them to diversify, but he also had a 3 per cent annual stake in the continued cultivation of coffee. Subsequent harvests—1.5 million livres in 1740, 2.5 million in 1745—suggest that the entretries yielded few returns, unlike the commission. And so Hégerty could make a fortune out of the credulous plantocracy. It was no accident that he did all of his business—even his marriage—with the colony's notables: de Verdières, the Sieur Justamont, the Sieur Calvert, "le marquis" Jacques Pitou. These men were attached to Ile Bourbon: their social function and self-worth derived from coffee yields and the domestic sovereignty they exercised on fief-like plantations. Hégerty, by contrast, was an outsider; he had no deep connections to Bourbon. Land, slaves and coffee were only valuable to him if they could be turned into money—money that could be easily taken back to France.

And so as much as Hégerty was simply in the right place at the right time, he also embodied a general tendency of capital, especially merchant capital in the early modern world: to seek abstraction, to free itself from its fixity in the land and in physical forms. Coffee, like all other colonial commodities, was a necessary vehicle for the accumulation of French capital at the

dynamic periphery of the global economy. As in Marx's general formula of MCM', capitalist agents invested money (M) into the commodity (C) to make more money (M'). The commodity was a means to an end, a concrete vessel that allowed abstract value to move through time and space—from France to Bourbon and back—and, in doing so, to multiply. It was therefore also a potential trap for value, a material entity that might spoil or be destroyed before it was reconverted into the money, profits, and liquidity desired by capitalist agents. With the emergence of competition from Martinique the Compagnie des Indes, otherwise so averse to large investments, received an unwelcome reminder of how easy it was to lose value in the commodity: to be caught in the middle of capital's cycle, with warehouses full of coffee that couldn't be sold.⁹⁷ Bourbon planters, conditioned first by the seigneurialism of the company and then by La Bourdonnais's science of police, with its ersatz society of orders, fell prey to the patrimonial illusion that wealth and status were permanently rooted in the land of their colony. A newcomer like Hégerty, who had come to the Mascarenes solely to make a fortune, was under no such illusions. As he wrote to his sister in March 1742, "*il faut que je liquide avant de partir.*"⁹⁸

In 1742 the Compagnie des Indes instituted a period of free trade for the Mascarene islands beyond the Cape of Good Hope. The company would remain in control of trade with Europe, but until 1747 colonists would be allowed to conduct business on their own accounts to Madagascar, Persia and southern India. After years of trying La Bourdonnais had finally

⁹⁷ On the commodity as a potential "trap" for value, see Walter Johnson, *The River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), esp. 66-7. David Harvey identifies capital's tendency towards abstraction and "liquidity" as a feature of "post-Fordist" capitalism in the twentieth century. See Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989). Giovanni Arrighi, following Braudel, argues that "flexibility" and "eclecticism" have been the central features of capitalism over the longue durée: "M' means liquidity, flexibility, and freedom of choice." See Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times* (London: Verso, 2010 [1994]), 4-5.

⁹⁸ "O'Hégerty," BM Nancy, Fonds Lorraine, MS 7597, 26.

convinced the company that commerce was the way to abundance. The experiment was a disaster. Most habitants were too indebted to raise the capital required to fund long-distance trade. Imports dried up, and the company was forced to cut short the experiment in March 1746. As Megan Vaughan has noted of Ile de France, “the period of liberalization did, however, give a boost to the evolving small elite of entrepreneurs based on the island.”⁹⁹ Disgruntled planters knew exactly who had benefited. “Examine the wealth of Hégerty, La Bourdonnais, and Lemery-Dumont, who all arrived in 1735,” wrote one colonist to the company in December 1744, “and you’ll see where all the money has gone.”¹⁰⁰ By that point the 1735 clique, having taken all they needed from the Mascarenes, had moved on to new ventures. La Bourdonnais to war in India, and from there to a terminal stay in the Bastille, hounded by accusations that he had personally profited from the ransom of Madras to the English, and condemned by the fall of his patron Orry.¹⁰¹ Hégerty, for his part, returned to France, and fashioned a new identity as an expert on commercial affairs in the Enlightenment public sphere.

Coming Home

Upon returning to Europe in 1744, Hégerty devoted himself to the Jacobite politics of his youth. He wrote a letter to Maurepas to request French support for the 1745 invasion, projecting freedom for Ireland and a Carthaginian end to the British empire.¹⁰² Yet Hégerty’s life had been irreversibly altered by his nine-year stay in Bourbon. The transformation was evident in his material circumstances. Already in 1741 he had sent 107,000 l.t. in bills of exchange to his sister

⁹⁹ Vaughan, *Creating the Creole Island*, 47. See also Huguette Ly-Tio-Fane Pineo, *Ile de France, 1715-1746* (Moka: Mahatma Gandhi Insitute, 1993), 243-TK.

¹⁰⁰ “Examen de la régie des isles,” December 1744, AN Col C 3 8 f 179.

¹⁰¹ Manning, *Fortunes à Faire*, 213-7.

¹⁰² Hégerty to Maurepas, “Projet pour renouveler le gouvernement de la Grande Bretagne,” 1745, Cornell University, The Maurepas Collection, Box 15, Folder 17.

in Nancy, so that she could buy him a lavish hotel in Nancy on the Place Saint Georges, a fashionable location near the court of Stanislas Leszczynski, the exiled king of Poland, father of the queen of France, and ruler of the quasi-independent duchy of Lorraine.¹⁰³ This proved to be the ideal base from which Hégueury could ascend the cultural elite of Nancy, just as he had conquered the plantocracy of Bourbon. Money kept coming back from the active loans he had left in Ile Bourbon: over the course of the 1750s he received 434,298 l.t. from the Mascarenes in bills of exchange.¹⁰⁴ In a bitter legal battle over Hégueury's testament (on which more below), his son claimed in 1763 that his recently deceased father was still owed rents from his stake in a company, "Pitoux et Calver," capitalized at 1,070,000 l.t..¹⁰⁵ A steady stream of colonial wealth had enabled Hégueury to expand his property portfolio in Lorraine, as well as those of his siblings, with whom he remained close. In 1758 he purchased the seigneurie of Villey-le-Sec and Chanteheux, where he accommodated his two sisters, Sara and Cécile Vertu, and one brother, François-Bernard. Another sibling, the agronomist Dominick, was recognized in 1765 by the "king" Stanislas, Pierre-André's patron, as the "Comte de Magnières," prompting a dismissive jibe from the local nobility: "*Il n'y a pas un comte de Magnières mais une manière de comte.*"¹⁰⁶ Despite such barbs, the Hégueury estate and reputation were well and truly secured in metropolitan society, thanks to a fortune made in distant Bourbon.

Hégueury made no secret of his formative experience in the colonies, which, far from being the shameful origin story of an arriviste seigneur, ensured a captive audience of courtiers and savants eager to hear first-hand accounts of life at the outer edges of the global economy. In

¹⁰³ "O'Hégueury," BM Nancy, Fonds Lorraine, MS 7597, 18 & 25. Chollet, *Les O'Hégueury*, 77. Lorraine was formally incorporated into the French kingdom in 1766.

¹⁰⁴ "Mémoire pour M. Pierre Charles-Daniel O'Hégueury, contre M. François Bernard O'Hégueury," BM Nancy, Fonds Lorraine, MS 7596, 60.

¹⁰⁵ "O'Hégueury," BM Nancy, Fonds Lorraine, MS 7597, 31.

¹⁰⁶ "Famille O'Hégueury biographies," BM Nancy, Fonds Lorraine, MS 1795, "Dominick O'Hégueury," 7.

1751 he was elected to the newly established Académie de Stanislas, one of the many provincial academies that had sprung up in the middle of the century to promote the circulation of knowledge and royal prestige.¹⁰⁷ For the most part Hégueury's academic contributions were merely exotic and entertaining: one speech of 1751 "terrified" an audience of courtesans with tales of carnivorous rats, ravenous locusts, and mutinous slaves; another, delivered in 1753, recounted the expedition of an acquaintance, the Chevalier Palmaroux, up the Piton de la Fournaise, a volcano "surprisingly ignored" by Buffon in his *Théorie de la terre*, and by all other "historians and travelers."¹⁰⁸ Hégueury's benign, anecdotal speeches were in keeping with the nature of the institution in which they were delivered. Academies were governed by kingly and aristocratic patronage. The chief function of whatever was discussed or presented at the academy in Nancy was to provide entertainment and promote knowledge that would reflect the glory of "King Stanislas"—hence Hégueury's description of a volcano that even the great Buffon had ignored. In turn, for those who participated the academy was a space of elite sociability where one could garner recognition and shore up status as a "man of the world." Tales from Bourbon allowed Hégueury to secure his place amongst the elite of Lorraine. Life in the colonies had produced social capital as well.¹⁰⁹

As an aspiring man of the world, however, Hégueury had ambitions beyond elite sociability. And academies were not simply branding exercises for kings and patrons, nor social clubs for gentlemen scholars. They also disseminated "useful knowledge" throughout the

¹⁰⁷ Daniel Roche, *Le siècle des Lumières en Province: académies et académiciens provinciaux (1680–1789)* (Paris: Mouton, 1978), 2 vols.

¹⁰⁸ Hégueury, "Discours prononcé devant le Roi à la séance du 26 mars 1751"; idem., "Observations sur le volcan d'Isle de Bourbon, par M. d'Hégueury, ancien président du conseil supérieur et commandant pour le Roi dans l'Isle de Bourbon," *Mémoires de la société royale des sciences et des belles lettres de Nancy, Tome Troisième* (1755), 218–35.

¹⁰⁹ Antoine Lilti, "The Kingdom of Politesse: Salons and the Republic of Letters in Eighteenth-Century Paris," *Republics of Letters*, vol. 1, issue 1 (December 2008).

kingdom, providing institutional grounding to schools of thought that spread through the more ephemeral medium of print. One such school was the new *science du commerce* that, thanks primarily to the efforts of the reformist minister Vincent de Gournay, had begun to dominate the pages of literary reviews and commercial periodicals. François Véron Duverger de Forbonnais, a prominent associate of Gournay, described the method of this new science as an examination of all the “particular details” of trade and its “infinite branches.”¹¹⁰ In 1754 Hégueury made his own anonymous contribution to this discourse in the *Essai sur les intérêts du commerce maritime*, which, in the introduction, promised—somewhat unoriginally—to analyze “the branches of commerce most susceptible to amelioration” in France’s overseas economy.¹¹¹ Three years later, in a speech delivered to the academy to mark the start of his presidency, Hégueury acknowledged that his *Essai* was fundamentally derivative, that it did little to advance the discussion of commercial affairs beyond what Melon, Forbonnais, Cantillon and Montesquieu had already established, and that its primary purpose had been to add his experience to their insights.¹¹² On his first day as president, though, Hégueury’s demonstrated his utility to the movement by nominating for membership Butel Dumont and Plumard du Dangeul, two companions in the “circle” of writers that surrounded the minister Gournay.¹¹³ The academy therefore served as a vehicle to advance the social standing of both Hégueury and the ideas in which he was interested.

It is not entirely fair to dismiss the contribution of the *Essai sur les intérêts du commerce maritime* to broader debates of commercial affairs. Unlike such luminaries as Melon and

¹¹⁰ Philippe Steiner, *La “Science nouvelle” de l’économie politique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998), 14.

¹¹¹ [Pierre-André d’Hégueury], *Essai sur les intérêts du commerce maritime* (La Haye, 1754), 9-10.

¹¹² “Discours prononcé de M. d’Hégueury à l’assemblée publique du 4 mai 1757,” in “Famille O’Hégueury biographies,” BM Nancy, Fonds Lorraine, MS 1795, “Pierre-André O’Hégueury.”

¹¹³ Loïc Charles, “Introduction,” in Loïc Charles, Frédéric Lefebvre and Christine Théré (eds.), *Le cercle de Vincent de Gournay: savoirs économiques et pratiques administratives en France au milieu du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Ined, 2011), 16.

Montesquieu, Hégouerty's experience was earned at the colonial periphery. This was not immediately clear from the text; Hégouerty made no explicit appeal to his years of experience as administrator, police commander and planter in Bourbon. Despite dedicating chapters to each of France's Atlantic colonies, as well as its trading posts on the African coast, he did not mention the Mascarene islands at all. Perhaps this was a precaution taken by an author on his way to seigneurial status, reluctant to being associated with any public commentary on state policy. It is nevertheless possible to discern traces of his past life in this document. Hégouerty's main recommendation—practically his only recommendation, for every “branch of commerce”—was to extend the slave trade. “*Les nègres* are the sinews and riches of our commerce,” he wrote in the section on the Guinea coast, the first chapter dedicated to an overseas establishment.¹¹⁴ The rest of the *Essai* was a variation on this theme. Louisiana, the Antilles, Cayenne: the surest way to improve each of them, according to Hégouerty, was to increase the supply of captives. As far as contributions to the *science du commerce* went, this was a uniquely explicit acknowledgement (and endorsement) of the reliance of France's growing material prosperity on the institution of slavery.

It is worth dwelling on this point, if only to demonstrate what this exercise in reading Hégouerty's public utterances against the backdrop of his colonial career can contribute to our understanding of Enlightenment political economy. As we will see in the next chapter, scholars have largely overlooked the extent to which the Gournay circle's *science du commerce* was rooted in the global commodity chains of France's commercial empire. This oversight is in turn symptomatic of a reluctance to consider the material conditions of the eighteenth-century emergence and popularization of “liberal” ideas about the economy (including the idealization of

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 79.

the market, anti-corporate sentiment, and ontological individualism). Recently some scholars have been more insistent in connecting colonial practices of exploitation to metropolitan discourses of liberalism. Yet even in these salutary interventions the relationship is presented as contradictory: slavery and expropriation might have been at the epicenter of the global spread of market relations that liberalism took as its object, but, as Onur Ulas Ince has argued, liberal ideas “could not normatively accommodate the violent processes that engendered them.” For Ince, the chief function of “British imperial ideology” in the long eighteenth century was “to uphold the *necessary misrecognition* of colonial capitalism as an essentially liberal market phenomenon.”¹¹⁵ Likewise Elizabeth Heath has argued that natural history texts, travelogues, and the “peculiar qualities” of French colonial commodities taught consumers to overlook the enslaved labor embedded in goods like sugar and coffee. Violence and slavery were “obfuscated,” “veiled,” “disavowed,” “erased,” “abstracted,” allowing for the formation amongst metropolitan consumers of a “double consciousness and willed imperceptibility conducive to modern capitalism.”¹¹⁶ And so while imperial relationships certainly existed in material forms (such as commodities and wealth) that made the liberal ideas of the bourgeois public sphere possible, they were absent in the ideas themselves, requiring the historian to tear down the veil separating colonialism and a wishful European self-understanding.

A reading of Héguey’s *Essai sur les intérêts du commerce maritime* informed by an awareness of his experience in Bourbon helps us to historicize the relationship between capitalism and slavery within Enlightenment political economy. No doubt there were many instances of obfuscation and misrecognition within that discourse. Yet we should avoid assuming

¹¹⁵ Ince, *Colonial Capitalism and the Dilemmas of Liberalism*, 29-30, emphasis in original.

¹¹⁶ Elizabeth Heath, “Sugarcoated Slavery” Colonial Commodities and the Education of the Senses in Early Modern France,” *Critical Historical Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2 (Fall 2018), 172-3 & 205.

that such instances were representative of metropolitan subjectivity, or ascribing to them the ideological functions of modern capitalism. Hégouerty's *Essai*, which was explicit in its engagement with slavery, and even endorsed its extension, was both written in and addressed to a society that was comfortable with violence, and which took for granted the existence of masters and slaves, seigneurs and vassals—in both old regime France and Ile Bourbon. As Barbara Jeanne Fields has argued, in the early modern world “everyone in society stood in a relation of inherited subordination to someone else: servant to master, serf to nobleman, vassal to overlord, overlord to king, king to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.”¹¹⁷ In such a society no obfuscation was required. Hégouerty, like Melon before him, could be explicit about the perceived economic justifications of slave labor. They both described empire as they had witnessed it, and it was this partially accurate description of economic reality—the abstraction of general principles from concrete experience—that was the main ideological function of political economy in French commercial imperialism.¹¹⁸

The *Essai sur les intérêts du commerce maritime* was, in truth, only a partial step towards the abstraction of principles. It advocated no laws that governments and merchants should follow, and nor did it propose any justifications of colonialism and its attendant practices and institutions. Eschewing normativity, Hégouerty's approach was instead overwhelmingly empirical, focusing on the peculiarities of politics surrounding France's various “branches of commerce.” Some passages urged specific interventions by the state, in the form of granting monopolies and favoring particular merchants. The chapter on Louisiana, for instance, proposed

¹¹⁷ Barbara Jeanne Fields, “Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America,” *New Left Review*, 1/181 (May-June 1990).

¹¹⁸ On the superiority of “partial truths” over the Althusserian concept of “necessary misrecognition” as an explanation of the success of liberal ideology, see Stuart Hall, “The Problem of Ideology: Marxism Without Guarantees,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, vol. 10, issue 2 (1986), 28-44; idem., “The Toad in the Garden: Thatcherism Among the Theorists,” in Lawrence Grossberg & Carry Nelson (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 35-57.

a twelve-year plan for tobacco cultivation, and concluded by remarking that a similar project had been devised by “M. de Chamousset, maître de requêtes” and “M. le Normande, the former commissionaire ordonnateur” of Louisiana, that “the minister” had seemingly been in support of it, but for “apparently superior and unknown reasons” it had never been carried out, and the colony “rests in its state of languor.”¹¹⁹ The chapter on Cayenne followed a similar template, presenting a case for how coffee could be grown there in abundance before recommending “*négociants* from La Rochelle” who would be happy to accept the “responsibility” (in other words, the monopoly) to supervise the project.¹²⁰ Aside from these attempts to lobby the government in print, most chapters were overviews of the recent histories and basic capacities of France’s global commodity chains. In short, Hégueury’s essay amounted to the raw materials of political economy, rather than the thing itself. It offered the experienced reflections of the practitioner, not the principles of the scientist—a compendium of what Hegel called “the endless mass of details” from which a Melon, Montesquieu, or Gournay might distil the rationality of global commerce.

Critique, then, required more than the *Essai sur les intérêts du commerce maritime*. Nevertheless, read with Hégueury’s experience on Bourbon in mind, the text is suggestive of attitudes about production and exchange that, thanks primarily to the influence of Gournay, came to dominate French attitudes towards overseas commerce around the middle of the century, as the institutional prestige and influence of the Compagnie des Indes waned. Throughout, and despite his liberal discussion of slavery, Hégueury’s treatment of France’s global commodity chains was devoid of the attention shown by his predecessors in Bourbon towards the finer details of commodity production, such as the timing of coffee harvests, the tactile qualities of a

¹¹⁹ Hégueury, *Essai sur les intérêts du commerce maritime*, 146-54.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 128-33.

good grain, the expertise and material needed for drying and packaging. Skill and labor, slave or otherwise, were, at best, considered in terms of accounting. The chapter on Louisiana and tobacco, for instance, calculated, based on the annual productive capacity of the average laborer and the size of the British supply to the General Farm, the number of slaves that needed to be brought to the colony (10,625), as well as the fixed prices of captives (900 l.t.) and tobacco (17 l.t. 10 sols *du cent pesant*). In addition, Hégouerty provided tables projecting the respective sizes of labor force, costs, and tobacco harvests for each of the next twelve years.¹²¹ As in Bourbon, the availability of enslaved labor and the eventual commodity could be taken for granted. What mattered were not technical questions of cultivation, nor moral questions of labor, but the management of exchange—how to govern rest of the “branch of commerce,” beyond the site of production. And so the *Essai* ended not with a chapter on a particular French colony, like Saint Domingue or Louisiana, but with long passages on re-export trades to Europe, the need to expel foreigners from the ports of Bordeaux, Bayonne, and Nantes, the possibility of emulating the British Navigation Acts, and a celebration of the amount of French imports and exports passing through Cadiz.¹²² As La Bourdonnais had instructed the habitants of the Mascarenes two decades before, the site of happiness and abundance was not the plantation, with its fixed costs, rooted in the land, but the market, the realm of liquidity. Hégouerty had been a receptive student.

As in the Mascarenes, so throughout France’s other global commodity chains, the Compagnie des Indes would be replaced by more flexible forms of governance: the targeted partnerships between state and entrepreneur that Hégouerty advocated in his essay, and the mastery of the sphere of exchange. And as in the Mascarenes, this new model of governance had a familiar face. The 1757 treatise *Remarques sur plusieurs branches de commerce et de*

¹²¹ Ibid., 146-52.

¹²² Ibid., 168-202.

navigations, often attributed solely to Pierre-André but potentially co-written with his brother Dominick, provided an explicit depiction of the ideal-typical “*Citoyen négociant*” whose private interest reaped public benefits. Recalling how in the 1670s Colbert had granted a 10 l.t. subsidy for each sheet of linen exported from a humble manufactory in Carcassonne, the authors pointed to the fruits of that state intervention in the form of the then factory owner’s son—the ubiquitous François Castanier, “today one of the directors of the Compagnie des Indes, who has made the extent of his genius known through his vast enterprises, which are superior to anything our greatest *négociants* had dared to imagine.”¹²³ It would take the systematic, sophisticated intellectual energies of Gournay and his followers to reorient the attentions of French commercial imperialism away from the production of commodities on colonial plantations and towards the management of their distribution through entrepreneurial skill and endeavor. But the turn in that direction was already evident in the raw materials of Hégueury’s career, and in the mass of details spelled out in his published writings.

As the example of Colbert and Castanier père made clear, the “enlightened absolutist” desire to maximize resources and unleash productive energies through the creation and spread of markets had a distinguished and largely metropolitan history. Hégueury, and by extension the coffee experiment on Bourbon, serves as an example of the global dimensions of the improving state’s paradoxical history that both Marc Raeff and Foucault elucidated. By turning traditional privileges and established corporate structures towards novel economic ends, and by appealing to individuals’ self-interest to stimulate productivity, the Compagnie des Indes ended up

¹²³ [d’Hégueury], *Remarques sur plusieurs branches de commerce et de navigation* (Amsterdam: Jean Schreuder et Pierre Mortier le Jeune, 1757), 27-35. The text is most often attributed to “Pierre-André d’Hégueury, le comte de Magnières,” indicating a confusion between the brothers. The contents of the *Remarques*, which combined questions of agronomy, textiles trade in the Levant, and coffee markets, suggest that the brothers, who were close, might have collaborated on its authorship.

undermining its conditions of existence. In Europe, according to Raeff, feudal status solidarities were gradually replaced by economically determined class-consciousness, and the legitimacy of absolutism itself was increasingly questioned, “pushing society and its active members onto the road of modernity and individualism.”¹²⁴ On Ile Bourbon this otherwise centuries-long development seemed to take place in a few short decades, with first the commercial demands of the Compagnie des Indes and then La Bourdonnais’s police reforms producing, in hothouse fashion, “modern” ideas of interest out of an ostensibly seigneurial regime. Hégerty, in his journey from obscurity to the Enlightenment public sphere via Bourbon, personified the way in which the ambitious old regime, when trying to meet the demands of merchant capital, could generate new and publicly discussed ideas about the means and ends of overseas trade.

Glorifying Castanier, these new ideas posed no immediate threat to the governing interests of commercial imperialism beyond the company. But as Foucault argued, it was a short step from the flexible, interventionist state that sought to create and police markets, to the “counter conducts” of political economy, which insisted that the state should be controlled by markets.¹²⁵ What happened to the Compagnie des Indes, in other words, could happen to the entire corporate structure of the old regime.

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Pierre-André d’Hégerty died in 1763, bequeathing most of his assets to his beloved siblings. His son Daniel, who had been born on Bourbon in 1742 and who, having already inherited his father’s taste for gambling, was forever in debt to unrelenting creditors, received only 30,000 l.t. from the communauté of his parents’ marriage—Marie-Françoise, his mother, having died in 1746. A legal battle ensued between the prodigal son and his aunts and uncles. Daniel claimed

¹²⁴ Raeff, “The Well-Ordered Police State,” 1238-9.

¹²⁵ Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 347-54.



Fig. 2.8. The Hoopoe Starling, as sketched by Paul Jossigny (1770s). One of the many avian casualties of colonization, the starling is believed to have eventually gone extinct in the mid-nineteenth century. The causes of extinction are disputed; the dreaded brown rat (*Rattus norvegicus*), which proliferated throughout Bourbon after its inadvertent arrival via a company ship in 1735, is a suspected culprit.



Fig. 2.9. *Plan de l'Isle de Bourbon* (Antoine-Denis Selhausen, 1793), BNF, Département des Cartes et plans, GE SH 18 PF 218 DIV 2 P 19. The desiccation of the forest wherever settlement had occurred is palpable; only the uninhabitable volcanic region of the southern tip of the island (north is at the bottom of this map) remained unaffected. Cheke and Hume argue that Selhausen exaggerated the extent of forest loss in some regions and “in general set the lower margin of the forest too high up the slopes” (See *Lost Land of the Dodo*, 105). Even if this is the case it would be testament to the extent to which deforestation was perceived as an urgent problem on Bourbon by the late-eighteenth century.

that his father owed everything to his marriage into creole wealth. Pierre-André had left France in 1734 with nothing, Daniel pointed out, and before the wedding in 1738 he had only a 3,000 l.t. salary and some leveraged property to his name. Daniel estimated the true value of communauté, his rightful inheritance, to be at least 400,000 l.t.. His father's testament stipulated otherwise. Whatever wealth Pierre-André had made in Bourbon, he had made it by his efforts alone. According to the Coutume de Paris the estate would have typically been divided up more equitably, with Daniel receiving a greater portion of the assets his father had accumulated since 1738. But like an Antillean plantation owner eager to protect the integrity of his capital, Pierre-André passed on his fortune to the dependable siblings rather than to the spendthrift son. With Marie-Françoise long since passed away and Daniel practically disinherited, Hégerty's obligations to Bourbon were more or less severed. Everything of value, including the Verdières dowry, had been liquidated, made moveable, and brought home to Nancy, leaving scant trace of coffee or slavery.

The Compagnie des Indes washed its hands of the coffee experiment in a similar fashion. But in the Mascarene islands those decades of investment, demographic expansion, intensive cultivation and ecological instability left indelible legacies. The infrastructure built for coffee plantations on Bourbon and for La Bourdonnais's reforms on Ile de France were repurposed later in the century, first when ministers and improvers turned to the Indian Ocean after the Seven Years War, and later when the Mascarene islands became a substitute for sugar production after revolution in the Antilles. A creole culture that had its origins in the early eighteenth century therefore continued to develop, generating a fraught relationship between Réunion and France that has endured for three centuries.¹²⁶ At the ecological level the effects of French colonization

¹²⁶ Françoise Vergès, *Monsters and Revolutionaries: Colonial Family Romance and Metissage* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

were irreversible. Scores of the Mascarenes' endemic fauna, already endangered by the early settlements of the seventeenth century, were condemned to extinction by the intensification of agriculture and external trade, and by the related spread of invasive species. Ground-nesting birds were particularly vulnerable: red hens, raven parrots, solitaire ibises and hoopoe starlings sooner or later went the way of the more commonly lamented dodo.¹²⁷ Vegetation fared no better. By the late eighteenth century forests that had once descended to the shoreline of Ile Bourbon stopped abruptly at the upper limits of human settlement around the coasts, revealing a littoral fringe of desiccation where canopy and shrub had made way for resources and commodities (Fig. 2.9).

The perspective of merchant capital, triumphant in Bourbon and beyond after the failure of the coffee experiment, was practically oblivious to such ecological disruption. Increasingly, French commercial imperialism turned its attention away from the colonial periphery and the site of production, focusing instead on how to control the intricacies of commodity chains. Grand projects like creating a coffee economy out of nothing were too much of a risk. Flexibility was prized over territory and fixed capital. No longer a seigneur *outré-mer*, the Compagnie des Indes became one privileged merchant enterprise among many. As such it was vulnerable to the critiques of an economically literate public sphere that, under the influence of the reformist and popularizing efforts of Vincent de Gournay, came to see entrepreneurial endeavor and commercial self-interest not only as means to productivity, but as moral ends in themselves—as regulative ideals against which the corporate society of the old regime could be judged.

¹²⁷ Cheke and Hume, *Lost Land of Dodo*, 37-41 & 81.

Insects and Entrepreneurs

Vincent de Gournay's appointment as intendant du commerce in 1751 marked the culmination of the joint march of merchant capital and political economy through the institutions of the absolutist state. Gournay and his allies inherited the ideology of commercial imperialism that had developed within, but had come to transcend, the Compagnie des Indes. And so in the 1750s they flooded the public sphere with treatises and periodicals arguing for the benefits of overseas trade and the valorization of the role of the merchant in old regime society, but also the abolition of monopolies. Public discourse was accompanied by a wave of liberalizing policies, which in turn initiated the protracted dissolution of the Compagnie des Indes.¹ Borrowing from Melon's argument about the need to protect nascent markets, Forbonnais, one of the members of the "Gournay circle," acknowledged in the *Encyclopédie* that exclusive companies had been necessary "during times of barbary and ignorance."² But such times were over. French commercial imperialism had outgrown the tutelage of the Compagnie des Indes, and the Gournay circle was ready to offer more enlightened forms of governance.

One can be forgiven for seeing it as paradoxical that the Compagnie des Indes would ultimately be undermined by an ideology that it had incubated. But the paradox is artificial, a product of viewing Enlightenment political economy through the dichotomous categories of "mercantilism" and "liberalism." Both the protectionism of the Compagnie des Indes and the

¹ Anoush Fraser Terjanian, *Commerce and Its Discontents in Eighteenth-Century French Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 147-62.

² François Véron Duverger de Forbonnais, "Compagnie de Commerce," in Denis Diderot and Jean-Baptiste le Rond d'Alembert (eds.), *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.* (Paris: Briasson, 1751-88), vol. III, 739-42 (November, 1753). University of Chicago: ARTFL Encyclopédie Project, Robert Morrissey and Glenn Roe (eds). For a sociological analysis of the "Gournay circle," see Loïc Charles, "Le cercle de Gournay: usages culturels et pratiques savants," in Loïc Charles, Frédéric Lefebvre and Christine Théré (eds.), *Le cercle de Vincent de Gournay: savoirs économiques et pratiques administratives en France au milieu du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Ined, 2011), 63-88.

market-oriented policies of Gournay belonged to the repertoire of French commercial imperialism. Their apparent opposition was brought about by a turn in the dialectic of merchant capital and political economy that we have been tracing. The Gournay circle's arguments were heavily influenced by Melon's *Essai politique*; at their most sophisticated, they elaborated on the "raw materials" provided by Hégouerty, rendering abstract, broadly applicable principles from the partial perspectives of the agents of merchant capital. But they were also honed in areas of France's overseas economy that were beyond the authority of the Compagnie des Indes. Specifically, the market ideology that stimulated so much public debate in the 1750s, and the appeal of this ideology to the French state after the War of Austrian Succession, can both be traced back to Cadiz, at the crossroads of global trade, where Gournay himself had earned a commercial education.

This argument isn't entirely novel. In his *Éloge de Gournay* (1759) Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, the *philosophe* and future finance minister, made a point of stressing that

"For twenty years, M. de Gournay had himself carried out, and had seen carried out, the greatest commerce on earth [*le plus grand commerce de l'univers*] without having had occasion to learn, other than from books, of the existence of those laws to which he saw so much importance attached, and therefore he did not believe that he would be taken for an innovator and a man of systems, when all he did was develop those principles which experience had taught him, and which he saw unanimously recognized by the most enlightened merchants with whom he was associated."³

Without explicitly endorsing the sensationalist epistemology behind Turgot's reasoning, the best recent scholarship on Gournay likewise presents him as a pragmatic statesman informed by

³ Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, *Éloge de Gournay* (1759), trans. Peter Groenewegen, in Daniel Gordon (ed.), *The Turgot Collection: Writings, Speeches, and Letters of Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, Baron de Laune* (Auburn: Mises Institute, 2011), 99-131. The *Éloge* was published in *Le Mercure*, no 8, in August 1759.

experience, not an idealist disruptor.⁴ His policies and arguments simply consisted of trying to apply knowledge gained as a merchant in places like Saint Malo (where he was born) and Cadiz, which operated according to the enlightened principles of commerce, to old regime France, which did not. Unfortunately, what Gournay's experience consisted of remains unclear; we are left to assume that it anticipated the liberal political economy for which he later became famous. That is to assume too much. As a corrective, this chapter will pursue Turgot's insight by recovering what Gournay did as a merchant in Cadiz, and by tracing the influence of those formative years on the arguments he promoted and the reforms he pursued as *intendant du commerce*. In doing so, the chapter revises our understanding of Gournay and his political economy. It also narrates a crucial turning point in French commercial imperialism, one that effectively ended a period of dominance by the Compagnie des Indes and ushered in a new model that shaped the French response to the Seven Years War. That new model owed a great deal to the trade conducted by Gournay in the 1730s and 40s, from his merchant house in Cadiz.

The analysis of Gournay in Cadiz will focus on his trade in cochineal, the powdery residue of insects bred in Oaxaca and shipped by the Spanish to western Europe, where it was used as a red dye in textiles manufacturing. Thanks to a combination of scarcity, a labor-intensive production process, and inherent qualities that made it an effective, prestige dye, cochineal was, after silver, the most valuable export from New Spain.⁵ As an essential component of a textile industry that extended French commercial power to the Levant and

⁴ See especially Loïc Charles, "Le cercle de Gournay"; "La liberté du commerce des grains et l'économie politique française (1750–1770)" (Doctoral thesis, Université Paris 1, 1999).

⁵ For general histories of cochineal see Amy Butler Greenfield, *A Perfect Red: Empire, Espionage, and the Quest for the Color of Desire* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005); Carmella Padilla & Barbara Anderson, *A Red Like No Other: How Cochineal Colored the World. An Epic Story of Art, Culture, Science and Trade* (New York: Skirra/Rizzoli, 2015). For the economic function of cochineal in the Spanish empire, see Carlos Marichal, "Mexican Cochineal and the European Demand for American Dyes, 1550-1850," in Steven Topik, Carlos Marichal & Zephyr Frank (eds.), *From Silver to Cocaine: Latin American Commodity Chains and the Building of the World Economy, 1500-2000* (2006).

Spanish America through the exports of finished cloths, it was also a crucial commodity for the global economy of the old regime. With supply controlled by Spanish monopoly, European merchants could only purchase cochineal in Cadiz—the pivotal node in a commodity chain that encompassed overseas markets where France wielded “informal” empire. Gournay’s experience in Cadiz therefore reveals how French merchant capital worked beyond the confines of formal colonial institutions. Whereas on Ile Bourbon the Compagnie des Indes attempted to create a vertically integrated coffee regime, an entirely different strategy was required to valorize capital in the distended, heterogeneous markets traversed by cochineal. The first half of this chapter will attend to how Gournay mastered the logics of this commodity chain, and cultivated a flexible, informal, and largely deterritorialized approach to commercial imperialism that could serve as an alternative to the methods of the Compagnie des Indes.

In Cadiz, Gournay gained expertise at a particular point in the global circuit of French merchant capital. This was the position from which he theorized—essentially, the point of exchange, between the supply of raw materials and their application in manufacturing, or between the production of a finished good and its consumption on the market. It set the parameters for his worldview. On one level, I mean this quite literally: the cochineal commodity chain aligns remarkably well with the geography of Gournay’s reformist agenda, which above all targeted French commercial performance in Spanish America, the Languedoc and the Levant.⁶ But by “worldview” I also mean the intellectual preoccupations of Gournay and his associates: the relationships between overseas trade, domestic improvement, and war; how quality and price,

⁶ Merchants in Cadiz occupied a position in the cochineal trade not unlike dominant firms in contemporary supply chains, controlling the circulation of goods through heterogeneous markets while leaving production unregulated. It is also notable that, like contemporary supply chains, the cochineal chain generated—through Gournay at least—conceptions of entrepreneurial freedom. See Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, “Supply Chains and the Human Condition,” *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture and Society*, 21:2 (2009), 148-76; idem., *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 61-6 & 109-19.

not regulation, generated trust; why the nobility and rich landowners should embrace commerce; and the role of the market in the progress of civilization. The argument is not determinist. Gournay did not only know cochineal; as *intendant*, he was not a mere functionary for Cadiz merchants. But it does open up a new interpretation of where Gournay's ideas came from, and why they were so effective at capturing the attention of state and society in the 1750s. The second half of this chapter will engage with existing accounts of the Gournay moment in French politics, in order to reiterate the benefits of reading political economy against the backdrop of merchant capital. Its ultimate purpose, though, will be to insist on a largely neglected consequence of this liberal turn in French politics and economic thought: that it established, at the heart of the French state, a new orientation to commerce and empire on the eve of the Seven Years War.

Commercial Imperialism in Cadiz

When the seventeen-year-old Jacques Claude Marie Vincent, the future Vincent de Gournay, left Saint Malo to work for the family business in Cadiz, he was following a well-trodden path. After a remarkable period of growth that had begun under Colbert, Saint Malo merchants began to send their sons and nephews to Cadiz, where they would represent their families' commercial interests.⁷ They would stay there for a decade or so, gaining experience and, with any luck, making a fortune, before returning to France to manage the affairs of the *maison de commerce* and being replaced in Andaluc  a by the next generation of apprentices. Cadiz was the ideal environment for this mercantile finishing school, somewhere one could learn how to raise capital, place it behind risky long-distance trades, and build a reputation with some of the richest

⁷ Andr   Lespagnol, *Messieurs de Saint-Malo: Une   lite n  gociante au temps de Louis XIV* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 1997).

merchants in Europe. In 1717 the city had replaced Seville as the *Puerto de Indias*, the only port that (officially, at least) could trade with Spain's American colonies, because it could accommodate vessels that were too large to navigate up the Guadalquivir River. By the time Gournay arrived in 1729, Cadiz was thriving, spurred on by this new status and by the intensification of commerce in the decades of peace that followed the Treaties of Utrecht (1713-14). In the early eighteenth century, Europe's "most enlightened" merchants gravitated to Cadiz to carry out, as Turgot put it, *le plus grand commerce de l'univers*.

To a certain extent, then, Gournay was both product of and participant in the Utrecht Enlightenment, J.G.A Pocock's term for the temporary harmony that prevailed in European politics at the beginning of the eighteenth century, when the continent resembled a confederation of states with mutual commercial objectives, as well as the theories of cosmopolitanism and commercial sociability that emerged out of this conjuncture.⁸ Certainly there is evidence to suggest that Gournay's commercial education in Cadiz provided the basis for his mature theory of the market, in which producers, traders and consumers efficiently allocated their resources in response to prices, the most accurate indication of changing needs and preferences. The organization of his firm, *Jamets, Verduc Vincent et Compagnie*, was typical for Cadiz; it was in partnership, through a shared account with Paris banks, with merchant houses in Marseille, Amsterdam, and other secondary destinations for Spanish American goods. Through correspondence, the Cadiz merchant would find out the prices for various goods (silver, tobacco, indigo, cochineal) across Europe, compare them with the prices and quality of goods of the latest shipment from Veracruz, and perform arbitrage wherever possible. From the perspective of the individual firm, these trades functioned like Braudel's "market economy, with its many

⁸ J.G.A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion. Vol. 1. The Enlightenments of Edmund Gibbon (1737-1764)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 109-12.

horizontal communications between the different markets” that enabled merchants to chart the fluctuations of supply, demand and prices.⁹ And as we will see, for Gournay the market was both economically efficient and morally beneficial, in that it punished fraud, encouraged honesty and generated trust.

And yet to depict Cadiz as a domain of market exchange and *doux commerce* would be to provide only a partial interpretation of Gournay’s intellectual formation. Commercial affairs there were not simply a matter of supply and demand; they required deep reserves of credit and capital, and relied on power, privilege, and the state. Cadiz was as much market as “antimarket,” “where the great predators roam and the law of the jungle operates”—and where, according to Braudel, capitalism has always been on home ground.¹⁰ Nor was the “Utrecht Enlightenment” as irenic as Pocock implies. The threat of war escalated throughout the 1730s, in anticipation of the end of the thirty-year *asiento* contract granted to Britain at Utrecht, conferring a monopoly on trading slaves to Spanish America. France had long harbored ambitions of commercially subsuming Spain and its empire, and the imminent weakening of Britain’s hold on the slave trade renewed aspirations that it could secure direct and near exclusive access to Spanish America, both as a source of tropical commodities and as an outlet for textiles. Nor were these hopes misplaced. Thanks in large part to its growing community in Cadiz, France became, and remained throughout the eighteenth century, the principal provider of finished textiles to Spain and its American colonies.¹¹ As early as 1714 the French consul estimated that two thirds of

⁹ Fernand Braudel, *The Wheels of Commerce: Civilization & Capitalism: 15th–18th Century*, Vol 2. (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 225-9.

¹⁰ Ibid. 229-30.

¹¹ Henri Sée, “Esquisse de l’histoire du commerce français à Cadix et dans l’Amérique espagnole au XVIIIe siècle,” *Revue d’histoire moderne*, T. 3e, No. 13 (Jan. - Feb., 1928), 13-31; Albert Girard, *Le commerce français à Séville et Cadix au temps des Habsbourg: contribution à l’étude du commerce étranger en Espagne aux XVIe et XVIIe siècles* (Paris: Bocard, 1932); Crouzet, “Angleterre et France au XIIIe siècle,” 263; Didier Ozanam, “La colonie française de Cadix au XVIIIe siècle, d’après un document inédit (1777),” *Mélanges de la Casa de Velazquez*, tome 4 (1968), 259-348; Carlos Malamud, *Cádiz y Saint Malo en el Comercio Colonial Peruano: 1698-1725* (Cádiz: Diputación

merchandise loaded onto fleets destined for Spanish America was controlled by French trading houses. By the middle of the century even Spanish merchants had conceded French superiority.¹² However informally, Cadiz belonged to France's commercial empire.

Compared to Ile Bourbon, the politics and geography of the trades that ran through Cadiz required an alternative approach to empire; the old regime state and its elite *négociants* had to resort to different methods within their imperial repertoire to wield power there. As we have seen, exclusive companies sought to manage global markets through vertical integration, encompassing as many links in the commodity chain as possible. They exercised total control over production and dictated the conditions of consumption through price-fixing. In the commodity chains that ran through Cadiz this vertically integrated company form was not an option. The Spanish controlled supply, and prices varied across Europe. Within these constraints, the wealthiest French merchant houses—the houses that the French state cared about—had three principal tasks. From France they imported textiles that were then sent to markets around the Iberian peninsula and across the Atlantic. From the fleets that arrived periodically from Veracruz they purchased silver and *fruits des indes* (upon which purchases that Spanish crown exacted a 4 per cent tariff), in order to reexport them to France and other markets in Europe. And finally, more a banking operation than a strictly commercial one, they would raise loans and insurance to cover these pan-European and, occasionally, transatlantic trades. Thanks to their importance to the old regime economy as a whole, merchant houses were not left to their own devices in ensuring the success of these operations. In reality, the wealthy societies formed a community, a

Provincial, 1986); Stanley J. Stein & Barbara H Stein, *Silver, Trade, and War: Spain and America in the Making of Modern Europe* (Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 109-16; idem, *Apogee of Empire: Spain and New Spain in the Age of Charles III, 1759-1789* (Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 305-35.

¹² Ozanam, "La colonie française de Cadix," 275.

“French nation” in Cadiz, that was closely monitored by the French state, and that served as an effective agent of French global power.

The French nation in Cadiz had the same structure as its counterpart in the Levant, with a representative assembly that discussed collective affairs, and two elected deputies that managed a budget to fund public ceremonies, the upkeep of the French chapel, and aid for compatriots in difficulty.¹³ In the 1740s there were around 900 French men and women (though overwhelmingly men) in Cadiz, but not all of them belonged to “the nation.” Membership was essentially determined by wealth. Only the *négociants en gros* who facilitated the imports and exports of essential commodities—silver and dyes—enjoyed the privileges and protection that came with being part of the nation. Small merchants, shop owners and artisans were excluded. The nation therefore consisted of only 50 societies. In 1746 Maurepas, the minister of the marine, expressed concern that this was still too many, and that the credibility of French commerce was being jeopardized by the membership of merchant houses with insufficient capital.¹⁴ In reply the consul reassured Maurepas that the *corps des négociants en gros* was in turn structured by its own internal hierarchy of four classes, organized strictly according to wealth. A document from 1771 provides approximate estimates of the capitalization for each class: societies in the first class were worth around 200,000 piastres, or 800,000 l.t.; in the second class 75,000 piastres; in the third 40,000; and in the fourth 20,000.¹⁵ As Maurepas was informed by his consul, the twelve houses of the first class tightly controlled French commerce. Between them they “received more merchandise... than the rest of the nation put together.”¹⁶

¹³ Yves Debbash, *La nation française en Tunisie (1577-1835)* (Paris: Sirey, 1957).

¹⁴ Maurepas to J.B. Partyet, 1st May 1746, AN Mar. B7 183 f211; idem., 10th July 1746, AN Mar. B7 183 f 327. Maintaining oligopolistic conditions was a general policy of Maurepas towards commerce through Spain. See also “Mémoire pour servir le commerce de France en Espagne,” Payot to Maurepas, Valencia, 1746. Cornell University, The Maurepas Collection, Box 15, Folder 31.

¹⁵ Ozanam, “La colonie française de Cadix,” 275.

¹⁶ J.B. Partyet to Maurepas, 4th April 1746, AN Aff. étr., B1 263.

These were the societies that mattered. They were the tools of the state in Cadiz and in all of the markets that ran through it, and as such they required all the protection that Maurepas could afford. Gournay's company, *Jamets, Verduc Vincent*, was a member of this mercantile elite, the first class of the French nation in Cadiz.

George V. Taylor once argued that the *société en commandite*, the institutional form of a partnership like *Jamets, Verduc Vincent*, "met all the needs of merchant capitalism" in old regime France, which he contrasted with the "court capitalism" of state-backed trading enterprises like the Compagnie des Indes.¹⁷ Were they really so different? Certainly, there was a sense amongst merchants in commercial centers like Saint Malo, Bordeaux and Cadiz that their affairs contrasted with whatever arrangements were devised at Versailles. This perceived distinction inspired countless polemics against monopolies, including the Gournay circle's attacks on the Compagnie des Indes in the 1750s. And as early as 1733 we find in the archives of the *Jamets, Verduc Vincent* firm one functionary (quite plausibly a young Gournay) advising a correspondent against investing in the Compagnie des Philippines, since it was better to make a profit from one's own industry (*à faire valoir son argent par son industrie*) than to abandon one's capital to the administration of others.¹⁸ But functionaries of the French nation in Cadiz were not so dissimilar to someone like Castanier in their relationships with power; they were not shy in appealing to the state to organize credit, to endorse hierarchies and reputations, and to aid and ease the insufficiency of accumulation, whenever the need arose.¹⁹ With the state's protection they constituted an oligopoly, an expression of French power that was indeed distinct from the Compagnie des Indes, but by no means therefore independent of the state and its

¹⁷ George V. Taylor, "Types of Capitalism in Eighteenth Century France," *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 79, No. 312 (Jul., 1964), 483 and 487.

¹⁸ CCIMP, Fonds Roux, LIX 818, 4th August 1733.

¹⁹ As was true of practically all merchants engaged in overseas trade. See Hirsch, "Les milieux du commerce," 1359.

strategic interests. And as a state-backed oligopoly they had plenty of capital, and plenty of ways to put it to work beyond Cadiz.

The Cochineal Commodity Chain

One of the most lucrative and strategically important trades that this oligopoly managed was that of cochineal. French merchants scarcely knew what this commodity was or where it came from. But that didn't stop them from using their resources—wealth, information, coordination and state protection—to capture profits at the many stages of cochineal's circulation between Oaxaca and (as a component of red textiles) the Levant. From Cadiz they operated in what Immanuel Wallerstein has called an “intermediary market,” in which despite having little to no control over the supply of commodities from across the Atlantic, they nevertheless struggled to “wrest from the seller a proportion of the profit realized from all prior labour processes throughout the commodity chain.”²⁰ Through these struggles they managed over the course of the post-Utrecht decades to achieve commercial hegemony over the principal markets for cochineal, even though its production remained resolutely in the Spanish empire, and well beyond the formal claims of French influence.

Spain had jealously guarded the supply of cochineal from the earliest years of American conquest. Pre-Columbian Aztecs had domesticated the cochineal insect, which is roughly 10 per cent carminic acid, on nopal cactus plantations, and had used the dyestuff widely in cloth production. Under Spanish rule and until the nineteenth century, production was almost exclusively concentrated in the hilly terrains of Oaxaca. Cultivation was labor intensive and required expertise, and so the colonial elite delegated the task to indigenous peasants, whom they

²⁰ Immanuel Wallerstein, *Historical Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 29.

enlisted and controlled through the *repartimiento* system, in which small loans were extended in return for the regular tribute of cochineal. There were several harvests a year. Each cycle lasted around three months, between the introduction of the pregnant female cochineal to the nopalera at the beginning to when thousands of fully grown offspring were assiduously plucked off the cactus leaf at the end, leaving a portion to multiply for the next harvest. (The last harvest of the cycle was the lowest in quality.) Once collected, the cochineal were placed in a basket and dunked in hot water. Their corpses would be left to dry in the sun. Alternatively, they would be cooked in bread ovens. The technique depended on the color and quality of the harvest. Peasants carried the dried, crushed cadavers overland to sell them at markets to district magistrates, the *alcaldes mayores*, in exchange for a further extension of credit. This was how the cochineal first appeared to merchants: a mass of silvery powder to be inspected, weighed, and wrapped in leather *zurrones* (small leather packages that were sewn together) with a royal seal. Muleteers transported the precious cargo across Mexico to Veracruz, where it would be assessed, insured, and shipped across the Atlantic. Even before the product had reached the Gulf of Mexico it had passed through a number of markets and inspections, its cottage-industry origins long forgotten.²¹

For the countless intermediaries in the commodity chain, these origins were of little importance. What mattered was that cochineal was light, portable and hugely valuable. Pound for pound it was worth more than gold.²² Its initial value to Europeans stemmed from the demand for brilliant, durable scarlets amongst princes, nobles, and armies.²³ Although some historians

²¹ R.A. Donkin, "An Ethnogeographical Study of Cochineal and the Opuntia Cactus," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol 67, No. 5 (1977), 1-84; Jeremy Baskes, *Indians, Merchants, and Markets: A Reinterpretation of the Repartimiento and Spanish-Indian Economic Relations in Colonial Oaxaca, 1750-1821* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

²² Carlos Marichal, "Mexican Cochineal and the European Demand for American Dyes, 1550-1850."

²³ John Munro, "The Medieval Scarlet and the Economics of Sartorial Splendor," in N. B. Harte and K. G. Ponting (eds.), *Cloth and Clothing in Medieval Europe* (London: Heinemann, 1983).

have claimed that within fifty years of its arrival in Europe in the sixteenth century cochineal had displaced kermes (also an insect, but indigenous to Europe) as a source for red dye, this does not seem to have occurred in the Languedoc until the eighteenth century.²⁴ By then, a deepening market of wealthy, fashion-conscious consumers had effectively tied the fates of Oaxacan peasants to European proto-industrialization in regions like the English west country and the Languedoc. Statesmen recognized the relationship between the transatlantic trade in cochineal, domestic improvement, and market dominance in textiles. Maurepas's protection of the "first class" of merchants in Cadiz was in part designed to ensure that they could purchase sufficient quantities for French manufacturers, who in turn had, since 1712, enjoyed an exemption from the *droits d'entrée* levied on cochineal imports.²⁵ Awareness of the commodity's importance extended beyond the state. In the fourth volume of his history of insects (published in 1738), Réaumur reckoned that cochineal was "more useful than silver or gold," and estimated that in the average year roughly 880,000 pounds, or 400 tonnes, of cochineal arrived in Cadiz from the New World. At around 21 l.t. per pound for the best quality (typically three quarters of the supply), that amounted to an annual market value of over 15 million l.t..²⁶ Perhaps more striking still is a figure that can be deduced from Réaumur's calculations. Every twelve months, over 5.2 billion individual cochineal insects were shipped to the manufacturing districts of Europe where, in response to consumers' demands for crimson hues, they were soaked into fashionable textiles. Five billion dead bugs across the Atlantic, each year, for red cloth.

²⁴ Judith Hofenk de Graaff, "The Chemistry of Red Dye-Staffs in Medieval and Early Modern Europe," in Harte and Ponting (eds.), *Cloth and Clothing in Medieval Europe*, 75; Pierre-Etienne Stockland, "Statecraft and Insect Oeconomies in the Global French Enlightenment (1670-1815)," (PhD Dissertation, Columbia University, 2018), 177-86.

²⁵ Jean-Michel Minovez, *La puissance du midi: drapiers et draperies de Colbert à la Révolution* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2012), 115-7.

²⁶ René Antoine Ferchault de Réaumur, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire des insectes, tome quatrième: Histoire des Gallinsectes, de Progallinsectes, et des Mouches à deux ailes* (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1738), 105-7.



Fig. 3.1. A contemporary depiction of a cochineal harvest. *Pintura del beneficio de la grana cochinilla en Mexico, ca. 1775*. Edward E. Ayer Digital Collection, Newberry Library.

And all of them—theoretically, at least—came through Cadiz. Huge profits could be made on cochineal there, with so much of Europe’s textile industry dependent on this monopsonistic intermediary market. But they weren’t guaranteed. Like all business in Cadiz, the cochineal trade was “*lucratif mais aléatoire*.”²⁷ During war the risk of capture and destruction pushed up insurance rates to over 30 per cent.²⁸ Even during peacetime the commodity chain was impossible to control or predict. There were simply too many variables: the quality and volume of harvests, the timing of shipments from Veracruz, the shifting costs of taxes, transport, and tribute at various points between Oaxaca and Cadiz. Merchants like Gournay had to make calculations based on what little information they had about these contingencies, and wherever possible they tried to turn them to their advantage.

Opportunities presented themselves in surprising forms. In July 1733 a hurricane tore through the Bahamas and destroyed the entire Spanish fleet that had left Havana just two days before. The fleet consisted of thirty-one ships: eighteen belonging to the king, thirteen to an assortment of merchants. Some managed to run aground on sandbanks in the Cayo de Viboras (present day Long Key), assembling salvage camps where the cargo could be rescued while help arrived from Havana. Waiting there for return passage, a sailor composed an epic poem in which he described “swollen bodies washed up by the sea” and estimated that 150 crew members of his ship alone had died.²⁹

In Cadiz, however, Gournay’s firm was more concerned with insect casualties. The fleet had been carrying a considerable cargo worth up to 16 million piastres (roughly 60 million l.t.) including 2 million piastres worth of cochineal. This was a surprise: just six months earlier the

²⁷ Henri Sée, “Esquisse de l’histoire du commerce français à Cadix,” 23.

²⁸ Baskes, *Indians, Merchants, and Markets*, 163.

²⁹ Jerry Gurulé, “Joseph Ignacio de Toca Velasco’s Triaca producida de un veneno, Naufragio de española flota: a critical edition and translation,” (PhD Dissertation, University of New Mexico, 1997).

Vincent firm reported rumors that Oaxacan rains had destroyed harvests.³⁰ Upon hearing of the hurricane, the firm instructed its trading partner in Marseille, the immensely wealthy Georges Roux, to hold on to whatever cochineal he still had, as the price was sure to increase with the interruption of supply. This was welcome news to Roux, who for years had been struggling to find outlets for cochineal-dyed textiles and raw cochineal in the Levant thanks to an ongoing Ottoman-Safavid conflict.³¹ For the next six months partners speculated on the market effects of natural disaster on one side of the Atlantic and of war on the other side of the Mediterranean, and how best they might be able “to profit from the great revolution that there will be on this grain.” Ultimately, the revolution never came. No one could say how long rescue operations would take, or what the quality of the surviving merchandise was like.³² Although not for lack of trying, Roux and the Vincent firm failed to benefit from this catastrophe.

The events of 1733 encapsulate the vast geography and contingencies of the commodity chain. Merchant houses in Cadiz had no choice but to operate between fixed but inscrutable poles of production and consumption, trying to find portents of profit or loss in news of bad weather and war. And yet by the middle of the eighteenth century, France had managed to achieve a commanding position at both ends of the cochineal market, in Spanish America and the Levant. The clout of the French nation in Cadiz was crucial in this endeavor. But how exactly did merchants like Gournay come to master this lucrative, convoluted and strategically important trade? Broadly, they had two techniques, and both of them were a function of their oligopolistic status. They could collaborate with the state and other elite merchants to crawl up the value chain

³⁰ Jamets, Verduc Vincent to Roux, 3rd, 17th & 24th March 1733. CCIMP, Fonds Roux, LIX 818.

³¹ Jamets, Verduc Vincent to Roux, 17th March & 8th April 1733. CCIMP, Fonds Roux, LIX 818. For more on Roux, see Charles Carrière and Michel Goury, *Georges Roux, dit de Corse. L'étrange destin d'un armateur marseillais (1703-1792)* (Marseille, Éditions Jeanne Laffitte, 1990).

³² Jamets, Verduc Vincent to Roux, 6th & 18th October, 29th December 1733. CCIMP, Fonds Roux, LIX 818, 6th & 18th October, 29th December 1733.

and get as close to the source of supply in Spanish America as possible, capturing, in Wallerstein's terms, as much surplus as possible from prior stages in cochineal's transport from Oaxaca. Or they could use their wealth and influence to crawl down the value chain and dictate how cochineal was used in the production of finished textiles. If the first technique informed Gournay's understanding of the relationship between the state, overseas trade and domestic improvement, then the second turned his attention to finer details—to the quality and application of cochineal itself, and to the representation of those factors in prices.

The Science of Use Value

It is worth dwelling on the European ignorance of the true nature of cochineal. Merchants and manufacturers encountered it only as a grey, powdery substance, which for centuries they understood to be the dried remnants of berries, seeds, or grains. It required a combination of microscopic observation, beginning in Holland in the 1670s, and the eventual publication in 1729 of Melchior de Ruuscher's *Natuurlijke Historie*, incorporating testimony from Oaxacan notables, for the matter to be settled in scientific circles.³³ No doubt the undignified origins of this expensive, brilliant dye came as a shock to some European elites. Montesquieu once compared Voltaire "to one of those cochineals who produces nature's most beautiful color, but who is nothing but a worm."³⁴ (He understood, at least, that both were lowly creatures.) Having worked out the extent and value of the cochineal trade, Réaumur lamented this prolonged

³³ Jordan Kellman, "Nature, Networks and Expert Testimony in the Colonial Atlantic The Case of Cochineal," *Atlantic Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 4, (December 2010), 373-95.

³⁴ Montesquieu, *Pensées*, quoted in Jean Ehrard, *L'Esprit des mots: Montesquieu en lui-même et parmi les siens* (Geneva: Droz, 1998), 198.

confusion and in part put it down to a lack of collaboration between commerce and science, but egregiously laid the ultimate blame on “ignorant” Oaxacan cultivators.³⁵

In reality, European merchants existed on the “knowledge periphery” of tropical commodity production, insect or otherwise.³⁶ This began to change around the middle of the century, after naturalists like Réaumur pointed out the potential connections between sciences like botany and entomology and commercial and political power. Daubenton, in his *Encyclopédie* article of 1753, felt confident enough to venture that “there is now no doubt that cochineal is a dried insect,” and by the following decade at least some manufacturers in the Languedoc knew that they were dealing with dead bugs.³⁷ In 1777 a lawyer and amateur botanist, Thierry de Menonville, even went on a mission to Oaxaca to bring back the precious insects to Saint Domingue. Menonville died two years later, and so did his loot, and that was about as close as any European empire got to “naturalizing” cochineal by its own initiative.³⁸ And yet those empires—and not just the Spanish—still managed to control and profit enormously from its trade. Ultimately, the fact that this commodity chain was so lucrative to European states, and so important to European manufacturers and consumers, and yet even European naturalists scarcely knew what the commodity itself was, tells us a great deal about the epistemology of merchant capital.

³⁵ Réaumur, *Histoire des Gallinsectes*, 98-103.

³⁶ Edward D. Melillo, “Global Entomologies: Insects, Empires and the Synthetic Age in World History,” *Past & Present*, 223 (May, 2014), 234.

³⁷ Louis-Jean-Marie Daubenton, “Cochenille,” *Encyclopédie*, vol. III, 559 (November, 1753); Dominique Cardon, *Mémoires de teinture: Voyage dans le temps chez un maître des couleurs* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2013), 48.

³⁸ Nicolas Joseph Thiéry de Menonville, *Traité de la culture de nopal, et de l'éducation de la cochenille dans les colonies françaises de l'Amérique, précédé d'un voyage à Guaxaca* (Cap-Français: Vve Herbault, 1786), 2 vols; James E. McClellan III, *Colonialism and Science: Saint Domingue in the Old Regime* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010 [1992]), 154-5; Londa Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 39-44.

Braudel, following the research of the economist Simon Kuznets, argued that early-modern capitalism was on “home ground” in long distance trade because there were comparatively meagre returns in agriculture and technology. Pre-industrial economies were vulnerable to the “deterioration of fixed capital”: rudimentary machines such as mills and looms succumbed to wear and tear and required constant upkeep; the fertility of land diminished year to year, hence crop rotations, fertilizers, and constant ploughing. A great deal of a society’s savings, its accumulated wealth, went towards replacing this “worn-out fixed capital.”³⁹ Captive markets (and, in the case of agriculture, necessity) might justify such constant maintenance. The vast, capital-intensive sugar plantations of the Antilles, for instance, could rely on the demand of European consumers. But without such assurances, investments in land and infrastructure could very easily turn in to losses—as the Compagnie des Indes discovered on Ile Bourbon. And so capital flooded into the sphere of circulation. As we will see, merchants still sought to control production where it was profitable; but they were loath to assume its costs. Instead, the primary function of capital was, as Grenier has put it, to “enable the control of the circulation of a product across its different stages of valorization.”⁴⁰ In other words, those who deployed capital sought to influence as much of the sphere of exchange as possible: to capture profits on the trade of a commodity as it traversed heterogeneous markets, just as French merchants moved up and down the cochineal value chain from Cadiz. Since the success of these merchants’ affairs depended so much on the terms by which the cochineal was traded, it is little wonder that they didn’t really care how it was produced—whether this grey powder had been, at some point, on the other side of the Atlantic, a bug or a berry.

³⁹ Braudel, *The Wheels of Commerce*, 242-7; Simon Kuznets, “Capital Formation in Modern Economic Growth,” in Kuznets, *Population, Capital, and Growth: Selected Essays*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973); idem, *Economic Growth of Nations: Total Output and Production Structure* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1971).

⁴⁰ Grenier, *L’économie d’Ancien Régime*, 89-90.

That is not to say, however, that merchants like Gournay were entirely unconcerned with the properties of cochineal as a commodity. Anthropologists distinguish between systems of exchange that have ordinal rankings, in which quality matters most, and cardinal rankings, defined by quantitative, commensurate values.⁴¹ The task of the merchant in Cadiz was to translate the former into the latter. Cochineal shipments contained different varieties of powder, which were categorized by merchants according to features that were both objective (dust, moisture) and subjective (“beautiful”), ranging from *Grana fina, ou misteca très belle* (the best and most expensive cochineal) to *Cochenille fine avariée, Poussière de cochenille* and *Cochenille sylvestre* (the worst and cheapest).⁴² Despite Réaumur’s complaint about the lack of engagement between science and commerce, a great deal of this translation work was therefore achieved through the techniques of natural history: through observation, description, classification. Foucault argued that in the eighteenth century this science consisted of “nothing other than the nomination of the visible,” and as such it was fundamentally compatible with Enlightenment political economy: both, for the most part, stayed on the surface of things, avoiding the “invisible tissues” and anatomies of beings or the “hidden abode of production” of the economy.⁴³ As if naturalists of the market, Cadiz merchants classified the cochineal that was

⁴¹ Chris Gregory, “Exchange and Reciprocity,” in Tim Ingold (ed.), *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 1994), 911-40; C.A. Bayly, “‘Archaic’ and ‘Modern’ Globalization in the Eurasian and African Arena, c. 1750–1850,” in A.G. Hopkins (ed.), *Globalization in World History* (London: Pimlico, 2002), 71 n44.

⁴² Gilbert Buti, “Perception, construction et utilisation de l’espace. D’Oaxaca à Bassorah: les négociants marseillais et la cochenille mexicaine au XVIII^e siècle” in Paul Aubert, Gérard Chastagnaret et Olivier Raveux (eds.), *Construire des mondes: Élités et espaces en Méditerranée, XVI^e-XX^e siècle* (Aix-en Provence: Publications de l’Université de Provence, 2005), 254. These variations were the result of a number of factors: moisture and dust gathered in transit, adulteration by intermediaries trying to cheat regulations, or whether the cochineal had actually been cultivated or simply found in Oaxaca. See Jeremy Baskes, *Indians, Merchants, and Markets*, 139-50.

⁴³ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1994), 144. There were, of course, exceptions within Enlightenment political economy to this tendency to stay on the surface of things. See especially Mandeville, who scrutinized not the “smooth white skin” of “political bodies and civil societies” but their “small trifling films and little pipes that are either overlooked, or else seem inconsiderable to vulgar eyes.” Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees, and Other Writings*, E.J. Hundert (ed.) (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 19.

visible to them. Not to find the right name, necessarily, but to find the right price, which amounted to much the same thing. As Linnaeus put it, “the general name is, as it were, the official currency of our botanical republic.”⁴⁴

Prices had to represent quality accurately, because cochineal was such an important component of textile manufacturing. The most expensive dyestuff available, it was measured by the pound rather than the quintal (100 lbs, the unit of measurement used for most bulk trades). Manufacturers altered the amount and quality of cochineal they used in their mordant or dye baths depending on the desired color of cloth, and would often recycle the bath two or three times for lower quality colors, soaking as much dye out of the cochineal as possible. Red cloths came in a variety of shades, the palette reading like an extension of the pseudo-naturalist classifications and descriptions that Cadiz merchants had applied to the raw material: scarlets, crimsons, and *soupevins* for the first round of dyeing; *fleur de grenade* (pomegranate flower), *langouste* (spiny lobster), *orange*, *abricot*, and *cerise* for the second round; *café au lait* and *gorge de pigeon* for the dregs. These distinctions were not frivolous. Regulations prohibited manufacturers from making high quality reds with less than $1\frac{3}{4}$ lbs of cochineal—or 7 to 7.5 per cent of the weight of dry cloth. (Recall that one pound could cost as much as 21 l.t..) Standards were vigorously policed, especially for textiles that were exported to the Levant, where French producers catered to the high end of the market. Inspectors visually assessed cloths and compared them with a standard sample, punishing suspected frauds whose cloths seemed *affamées*, lacking the requisite intensity of color.⁴⁵ The regulations also policed the domestic “hierarchy of commodities” that corresponded to the social hierarchies of consumers, where more than value for money was at stake in purchasing red cloth. Markets in luxury goods like

⁴⁴ Linnaeus, *Philosophie botanique*, section 284, quoted in Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 141.

⁴⁵ Cardon, *Mémoires de teinture*, 113-28.

high-end textiles operated according to “an economy of aristocratic reference,” in which subtle gradations of color mattered a great deal—especially for a color so associated with courtly display and prestige.⁴⁶ Distinctions between scarlet, spiny lobster and *gorge de pigeon* were expressions of both the respective amounts of cochineal in each cloth, as well as the status of their consumers.

From Cadiz, merchants like Gournay took an active interest in this entire process of production and consumption. Their expertise in cochineal entailed not just the ability to make distinctions between the different qualities of the powder they bought, but also an understanding of how that powder was used in the manufacturing process, and how the finished textiles performed on different markets. Conferring with partners in the Languedoc and Picardie about production costs, regulations, color palettes, and shifts in consumers’ desires, they mastered what Grenier has called “the science of use value,” because in doing so they could control the valorization of cochineal after it left Cadiz, and even after it subsequently left France soaked into red cloth.⁴⁷ Comprehensive control of the cochineal trade therefore required an understanding of the rhythms of and relationships between heterogeneous aspects of global trade: the Spanish fleet and galleon system, the distribution of goods from Cadiz around Europe, textiles manufacturing, and export markets for finished cloth in the Levant and America.

Gournay, it seems, had mastered this science by the 1740s, over a decade after starting his apprenticeship at *Jamets, Verduc Vincent*. War between Spain and Britain, which had started in 1739 when Philip V of Spain annulled Britain’s *asiento* contract four years early, presented French merchants with an opportunity to consolidate their control over the Spanish textile industry. This control was nearly total: French manufacturers used cochineal from Oaxaca and

⁴⁶ Grenier, *L’économie d’ancien régime*, 74-8.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 131-5.

wool from Spain to make finished cloths that they then exported back to the Iberian peninsula and Spanish America, an international division of labor that was testament to the success of French textiles regulations in maintaining quality and in deploying France's aristocratic hierarchy of tastes and values for commercial imperialism abroad—yet another example of the old regime's capacity for imperial bricolage. Gournay worried, however, that the near absence of British competition was both a blessing and a curse for French manufacturers, who were seemingly taking their market supremacy for granted. In 1742 he scolded a manufacturing partner in the Languedoc, M. Mailhol, for producing red cloths—"Bayettes"—that were insufficiently "bright and clear." Gournay attached a sample of superior English scarlet that the producer ought to imitate, along with instructions for weaving and dying, and warned Mailhol that unless he improved "the reputation of his products" then he would lose all of his outlets "with the first appearance of peace between Spain and England."⁴⁸ It was in Mailhol's interest to listen. The year before, Gournay and Roux, his Marseille partner, had lobbied the controller general, Philibert Orry, and the French ambassador to Spain on behalf of Mailhol's merchandise. Writing to Roux about their campaign, Gournay conceded that it was "doubtful we'll be able to get an exclusive privilege for the merchandise," but felt that a reduction of import and export duties was entirely possible.⁴⁹ Mailhol was therefore entirely dependent on Gournay both for primary materials and for access to a market as large as Spanish America.

In Gournay's mastery of the science of cochineal's use value we can identify some of the features that would come to define his political economy: a preoccupation with the Levant and Spanish America as markets for Languedoc textiles, the role of price in representing quality, and,

⁴⁸ "Mémoire sur les Bayettes"; "Copie d'une lettre écrite à Mss J & F Mailhol par Mss Verduc Vincent & Cie de Cadiz le 20 février 1742." Verduc Vincent et Cie to Roux, CCIMP, Fonds Roux, LIX 846.

⁴⁹ Verduc Vincent et Cie to Roux, 8th August 1741. CCIMP, Fonds Roux, LIX 846.

wherever possible, the domination of merchant capital over production. As far as the future intendant was concerned, it was completely rational that the warp and weft and pigmentation of a cloth would be stipulated by a merchant in Cadiz, and not by the person actually making the cloth in the Languedoc. For Gournay, merchants should take precedence over all other interests in the production of a commodity—including inspectors. As we will see, one of Gournay's priorities as intendant was to dismantle the regulations that monitored the red cloths sent from Marseille to the Languedoc. Given his familiarity with the valorization process of cochineal downstream from Cadiz, which relied heavily on the enforced observance of color and quality, Gournay's hostility to these regulations might come as a surprise. Why would he undermine a system that had been so integral to the success of the French cochineal trade?

Gournay made his reasons clear in his *Remarques* on the translation of Josiah Child's *Discourse of Trade*, which he prepared in 1753 for Daniel-Charles Trudaine, his protector and, as director of commerce, his superior. Both the translation and the extensive remarks have been recognized as a statement of Gournay's principles, a manifesto aimed at fellow ministers outlining why the French economy should be organized around competition, rather than regulation and fixed prices.⁵⁰ Although they went unpublished, the *Remarques* played a crucial role in the formation of the circle of writers and administrators that formed around Gournay at the between 1752 and 1754. Unsurprisingly, then, the *Remarques* of the intendant were broader in perspective, more moral and political, than the detailed correspondence of the younger merchant in Cadiz—or indeed of Hégouerty's writings, which resolutely described global trade from the perspective of the merchant. By contrast, the Gournay was willing to indulge in the normative, categorical statements reminiscent of Melon's *Essai politique*. Commerce, the reader

⁵⁰ Simone Meyssonier (ed.), *Traité sur le commerce de Josiah Child, suivis des Remarques de Vincent de Gournay* (Paris: Harmattan, 2008).

is told in the *Remarques*, is founded “as much on fantasies as on needs that continuously change,” and so its management should be entrusted to merchants uninhibited by regulations to respond to the shifting desires of consumers. Gournay extrapolated from his expertise in cochineal—in textiles dyeing—to illustrate his main argument about the mistaken basis and harmful effects of regulations. Dyeing, Gournay wrote, and as he had learned indirectly from Cadiz, is “the most delicate profession of manufacturers, and the one in which it is easiest to cheat.” But just because a dyer could cheat, that didn’t mean he would. That assumption was at the basis of all regulations; it was “to treat the manufacturer as a rogue.” There were no such regulations in England, yet English dyers were twice as good as French ones, because a manufacturer who skimped on cochineal would get found out sooner or later, and people would stop buying his product. In all commercial nations where “merchandise is allowed to find its outlet,” Gournay argued, “it will always find one adequate to the time and material used in it.”⁵¹ A merchant who supervised production and knew his goods—who had mastered the science of use value—would always be able to realize the value of a commodity on the market.

The disastrous long-term effects of the deregulation of French trade with the Levant suggest that Gournay’s argument was overly optimistic.⁵² But such was the view from Cadiz, where Gournay and his fellow members of the French nation had the resources and the incentives to dictate terms to manufacturers. Without someone like Gournay’s help, how would someone like Mailhol react to the geopolitical contingencies and shifting consumer preferences that shaped the Spanish American or Levant textiles markets? For societies like *Jamets*, *Verduc* *Vincent*, the control of production by merchant capital was possible, and it made sense. Gournay

⁵¹ Gournay, “Remarques sur le chapitre 8e concernant la laine et les manufactures de laine,” Bibliothèque municipale de Saint-Brieuc, Fonds Gournay, M. 81 n16.

⁵² Philippe Minard, “Réputation, normes, et qualité dans l’industrie textile française au XVIIIe siècle,” in Alessandro Stanziani (ed.), *La qualité des produits en France (XVIIIe-XXe siècles)* (Paris: Belin, 2003), 69-89.

perhaps understandably thought that his expertise in the cochineal commodity chain could, once he became intendant, with an attentive public of ministers and writers, be applied to market behavior in general, as his moralistic *Remarks* suggest, or at least to France's other global markets. One anonymous memoir submitted to his bureau made the mistake of suggesting that the quality of indigo in Saint Domingue might improve if inspectors were appointed to supervise its cultivation; in the margins Gournay scribbled, "No inspectors, it would be a sure way of destroying the colonies."⁵³ French traders dominated cochineal markets without knowing anything about the bug itself. Why should indigo be any different? The author of the memoir redeemed himself by remarking that "the productions of the colonies will only be sought after because of their beauty, their quality, the good faith in which they are traded, or by their price."⁵⁴ Gournay could scarcely have put it better himself. The cochineal market taught him that the French economy could succeed overseas by relying on merchants who knew their markets, the quality of their goods, and the subtle language of price. And so that is what he theorized in his *Remarks* and tried to implement from Versailles.

Of course, the view from Cadiz was partial. Not all markets were situated at the crossroads of world trade, and nor were they overrun with "the most enlightened merchants in Europe." More to the point, nor did Gournay's public ideology of the market truly reflect his commercial education. Scaling up from his experience, abstracting principles from the contingencies of trade, significant details got obscured. What he left out of the *Remarks* was any concession that perhaps the domination of production by merchants worked best when those merchants had the ear of the controller general—when Gournay could lobby Philibert Orry on

⁵³ "Indigo, Coton, Rocou," Bibliothèque municipale de Saint-Brieuc, Fonds Gournay, M. 83 n17 f 126-9.

⁵⁴ "Suite de la recapitulation des memoires sur les colonies françaises, ou on considere les moyens qu'il parait d'ici que la France peut employer pour tirer tout le parti possible de ces établissements," Bibliothèque municipale de Saint-Brieuc, Fonds Gournay, M. 83 n17 f 140-2.

Mailhol's behalf. This was a benefit of belonging to an oligopoly like the French nation in Cadiz that was conspicuously absent from the arguments of the Gournay circle. Another benefit of oligopoly, one on which Gournay's career progress from merchant to statesmen turned, was the ability it bestowed upon its members not just to swim downstream from Cadiz and cultivate their expertise in prices and use values, but also to swim upstream: to cross the Atlantic and capture profits from Veracruz, all with the help of the French state.

Capital and Power

As the War of Ausrian Succession continued through the middle of the decade, Gounray had to abandon his hope that Mailhol's cloths would enjoy unrivalled access to Spanish American markets. The *flotas y galeones* system had been suspended, severing the connections of the Atlantic economy. French manufacturers lost outlets for their textiles, and the supply of gold, silver, and New World drugs dried up for Cadiz merchants. France eventually joined the war in 1744, by which point, as one merchant informed Maurepas, French commerce and manufacturing had lost 147 million l.t. as a result of disruptions to Atlantic trade.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, Maurepas continued to see the war as a geopolitical opportunity: a chance, as one memoire put it, to "re-establish the balance and harmony which should prevail among all the sovereigns of the Christian republic of Europe," to strengthen the Bourbon alliance between Spain and France against Protestant England, and, above all, to establish once and for all Rouen and the Languedoc as the manufacturing centers of the Spanish empire.⁵⁶ Without contradiction, Maurepas and his

⁵⁵ Fournier, "Mémoire pour faire connaître la situation actuelle du commerce maritime" (1745). Cornell University, The Maurepas Collection, Box 14, Folder 36. See also Joseph Pellerin to Maurepas, August 12th 1744. Cornell University, The Maurepas Collection, Box 14, Folder 21.

⁵⁶ "Mémoire sur divers articles concernant le commerce de l'Espagne," Cornell University, The Maurepas Collection, Box 16, Folder 1; Joseph Pellerin, "Explanation of abstract of orders to be sent from the Spanish court to Torres." Cornell University, The Maurepas Collection, Box 14, Folder 21.

advisers embraced allegiance with Spain while counting on the ongoing shortcomings of Spanish industry.⁵⁷ But the 147 million l.t. losses to French trade showed that Maurepas could not rely on his merchants in Cadiz to make this gambit pay off. Connoisseurship, the science of use value, and merchant domination of European production were of little help if Atlantic trade had dried up. French commerce needed to take control of the cochineal trade closer to its source, and to do that it needed to mobilize capital on a scale that was beyond the means of even the French nation in Cadiz.

The French solution to the scarcity of Atlantic trade during the War of Austrian Succession was testament to the state's willingness to step in to generate, protect, or revive markets that it deemed strategically or commercially important. This was, after all, the purpose of many of the policies and institutions in the old regime's imperial repertoire, including loans, subsidies, privileges, exemptions, and monopolies. The state, however, did not intervene everywhere. It was not a substitute for the market. Rather, it sought to stimulate commercial activity that it cared about the most, and invested in the commodities it deemed especially valuable.⁵⁸ For the Maurepas administration of the 1740s, cochineal was one such commodity. That much is clear from the tools that Maurepas used to reinvigorate its trade: not the subtle leverage of economic policies but the hard application of naval force.

Since the early 1740s, some prominent merchants, including Gournay, had been offering to take responsibility for the Spanish fleet, shipping necessities and munitions to Veracruz, where they would be sold for New World merchandise.⁵⁹ These plans coalesced in 1745 when

⁵⁷ Stein & Stein, *Apogee of Empire*, 322-35.

⁵⁸ Grenier, *L'économie d'ancien régime*, 97. See also Jeff Horn, *Economic Development in Early Modern France*.

⁵⁹ For Gournay's proposal, see Verduc Vincent et Cie to Roux, 9th August – 22nd November 1741. CCIMP, Fonds Roux, LIX 846. See also "Projet pour faire passer à la Veracruz le chargement de la flotte qui est actuellement à Cadiz, et pour en faire revenir en Europe les retours en espèces matières d'or et d'argent et des marchandises fines," 1741. Cornell University, The Maurepas Collection, Box 11, Folder 30.

Fournier, a merchant close to Maurepas, proposed an expedition to recover 200 million l.t. that was owed to French merchants from textiles sales but that was stuck in the ports of Spanish America, and to bring back much needed *fruits des Indes* for French manufacturers. Maurepas would provide a warship, and would send to the Spanish court an “intelligent man” to negotiate good terms and secure a convoy for security on the Atlantic crossings.⁶⁰ Whether because of his stature in Cadiz, his experience lobbying ministers on behalf of French merchants and manufacturers, or the machinations of patronage, Gournay was the man chosen for this diplomatic mission.⁶¹ The affair would be his swan song as a merchant, and signaled his entry into the upper echelons of old regime politics.

With the protection of the state secured in the form of the 48-canon *St Michel*, Gournay set about raising capital from a wide pool of investors (including a disgruntled Hégerty, who complained that “M. Vincent” had behaved towards him “with little delicacy”).⁶² Between June 1745 and July 1746, when the expedition was organized, Gournay traveled from Cadiz to Paris, Saint Malo, Rotterdam, London and Amsterdam, and urged associates like Roux to spread word of the venture to his powerful friends in Marseille and Italy. Gournay and Roux, for their part, decided to exploit this unique opportunity by leaving funds with an associate in Veracruz, “one of the richest businessmen in Mexico,” so that they could keep a foothold on the other side of the Atlantic when peace returned.⁶³ In June 1746 the *St Michel* left Brest for Cadiz, and from there travelled to Veracruz, loaded with 1.2 million l.t. worth of merchandise, a large portion of which

⁶⁰ Fournier, “Mémoire pour faire connaître la situation actuelle du commerce maritime,” 1745; idem., “Reflexions sur les moyens de sauver le debris du commerce en France,” October 1745. The memoirs can also be found at the Bibliothèque municipale de Saint-Brieuc, Fonds Gournay, M. 82, n29 & 30, ff 224-247.

⁶¹ As Simone Meyssonier has pointed out, the ambassador to Spain at the time was Louis-Guy de Guérapin de Vauréal, the Archbishop of Rennes, who had relations with the Vincent family of Saint Malo. See Meyssonier, “Vincent de Gournay, un intendant du commerce au travail,” in Charles et al, *Le cercle de Gournay*, 94-5.

⁶² BM Nancy, Fonds Lorraine, MS 1795, Famille O’Hegerty.

⁶³ Jacques-Claude-Marie Vincent [de Gournay] to Roux, 23rd January 1745 – 15th July 1747, CCIMP, Fonds Roux, LIX 511.

was made up of textiles from all over France, including Maillhol's "Bayettes." It returned the following September with 1.6 million piastres of silver as well as a wealth of other commodities, and 844 *zurrones* of cochineal—roughly a quarter of the typical annual peacetime supply for the whole of Europe.⁶⁴

For Gournay, the profitable return of the *St Michel* confirmed a prestigious reputation. Over the next few years his life would be transformed. In 1748 an associate of the Vincent firm in Cadiz, Jamets de Villebarre, died; Jacques Claude Marie inherited both his estate and title, becoming the Marquis de Gournay, and married his former colleague's widow, Clotilde, for good measure. (Family associations did after all meet some of the needs of merchant capitalists.) These were familiar forms of consolidation: commercial wealth found security through the tightening of patrimonial bonds and through its investment in the land, and the newly minted marquis abandoned the family business for a more prestigious career in Versailles. The *St Michel* affair was therefore a career turning point, and also a practical precursor to the latter half of the Gournay dictum: liberty and protection. Exclusive focus on the attacks of the Gournay circle on corporations like the Compagnie des Indes can give an exaggerated sense of merchant hostility to privilege and the structuring institutions of the old regime economy. But the ease with which Gournay collaborated with the Ministry of the Marine in 1746 should make us skeptical of any notion that he was a stranger to the administration of old regime France in the 1750s. He was already embedded in traditional circuits of wealth and power. And he benefited immensely from the state's willingness, in 1746 and beyond, to perpetuate the societies, hierarchies, and markets in which he operated.

⁶⁴ CCIMP, Fonds Roux. LIX 1085. See also Charles Carrière, *Négociants marseillais au XVIIIe siècle*, 549; Simone Meyssonier, *La balance et l'horloge: la genèse de la pensée libérale au XVIIIe siècle* (Montreuil: Editions de la Passion, 1989), 169-74.

The *St Michel* affair demonstrated that the relations of force created by capital extended from the Languedoc producer, to the merchant operating in global markets in Cadiz, and up to the French state. It also showed that those relations of force could work in both directions. In retrospect, the long-term significance of the *St Michel* affair lay not so much in Maurepas using the French nation in Cadiz to further the geopolitical ambitions of the French state as it was about the French nation in Cadiz, along with its network of clients and partners, gaining influence over the French state. Gournay's ascent to Versailles after 1746, as well as the policies and causes that he championed, was just the most obvious manifestation of the increasing political influence of actors along the cochineal commodity chain.

Take, for instance, the deregulation of trade with the Levant, perhaps the signature reform of Gournay's intendancy. For decades, the trade had been structured by a system of *arrangements*, including regulations on quality, the obligation to export via Marseille (exports via other ports were subject to a 20 per cent tariff), and the fixing of prices by commissioners in Levant. The *arrangements* had been instrumental in allowing Languedoc manufacturers to edge out British competition through the brightness and variety of colors used in their Londrins Seconds, a type of cloth that accounted for the vast majority of exports to the Levant in the eighteenth century.⁶⁵ (The name "Londrin" derived from *Londres* (London), and was used to denote cheaper broadcloths spun "in the English fashion" that began to appear in Levant markets in the seventeenth century.) It was widely acknowledged that French superiority derived especially from the quality of its cochineal-produced reds.⁶⁶ Yet Languedoc manufacturers began

⁶⁵ Edhem Eldem, *French Trade in Istanbul in the Eighteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 38; Charles Carrière, "La draperie languedocienne d'exportation," in Louis Cullen and Paul Butel (eds.), *Négoce et industrie en France et en Irlande aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles* (Paris: Editions du CNRS, 1980), 94.

⁶⁶ Ralph Davis, *Aleppo and Devonshire Square: English Traders in the Levant in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Macmillan, 1967), 100-6. It was common knowledge that color was the determining factor in succeeding in Levantine markets. As Jacques Savary's *Le parfait négociant* had informed its readers in 1675: "The Turks, the

to chafe at the *arrangements* in the late 1740s, when they claimed that they were being undercut in the Levant by cheaper English and Dutch alternatives, as trade resumed after the conclusion of the War of Austrian Succession. They wanted the state to relax regulations on the production of Londrins Seconds, and to allow manufacturers to export whatever range of qualities and prices they deemed convenient. To ensure the continued hegemony of French merchandise in the Levant, they claimed, producers should be motivated by initiative, emulation, profit, and the desires of consumers, not the stipulations of the state.

It was no coincidence that these demands resembled the arguments that Gournay would go on to make in his *Remarks* on Child. The cause of Languedoc producers was first articulated in a memoir submitted in August 1748 to Daniel-Charles Trudaine, the *intendant des finances* and *directeur du commerce* (and therefore Gournay's future superior), written by Germain Pinel, a manufacturer based in Carcassonne. Pinel had been in partnership with Jamets, Verduc Vincent since 1733 (if not before).⁶⁷ He had invested in the *St Michel* expedition.⁶⁸ He owned the Royal Manufactory at Bize operated by Jean Mailhol, who, if we recall, had been both the beneficiary of Gournay's lobbying and the subject of a scolding from the future intendant over the poor quality of his red cloths.⁶⁹ In short, Pinel's entire operation in the Languedoc was an extension of the oligopoly in Cadiz, the assistance of which allowed him to export his merchandise not just to the Levant but to Mexico, the Antilles, Canada, and China. When he died in 1774 he left behind a fortune of 1.3 million l.t..⁷⁰ Pinel was typical of the interests that Gournay represented—big

Armenians, and the Persians are very demanding concerning colors... It is the vividness of the colors that makes them [the cloths] sell easily." Quoted in Cardon, *Mémoires de teinture*, 13.

⁶⁷ The earliest mention of Pinel in the correspondence between the Vincent firm and Roux is Jamets, Verduc Vincent et Cie to Roux, 14th July 1733, CCIMP, Fonds Roux, LIX 818.

⁶⁸ Gournay to Roux, 4th June 1745 & 21st June 1745 CCIMP, Fonds Roux, LIX 511. See also the accounts for the *St Michel*, CCIMP, Fonds Roux, LIX 1085.

⁶⁹ Cardon, *Mémoires de teinture*, 8.

⁷⁰ Claude Marquié, *L'industrie textile carcassonnaise au XVIIIe siècle. Etude d'un groupe social: les marchands-fabricants* (Carcassonne: Société d'Etudes Scientifiques de l'Aude, 1993), 177-96.

capital, with global horizons—and by all accounts, the latter’s influence around Trudaine was a significant factor in the eventual dismantling of the *arrangements* governing trade to the Levant in 1757. But Pinel had the ear of Trudaine before Gournay began his tenure as intendant in 1751, and his associates enjoyed this access after Gournay abandoned his post in 1758.⁷¹ All of which suggests that the state cared about Gournay because it cared about the cochineal commodity chain and its attendant industries and markets, and not the other way around.

In sum, the *St Michel* expedition was not only an opportune collaboration between the state, the nation in Cadiz, and the Languedoc textiles industry; it also signaled the formation of an enduring coalition of interests in the pursuit of French commercial imperialism.

Administrators like Maurepas and Trudaine were increasingly convinced that large-scale manufacturers and *négociants en gros* knew best how to advance French interests in competitive markets overseas. With the Compagnie des Indes in arrears after the War of Austrian Succession, here was a technique within the old regime’s imperial repertoire that seemed to work. The cochineal commodity chain, from the Iberian Atlantic to the Levant, provided a model for the rest of the global economy.

Gournay was not a mere a beneficiary of this development—he was its most vocal and sophisticated advocate. His *Remarks*, the ur-text for the new ideology of wielding overseas power through the market, were littered with references to the Levant affair, that ideology’s *cause célèbre*.⁷² Although they went unpublished, Gournay’s extended commentary on Child’s

⁷¹ In 1759 Paul Gout, the successor of Mailhol at Pinel’s manufactory at Bize, with the intendant of the Languedoc having rejected his request to be allowed produce cheaper cloths, went over the intendant’s head and secured the permission of Trudaine. See Cardon, *Mémoires de teinture*, 8.

⁷² An observation made by Simone Meyssonier in “Vincent de Gournay, un intendant du commerce au travail,” in Charles et al, *Le cercle de Gournay*, 92. Gournay mentioned the Levant affair first in the Preface of the *Remarks*, and then in the chapters on Merchant Companies, on the Navigation Acts, on the Naturalization of Foreigners, on the Balance of Commerce, and on Colonies. See Meyssonier (ed.), *Traité sur le commerce de Josiah Child, suivis des Remarques de Vincent de Gournay*, 20, 131, 146, 182, 219 & 275.

Discourse on Trade circulated among intellectuals, leading to the formation of the stable of writers around the intendant who would go on to advocate the cause of the market in their own publications—such as Forbonnais’s *Questions sur le commerce des français au Levant* (1755)—and in venues like the *Journal oeconomique*. And it was thanks to the popularizing efforts of the Gournay circle that the market ideology endured beyond the fleeting preferences of Maurepas and Trudaine, and transcended its particular application to the Levant. It was in the public sphere that, for better or worse, Gournay’s ideals became the new common sense of French commercial imperialism.

A Concrete History of “The Market”

Historians have typically interpreted the Levant affair as being precipitated by Gournay’s desire to apply a market ideology to the long-standing regulatory apparatus of old regime France. They have detailed the processes by which the intendant made the case for these specific reforms to, successively, Maurepas, Trudaine, the writers who supported his agenda, and through them to the broader public. And as a result we have a comprehensive understanding of what the emergent “market ideology” entailed. In the prolix, exhaustive definition of one authority, Gournay and “the Gournayites” believed above all in “the free allocation of resources and men in time and space through a vision of the market price as a vector of information allowing producers, traders and consumers to adjust their behavior rationally in order to satisfy their variable needs, a model emphasizing their capacity to ‘self-organize,’ through the play of self-interest, and denying an ontological privilege to production.”⁷³ Which is accurate, but also abstract. Why did Gournay and his followers have so much faith in this model? Where did these ideas come from? And why

⁷³ Steven A. Kaplan, *The Stakes of Regulation: Perspectives on Bread, Politics, and Political Economy Forty Years Later* (London: Anthem, 2015), 323-4.

were they all of a sudden so appealing to a state that had, for so long, maintained the regulations that Gournay and his associates attacked? The foregoing analysis of Gournay's career in Cadiz helps us provide otherwise elusive answers to these questions; through cochineal, we get a concrete history of the abstraction of the market. Before demonstrating how, it is worth dwelling on two dominant interpretations of Gournay's role in the Levant affair—interpretations that in turn are representative of two influential accounts of Enlightenment political economy and the emergence of market society.

The first interpretation champions the role of enlightened administration. Simone Meyssonier has argued that Gournay's intervention into the regulations on trade with the Levant was motivated by dispassionate inquiry. Upon hearing of the dispute between Languedoc manufacturers and Marseille merchants (who benefited from the protections), the newly promoted intendant solicited memoirs from manufacturers, inspectors, and merchants, and even conducted a tour of the Languedoc, accompanied by Turgot. Based on what he had read and seen, Gournay's sympathies tended towards the cause of liberty. Trade with the Levant should benefit all of French commerce and industry, not just Marseille. And although French textiles had historically been dominant in Mediterranean markets, restrictions and price controls were preventing them from being more dominant still. Having reached these conclusions, Gournay then set about synthesizing and championing the liberal cause in public. By 1757, the abolition of *arrangements* was the consensus position, a foregone conclusion. The liberalization of French trade to the Levant is therefore explained through a bildungsroman of technocratic enlightenment. Starting from curiosity, Gournay passed through research, deliberation, and debate, before arriving at conviction in the form of a policy that broke with the entrenched Colbertian practices of French industry. Meyssonier's argument broadly conforms to Jürgen

Habermas's interpretation of eighteenth-century political economy, with the public use of private reason bringing mercantilist state policies in line with the conditions of a nascent modernity.⁷⁴

The second interpretation rejects that narrative as a triumphalist history of ideas. In Jeff Horn's telling, the success that French textiles had achieved in the Levant by the 1740s was the result of careful surveillance on the part of the French state and local inspectors. Languedoc manufacturers might have wanted liberty, but they were eager above all to abuse it—principally by cheating customers, exploiting workers, and skimming profits. They got their wish when, after 1750, the anti-regulatory opinions of “improvers” (“physiocrats and their fellow travelers”) “infiltrated the council of commerce and informed the decision making of influential royal ministers.” The resulting abolition of the *arrangements* was a “naive” and “premature experiment with liberty.” Horn concedes that exports to the Levant peaked between 1763 and 1772, but provides evidence that this boom was accompanied by manufacturers cutting back on workers and wages, and deliberately diminishing the quality of their textiles, with long-term consequences for the reputation of French products in the Mediterranean.⁷⁵ There is a confusing irony in Horn's argument: rejecting the importance of ideas in the development of French industry, he nevertheless blames the reduction of quality in Languedoc woollens after the 1750s on the naive ideology of improvers. Ideas don't matter, except when they're wrong. Regardless, what's crucial in Horn's argument is that *laissez faire* ideology is an exogenous force that “infiltrates” and clumsily dismantles the finely tuned Colbertian state machine. In the contrast it posits between the Colbertian economy, in which prices and quality were carefully regulated and

⁷⁴ Meyssonier, “Vincent de Gournay, un intendant du commerce au travail”; Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 67-9. See also Robin Ives, “Political Publicity and Political Economy.”

⁷⁵ The decline in quality was particularly marked by the increasing scarcity of prestige reds produced by cochineal. As Dominique Cardon writes, “After winning the favor of the Eastern Mediterranean elites by including five pieces of “high colors” per bale of cloth, French manufacturers gradually had to reduce their offer to four, three, or only two pieces of scarlet, crimson, or wine soup per bale.” See Cardon, *Mémoires de teinture*, 114.

markets were controlled by state institutions, and the mistaken and abstract ideology of *laissez faire*, which disregarded established practices and emerged as if *ex machina*, Horn's argument conforms to Karl Polanyi's more general account of the origins of market society.⁷⁶

Those historians of the 1750s liberal turn in old regime political culture who are influenced by Polanyi seek above all to expose the fictive qualities of Enlightenment political economy. The idea of the market endorsed by reformers like Gournay, an "abstract place where information and goods circulate by the exclusive play of self-interest," is revealed to be an imaginary, rhetorical construct, summoned up by those reformers so that it might one day exist in the future, or at least condemn the deficiencies of "real" markets in the present.⁷⁷ But as has been pointed out by Steven Kaplan, whose own work is influenced by Polanyi, this opens up a troubling contrast between "fiction" and "reality." For why did reformers' vision of the future, or their critique of the present, take this particular form: the idea of the market? By denying that such an idea had any correspondence with reality, the Polanyian interpretation implies that it emerged from outside of history or social experience. The "market principle" therefore resembles some primordial intellectual category, waiting for the right conditions to emancipate itself from the constraints of culture.⁷⁸ (It is no small irony that this naturalization of the market principle was precisely the opposite of Polanyi's intention.) What unites Meyssonier's argument for the autonomous processes of reason and Horn's argument for the perils of

⁷⁶ Horn, *Economic Development in Early Modern France*, 158-67; Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957).

⁷⁷ Charles, "La liberté du commerce des grains et l'économie politique française," 96-105.

⁷⁸ Kaplan, *The Stakes of Regulation*, 332-3. Market ideology—or, in Kaplan's terms, "market principle"—understood as "an abstract space where the totality of supply and demand are organized without consideration of time and space." See Kaplan, *The Stakes of Regulation*, 332. For an explanation of what Kaplan means by the contrast between "market principle" and "market place," see his *Provisioning Paris: Merchants and Millers in the Grain and Flour Trade During the Eighteenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 23-40.

abstraction is an assumption that Gournay's market ideology can only have emerged from outside of old regime France.

Fortunately, there is a more persuasive interpretation. Building from Meyssonnier's own research, Loïc Charles has argued that the origins of Gournay's ideals, and indeed their appeal to the state and the public sphere in the 1750s, lay in the fundamentally practical concerns of geopolitics. Specifically, Gournay seemed to provide an answer to the question of how, after the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1748, France could counter British power on land and sea.⁷⁹ Britain provided France with an "enemy model," something to emulate in order to overcome. Gournay's preoccupation with Britain in the years between leaving Cadiz and arriving in Versailles in 1749 support this thesis. Six months before the *St Michel* returned to Europe, in the spring of 1747, Gournay wrote to Maurepas from Amsterdam. He had used his European capital-raising tour as an opportunity to observe the political and economic conditions of France's rivals, and was eager to report on what he had learned from a winter in London. Above all, Gournay stressed how comfortable the British were with war: they raised money for it so easily, and since they were almost the exclusive insurers in Europe they seemed bound to profit whatever the outcome. Even their manufacturers hadn't been too badly affected: they had found routes to the Iberian peninsula through Holland, and had secured New World contraband through Jamaica and Peru. The East India Company's sales had *increased*, by 20 per cent, from the start of the war. Understandably, British creditors wanted war to continue. Implicit in Gournay's report was the stark contrast between this fiscal-military juggernaut, preeminent in both war and peace thanks to

⁷⁹ Loïc Charles, "La liberté du commerce des grains et l'économie politique française (1750–1770)" (Doctoral thesis, Université Paris 1, 1999).

relatively free trade and low interest rates, and the financial and commercial situation in France.⁸⁰

Charles is right to identify a concern with British competition as a source of Gournay's market ideology. Yet he perhaps goes too far in presenting Britain as something to be emulated. For all his admiration of the British state's ability to raise credit, Gournay also noted significant defects in the "enemy model." Enthusiasm for war crowded out any concern for the debt that was incurred to pay for it, which had ballooned to 70 million sterling, or 1.5 billion l.t.. Gournay was sure that this could only lead to more taxes and higher interest rates (already up to 5% from 3.5% at the beginning of the war), pushing up prices and wages. There was no way, Gournay concluded, that British textiles would ever be as cheap as they had been previously, which in turn could only make French products more attractive in overseas markets. As he knew from Cadiz, wherever French merchandise overcame British competition it was because of their superior quality. Even the cheaper Londrins Seconds were deemed more desirable than the British cloths that they imitated, precisely because consumers in the Levant got brighter reds for the prices they paid. And so if France was losing the war, then it might still win the peace—not by copying Britain, but by amplifying the practices through which it was already beating Britain. On the eve of the treaty of 1748, Gournay wrote a memoir that elaborated on this point, arguing that the way to compete with Britain was to reinforce French superiority in Spain and the Levant. Unsurprisingly this required bestowing further privileges on the nation in Cadiz, including the right to the free extraction of goods (which would be achieved through diplomacy in Madrid) and the provision of constant naval support. In other words, Gournay was suggesting that the

⁸⁰ Lettre de Vincent [de Gournay] adressée à Maurepas, Amsterdam, 5th March 1747, Archives diplomatiques du Ministère des affaires étrangères, Correspondance politique, Angleterre 423.

extraordinary arrangements of the St Michel be made permanent.⁸¹ A year after submitting the proposals, Gournay was appointed to the *Grand Conseil*. Two years after that, in 1751, he was made *intendant du commerce*. His political career, along with the origins and appeal of his reform agenda, had its origins not in London and the British model, but from within the old regime's commercial empire—and more specifically, from Cadiz and the cochineal commodity chain.

That is not to say that Gournay only concerned himself with those areas of the French global economy. Certainly both the Spanish Atlantic and the Levant loomed large in the concerns of the intendant and the publications of his fellow travelers.⁸² But his reform project is best understood as an attempt to organize French commercial imperialism not around the specific interests and activities of Cadiz merchants, but around their *values*: around the belief that merchants and not the state should control the production and quality of export commodities; that they needed the militarized protection of the state; that they should be glorified within old regime society; and that overseas commerce, manufacturing, and geopolitical rivalry were intimately linked. Which is why Gournay paid such sustained attention to overseas trade, when technically his authority as *intendant du commerce* only applied within the terrestrial boundaries of France. Writing to his former trading partner Roux after he had been appointed, Gournay confessed that he wished his role entailed more associations with “le commerce maritime” (officially the domain of the minister of the navy), but pledged that he would continue to occupy himself with

⁸¹ Gournay, *Mémoire sans titre* (“Il y a longtemps que l’on parle du paix...”), Bibliothèque municipale de Saint-Brieuc, Fonds Gournay, M. 84 n.11.

⁸² For the interest in Spain amongst the Gournay circle see François Véron Duverger de Forbonnais, *Considerations sur les finances de l’Espagne* (1753); idem., *Théorie et pratique du commerce et de la marine. Traduction libre sur l’Espagnol de Don Geronimo de Ustariz, sur la seconde édition de ce livre, à Madrid, en 1742* (1753); Plumard de Dangeul, *Rétablissement des manufactures et du commerce d’Espagne. Traduit de l’Espagnol de don Bernardo de Ulloa* (1753), BnF Français 1677; anon., “Le commerce de l’Espagne,” Bibliothèque Municipale de Saint-Brieuc, Fonds Gournay, M. 82 n.5. For French policy towards Spain after the War of Austrian Succession, see Stein & Stein, *Apogee of Empire*, 322-35.

such affairs “as long as they have a necessary connection with interior commerce and manufacturing.”⁸³ And so in a 1755 memoir Gournay took the liberty of speculating on how to improve commerce across Quebec, Louisiana, the Antilles, Guiana, and the Indian Ocean. For too long, he claimed, French administration had contrived a “monstrous division” between the colonial sphere and the “internal” economy, when in fact the two were “as inseparable as the soul is to the body.”⁸⁴ His remarks on Child’s chapter on the Balance of Trade, written two years previously, made it clear that Gournay saw his official task of improving domestic manufacturing as being downstream from the fluctuations of the global economy, much as Mailhol’s textiles had been dependent on the *Jamets, Verduc Vincent* company. “The power of the state rests on overseas commerce,” Gournay had remarked, transforming a perspective developed from Cadiz into a categorical statement of political economy.⁸⁵

The abstraction of Gournay’s market ideology, then, did not lie in its lack of correspondence with the “reality” of the old regime economy. Turgot was essentially correct in arguing that Gournay simply tried to turn into policy what he had learned from experience. Instead, the abstraction should be understood as a process whereby Gournay extrapolated from his expertise in the cochineal commodity chain to develop a model of commercial imperialism that could be universally applied. The French economy would effectively be opened up, its manufacturers exposed to competition and submitted to the authority of experienced, well-resourced merchants, who facilitated the provision of raw materials from other empires and sold finished products to other nations. Besides the Levant affair, Gournay’s other preoccupations

⁸³ Gournay to Roux, 10th March 1751, CCIMP, Fonds Roux, LIX 511.

⁸⁴ Gournay, “Moyens proposés pour agir le plus offensivement possible contre les Anglais, et pour ranimer en France le gout pour la marine” (1755) in Charles et al, *Le cercle de Gournay*, 352-67.

⁸⁵ Gournay, “Remarques sur le chapitre 9e touchant la balance du commerce,” Bibliothèque municipale de Saint-Brieuc, Fonds Gournay, M.81 n18.

likewise struck at the institutions, such as the Compagnie des Indes, that were now preventing the beneficial exposure of the domestic economy to global markets.⁸⁶ Much of the latter part of his intendency was dedicated to lifting the ban on imports of printed silks and cottons from India, which had existed since 1686. French manufacturers, Gournay and his associates argued, should be allowed to produce colorful cloths that could be sold to consumers throughout France and, significantly, beyond France as well. Lifting the ban on imports, Gournay claimed, would encourage a French industry of calico production that could compete with rivals on international markets—all with the aid, it went without saying, of merchants who could operate on such a scale, and who knew how to mediate between quality and price, between producer and consumer.⁸⁷ The prohibition was struck down in 1759: a victory, on the year of his death, for Gournay's vision of a global France, opened up to merchant capital.

However abstract and universally applicable it became in its maturity, Gournay's ideology had perhaps the greatest impact on the very markets out of which it emerged: cochineal and the Languedoc textiles industry. Exports to the Levant grew throughout the 1760s, but wages, employment and threadcounts declined.⁸⁸ Consumers began to lose faith, leading to what Philippe Minard has described as a "latent permanent crisis" in French trade with the Levant in the late-eighteenth century.⁸⁹ The decline of textiles exports to the region after 1772 was compensated for by an increase in the re-exports of raw colonial goods, including sugar, coffee,

⁸⁶ See *the Observations sur le rapport fait à M. le contrôleur général par M. de S*** le 26 juin 1755, sur l'état de la Compagnie des Indes, par feu M. de Gournay*, printed in the same volume as Morellet's *Mémoire sur la situation actuelle de la Compagnie des Indes* (1769). Morellet had been commissioned to write his memoir on the company by Maynon d'Invaux, a former associate of Gournay. See Terjanian, *Commerce and Its Discontents*, 148-51.

⁸⁷ Gournay, "Observations sur l'examen des avantages et désavantages de la prohibition des toiles peintes," in *Examen des avantages et désavantages de la prohibition des toiles peintes* (Marseille, 1755); Morellet, *Réflexions sur les avantages de la libre fabrication et de l'usage des toiles peintes en France* (1758). For commentary, see Larrère, *L'invention de l'économie au XVIIIe siècle*, 144-50; Gottmann, *Global Trade, Smuggling, and the Making of Economic Liberalism*, 131-69; Michael Kwass, *Contraband*, 292-4.

⁸⁸ Horn, *Economic Development in Early Modern France*, 158-67.

⁸⁹ Minard, "Réputation, normes, et qualité," 69-89.

indigo and, notably, cochineal.⁹⁰ But that was hardly good news for French industry. Rather than being soaked into Languedoc cloths by Languedoc workers, cochineal—which of course French colonies did not produce—was skipping off the surface of old regime markets, leaving only traces of unproductive profits in the account books of privileged manufacturers and merchants. By the 1780s Louis Pinel, the brother of Germain, was using only a fifth of the cochineal he purchased from Cadiz in the production of cloths; the majority he just re-exported for a profit.⁹¹ The science of use value was being eclipsed by arbitrage.

The disastrous effects of Gournay's liberalization went further still. By dismantling regulations on quality and further encouraging cochineal imports, the 1750s reforms obliterated once and for all the demand for peasant-collected kermes insects that had been essential for Languedoc textiles for centuries. As Pierre-Etienne Stockland has shown, once the effects of cochineal dependence became apparent in the late 1770s, local improvers even explored the possibility of naturalizing nopal cactuses in Provence, while others urged a return to the neglected kermes insect as a "patriotic" duty.⁹² It was plainly apparent to these observers that local industries and resources had been badly undermined by the opening up of France to the global economy, and the grievance became only more acute during the Napoleonic wars, when manufacturers were cut off from the Atlantic supply of the *fruits des indes*. In 1811 one cultivator from Arles wrote a treatise on kermes, in which he urged his fellow Frenchmen to

⁹⁰ Eldem, *French Trade in Istanbul*, 81-89.

⁹¹ In 1788 he bought 10,688 l.t. of cochineal but used only 2,040 l.t.; the year before he bought 22,667 l.t. and used only 3,550 l.t.. Marquié, *L'industrie textile carcassonnaise au XVIIIe siècle*, 193.

⁹² See, respectively, "Le Sieur Conte, propose d'établir dans la partie méridionale de la Provence la cochenille et la plante qui la nourrit," (1779) A.N. F10 258, and Pileur d'Alpigny, *Essai sur l'art de la teinture, et sur les moyens de la perfectionner. Avec des observations sur quelques matières qui y sont propres* (Paris: Costard, 1774), 50-1, both quoted in Stockland, "Statecraft and Insect Oeconomies," 180-1.

return to “the resources of our own soil” in order to thwart the “monopoly” of cochineal, “the tyrant of the seas.”⁹³

This might serve as a fitting epithet for the origins of Gournay’s market ideology in *le grand commerce maritime* in general, and in cochineal in particular: “the tyrant of the seas.” But the late-eighteenth century crisis of the Languedoc industry is, above all, damning evidence that Gournay’s reform agenda failed on its own terms. The opening up of France weakened the very aspects of the domestic economy that it was meant to improve.

How, then, did Gournay’s legacy survive? One could plausibly argue that the costs of liberalization only came to be felt in the late 1770s, too late to be tied to the long-since departed intendant. Or one could point to the fact that the interests Gournay represented, like the Pinels, had no trouble profiting from arbitrage rather than improvement. And yet the appeal of Gournay’s ideas transcended their material beneficiaries, and endured through to the end of the old regime. As we will see, the Gournay model heavily informed the French approach to commercial imperialism after the Seven Years War, if not directly through policy then indirectly, through the adoption by administrators and elites of his market ideology, which both complemented and shaped Enlightenment ideas about epistemology, subjectivity, and progress. Understanding this process of popularization means going back to where we started—to Turgot, the ultimate arbiter of Gournay’s legacy, but also to Cadiz. Because the afterlife of Gournay’s political economy is best explained through two of its elemental features, present from the outset: oligopoly, and the science of use value.

The Epistemology of Merchant Capital

⁹³ Michel Truchet, *Traité complet du kermes, considéré sous un rapport nouveau relativement aux circonstances de sa vie et à sa propagation, à sa conservation et aux moyens de la rendre proper à remplacer la cochenille des îles* (Paris: Bertrand, 1811), quoted in Stockland, “Statecraft and Insect Oeconomies,” 184.

Gournay's market ideology rose to prominence in the public sphere just as intellectuals were embracing a sensationalist epistemology, derived from Locke, which held that the mind at birth was a blank slate, and ideas were inscribed upon it through sensory experience of the outside world. The coincidence supports Habermas's claim that political economy and psychology were the twin sciences of "the merchant phase of capitalism," and indeed Jan Goldstein's suggestion that just as in England Locke's sensationalism "may well have been prompted by the precocious appearance of a laissez-faire economy there," its "gallicization by the abbé de Condillac in the 1740s was probably spurred on by intimations of corporate collapse."⁹⁴ Many in the 1750s, including Condillac, simultaneously endorsed sensationalism and the market ideology.⁹⁵ This dual commitment could lead to different outcomes. Quesnay, deeply committed to free trade and influenced by Condillac, nevertheless contrasted his deductive approach to political economy with the empiricism of Gournay's "*système des commerçants*," and was famously dismissive of the "sterility" of trade. Gournay's disciple Forbonnais, on the other hand, championed both empiricism and the role of merchants in stimulating wealth and knowledge, and characterized his *science du commerce* as an examination of all of the "infinite branches of commerce," tracing for the "attentive eyes the route one must follow to understand its details."⁹⁶ Since the emergent conception of subjectivity insisted, as Goldstein has put it, on the link "between the (external) economy and the (internal) psyche," it is not hard to understand why this science of commerce would be appealing to a French public increasingly exposed to the complex "branches" of global trade.

⁹⁴ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 18-29; Jan Goldstein, *The Post-Revolutionary Self: Politics and Psyche in France, 1750-1850* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 9.

⁹⁵ See, for instance, his *Traité des sensations* and *Dissertation sur la liberté*, both published in 1754.

⁹⁶ Forbonnais, *Le négociant anglaise, ou Traduction libre du livre intitulé The British Merchant* (1753), I, xxvii-xxviii. Steiner, *La "Science nouvelle" de l'économie politique*, 9-14.

This was a form of knowledge, after all, that had in part developed out of a practical mastery of global commodity chains. Gournay's youthful expertise in cochineal, his ability to judge quality, read price, understand utility, and react to consumer desire, anticipated the idealized subject conjured up by midcentury intellectuals, who championed the benefits of a deregulated society. The arch sensationalist Buffon provided a mature articulation of this type in his essay on "Moral Arithmetic" (1777), arguing that "all our knowledge is founded upon proportions and comparisons," and that the "sensible man" knew how to relate values to other values, and to integrate himself into a society of interacting individuals and market exchanges of money for goods.⁹⁷ Then again, not everyone had Buffon's genius for taxonomy and comparison, and nor was everyone a rich merchant in Cadiz, with a privileged perspective on world trade. Many feared that the mental faculties of the average old regime subject would lose form and coherence without the scaffolding of corporations. For them, the dissolution of the Languedoc textiles industry was an economic manifestation of the psychological dissolution of the newly isolated homo economicus.⁹⁸ And so it became necessary to find a broader register for the market ideology: one that demonstrated that deregulation and competition would benefit not only those who could claim mastery of global commodity chains, or even those who took the time to read the *Journal oeconomique* and learn Forbonnais's *science du commerce*, but also unincorporated artisans in the Languedoc and their customers. In short, Gournay's disciples needed a more abstract, widely applicable account of the psychosocial virtues of the market.

⁹⁷ See the commentary in Jessica Riskin, *Science in the Age of Sensibility: The Sentimental Empiricists of the French Enlightenment* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 92.

⁹⁸ Goldstein, *Post-Revolutionary Self*, 38-43.

The vehicle for abstraction in this instance was Turgot.⁹⁹ As a young student at the Sorbonne, Turgot had enthusiastically adopted Condillac's sensationalist psychology; in his 1750 lecture, *A Philosophical Review of the Successive Advances of the Human Mind*, he categorically announced that "the senses constitute the unique source of our ideas," and that "the whole power of our mental faculties is restricted to combining the ideas which they have received from the senses."¹⁰⁰ In subsequent years he turned away from a life in the church, for which he had been educated, and towards a career in administration; his intellectual interests, along with many of his generation, gravitated to commercial affairs. Gournay's influence on this development is palpable. In the autumn of 1753 Turgot accompanied the newly appointed *intendant* on his tour of the Languedoc, where they stayed with Roux and Pinel and solicited opinions on manufacturing and trade with the Levant.¹⁰¹ Immediately after, around the turn of 1754, Turgot wrote a manuscript, "Plan of a Work on Commerce, the Circulation of Money, the Wealth of States," which reiterated many of Gournay's arguments from the *Remarks* on Child, including a dutiful denunciation of regulations, and an assertion that free competition would allow commodities to receive a price that covered both costs and "the interest on the advances which their trade requires."¹⁰² The debt to Gournay was made more explicit still in a 1757 *Encyclopédie* article, "Foire," where Turgot approvingly quoted the *Remarks* to take aim at how France's artificially fragmented markets inhibited the circulation of wealth. But Turgot was no mere mouthpiece for Gournay's agenda; he brought his own interests and intelligence to bear on the

⁹⁹ The following argument about the role of Turgot in popularizing Gournay's political economy reinforces the case for understanding him as a member of the Gournay circle, as Loïc Charles has argued in "Le cercle de Gournay."

¹⁰⁰ Turgot, "A Philosophical Review of the Successive Advances of the Human Mind," in Ronald L. Meek (ed.), *Turgot on Progress, Sociology and Economics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 46.

¹⁰¹ Gournay to Roux, 11th July–14th December 1753, CCIMP, Fonds Roux, LIX 511. For Turgot accompanying Gournay, see Douglas Dakin, *Turgot and the Ancien Régime in France* (London: Methuen, 1939) 18.

¹⁰² Gustave Schelle (ed.), *Oeuvres de Turgot et documents le concernant* (Paris, 1913–23) vol.1, 376–87; Meek, *Turgot*, 15.

market ideology. By the *Eloge de Gournay* of 1759, it became clear that the *intendant* had helped Turgot develop a practical language with which he could critically apply his reflections on the progress of mind and society to the institutions of old regime France. It was in his obituary for Gournay that Turgot managed to synthesize the science of commerce with a sensationalist conception of knowledge.

Turgot's *Eloge* was therefore explicit in its endorsement of Gournay's antiregulatory measures, for both economic and political reasons. As in the Levant affair, restrictions on the production and circulation of commodities within France were criticized for exacerbating fragmentation. Different regions "looked on each other as enemies," with private interests—like those of Marseille merchants—guarding privileges and profits to the detriment of the kingdom. But Turgot also formulated a thoroughgoing epistemological defense of how the market brought enlightenment to everyone who interacted with it—and not, then, just those who mastered it. In its determination to impose protections on trade, the state acted "blindly," or at best incoherently, not unlike the myopic "man of systems," whose thinking is characterized by

"that lack of observation, that overhasty reliance on obscure analogies by which a particular fact is rashly translated into a general principle, and the whole is judged by a superficial glance at a part; that blind presumption which relates all it does not know to the little it knows; which, dazzled by an intense look at the sun, casts its image on all the objects to which it directs itself."

Contrast that sensationalist imagery, all distortion and deficiency, with Turgot's description of how individuals—merchants, manufacturers, artisans, and consumers, as opposed to the state, or corporations, or the man of systems—interact with the market:

"There is no need to prove that each individual is the only competent judge of the most valuable use of his lands and of his labor. He alone has the particular knowledge

without which the most enlightened man could only argue blindly. He alone has an experience which is all the more reliable since it is limited to a single object. He learns by repeated trials, by his successes, by his losses, and he acquires a feeling for it which is more ingenious than the theoretical knowledge of the indifferent observer because it is stimulated by want.”

The latter can be read as a generous description of Gournay’s tactile knowledge of cochineal and its market performance, as well as his understanding, through the likes of Mailhol and Pinel, of the textiles industry. Gournay himself, as well as his followers, wrote copious passages on the superior commercial expertise that comes from experience and self-interest. But Turgot is adding something more. Here the market generates not just expertise but also knowledge; it improves the mind. Whereas the effect of regulations was to “to restrict the imagination of artificers to the narrow limits of the familiar,” *laissez faire* enabled new combinations of both capital and ideas.

We can appreciate the significance of Gournay’s market ideology to Turgot, and to the *philosophes* who shared his intellectual preoccupations, if we return to the latter’s conception of the relationship between the human mind, economic needs, and the progress of society. In his *Philosophical Review*, the lecture he delivered at the Sorbonne in 1750, Turgot claimed that the “civilized” man had progressed further than the “savage” because he had recorded more diverse combinations from his surroundings: humanity had experienced more, and so the human mind had become more refined.¹⁰³ The following year Turgot wrote a discourse, *On Universal History*, in which he developed this link between the progress of mind and civilization, which had proceeded successively through hunting, pastoral, and agricultural stages—but not in a uniform fashion. Instead, societies had developed unevenly, the discrepancies explained by the changing

¹⁰³ The relationship between Turgot’s sensationalist epistemology and his stadial theory of history is explored in Frank E. Manuel, *The Prophets of Paris* (Cambridge MA.: Harvard University Press, 1962), 11-53.

circumstances to which they had been exposed. France boasted a relatively well-developed communications systems and a complex division of labor: its subjects lived in cities, were exposed to the arts and sciences, and conducted commerce with other societies.¹⁰⁴ They were, in short, more enlightened. And so any restrictions to the progressive exposure and refinement of the human mind had to be fought against. Civilization happened faster wherever there were more exchanges and combinations. Turgot really meant it when he said that in going to Cadiz Gournay was joining ranks with the most enlightened merchants of Europe. The sheer amount of merchandise they sifted through, the cosmopolitan trade they carried out, their understanding of the powdery substance of cochineal, was a sign of their intellectual advancement.

Turgot's *Eloge de Gournay*, which tied the deregulation of the Languedoc textiles industry and the lifting of the ban on calicoes imports to the progress of civilization, was published in August 1759 in the *Mercure*, ensuring that the moral case for the market ideology was broadly dispersed. To the moral case, the Gournay circle had added a sociological one. The market might have been a sign of the natural progression of the human mind, but its advocates were not willing simply to wait for civilization to take its course. Obstacles to new combinations of capital (and, of course, knowledge) had to be forcibly removed, whether they were privileged corporations and quality inspectors, or yet more entrenched cultural barriers, such as the prestige of landed wealth and the hegemony of a nobility that refrained from commercial activity. Turgot, too, was invested in accommodating Gournay's ideas to the old regime's society of orders. But then they didn't need too much accommodating; they had, after all, emerged out of the French nation in Cadiz, an organization that was at least not incompatible with the inegalitarian metropole. The methods and concepts used by the Gournay circle and, later, Turgot, to make the

¹⁰⁴ Turgot, "On Universal History," in Meek, *Turgot*, 84-9.

political economy of the market legible to the hierarchies of old regime society evinced just how formative those origins had been. They also prompt both a revision of our understanding of what Gournay's market ideology really meant, and a new appreciation of its influence on French commercial imperialism.

Oligopoly and the Entrepreneur

Because of his perceived attraction to the British "enemy model" and his advocacy of laissez faire, it is tempting to interpret Gournay as a French counterpart to his near-contemporary theorists of "commercial society" on the other side of the Channel. Like Hume and Smith, we might also argue that Gournay envisaged, as Istvan Hont has put it, "a society whose members related to one another as interactive commercial individuals, behaving generally as merchants act when entering a market."¹⁰⁵ But this would fail to capture the scope of Gournay's conception of mercantile activity that we have been tracing in this chapter. For Gournay, markets were as much about interacting individuals (atomized, abstract, and fundamentally alike) as they were about the relations of force created by capital and carried out by institutions. "Commercial society" is therefore an accurate description of only half of Gournay's worldview: the half that included trust and expertise, the enlightenment generated by the "horizontal communications" of Braudel's market economy. What of the other half? Gournay was equally at home in Braudel's antimarket. His ultimate brief as intendant, if we recall, was to beat Britain on overseas markets. "The only thing we should be occupying ourselves with," he wrote in 1755, "is doing harm to the English, since they are the only true enemies that France has in the world."¹⁰⁶ Market expertise

¹⁰⁵ Istvan Hont, *Politics in Commercial Society*, 3.

¹⁰⁶ Gournay, "Moyens proposés pour agir le plus offensivement possible contre les Anglais, et pour ranimer en France le gout pour la marine" (1755) in Charles et al, *Le cercle de Gournay*, 352-67.

alone would not fulfill that objective, just as it had not been sufficient to maintain superiority in the cochineal commodity chain. Gournay understood that the old regime's imperial repertoire had to be kept open. Much of his market ideology was therefore geared towards convincing powerful French subjects that their considerable wealth and influence could be virtuously put to use in overseas commerce. A key instrument in this work of persuasion was the figure of the entrepreneur.

Traditionally in old regime France entrepreneurial activity had been associated with military undertakings or, starting in the seventeenth century, public works projects. Calculation, risk, and uncertainty were central to these activities. But it was only in the mid-eighteenth century that the “entrepreneur” assumed predominantly economic connotations.¹⁰⁷ Richard Cantillon, a Franco-Irish financier who made a fortune during the Law scheme, was the pioneer of this conceptual transition. In his *Essai sur la nature du commerce en général*, Cantillon presented the entrepreneur as an agent who operated in the interstices of production and consumption. The category was broad, encompassing farmers, bakers, butchers, manufacturers, “and merchants of every variety,” but at the most basic level, the entrepreneur bought at a certain price and sold at an uncertain one. The defining characteristic of the entrepreneur was therefore the capacity to bear risk in the exchange of commodities, to make profits in fundamentally uncertain markets. And his function was to facilitate new combinations of producers and consumers. Cantillon's manuscript was probably written at some point in the 1730s, but it was only published in 1755. According to Cantillon's foremost biographer, Gournay was responsible for the publication of the *Essai sur la nature du commerce*.¹⁰⁸ It seems that use of “entrepreneur”

¹⁰⁷ Hélène Vêrin, *Entrepreneurs, entreprise: Histoire d'une idée* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2011 [1982]); Daniel Roche, *France in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 531-5.

¹⁰⁸ Antoin E. Murphy, *Richard Cantillon: Entrepreneur and Economist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 299-322.

in published texts in political economy became markedly more frequent during the 1750, thanks in part to the publication Cantillon but also to the writings of the Gournay circle, especially Forbonnais, Ange Goudar, and the Abbé le Blanc, with his translations of Hume.¹⁰⁹

It is not hard to see why this concept of the entrepreneur, the risk-bearing agent of commercial innovation, would have been appealing to Gournay and his disciples. But in Gournay's writings in particular and in those of the Gournay circle in general, the entrepreneur was not simply a merchant operating between the spheres of production and consumption. Between Cantillon and the 1750s the entrepreneur had assumed a new function and identity. No longer a mere go-between, now it was necessary for the entrepreneur to have power—to have capital. Only then was he in a position to prosper in a society opened up by markets.

In short, Gournay's entrepreneur was someone who could carry out an operation like the *St Michel*, a member of the upper tier of merchant houses in Cadiz who could make profits in cochineal. France needed more actors like this—more French nations in Cadiz, alternatives to the outmoded and unproductive privileged trading companies that governed overseas trade. Recall the young Gournay's advice to an associate thinking about investing in the Compagnie des Philippines in 1733: it is better “to make value out of one's money from one's own industry” than to abandon capital to the administration of others.¹¹⁰ The Gournay circle insisted on this idea of the entrepreneur creating value through industry and *his own capital*. The alternative to the exclusive company was not simply a society of atomized, individual merchants, but rather a

¹⁰⁹ This assertion is based on preliminary research in ARTFL, which I hope to be able to substantiate with a more sustained analysis of mid-century publications. See, for instance, *Forbonnais, Éléments du commerce* (Leyde, 1754); Ange Goudar, *Les Intérêts de la France mal entendus, dans les branches de l'agriculture, de la population, des finances, du commerce, de la marine, & de l'industrie. Par un citoyen*, (Amsterdam: Jacques Cœur, 1756); Jean-Bernard, Abbé le Blanc, *Discours politiques de M. Hume* (Amsterdam, 1754).

¹¹⁰ CCIMP, Fonds Roux, LIX 818, 4th August 1733.

society dominated by rich entrepreneurs. Like the Compagnie des Indes, the entrepreneur belonged in the old regime antimarket.

The best demonstration of this can be found in the mature political economy of Turgot, and particularly in his *Reflections on the Formation and the Distribution of Wealth* (1766). There Turgot analyzed an economy in which three “orders” operated: landowners, wage-earners and “capitalist entrepreneurs.” He begins with a survey of society at its agricultural stage, in which cultivation enables the production of a surplus over subsistence. This stage culminates in the “letting out of the land” to capitalist entrepreneurs, who, neither landowners nor mere wage laborers, now make “advances” for agricultural, industrial and commercial enterprises which reap returns over and above the costs of wages and investments. The profits of the entrepreneur, understood as “rewards” for risks and “special abilities,” exceed the surplus enjoyed in an agricultural economy, and are sufficiently high to encourage reinvestment in productive enterprises (and to prevent them being diverted to land purchase or lending at interest). Society has now entered a fourth stage, beyond agriculture: a “commercial” stage in which the rhythms of the economy are dictated by the advances and returns of capital owned by the entrepreneurial class. Entrepreneurs were therefore the agents of progress, their activity bringing about the emergence of the commercial stage of society.¹¹¹

Turgot’s depiction of an economy governed by entrepreneurs was in part an ideal one, a society with a broad division of labor, in which monopolies had been abolished and savings were immediately transformed into investments. The agrarian reality of France was somewhat different, which Turgot knew well from his time as intendant in the Limoges, one of the most economically deprived areas of the kingdom. Yet his analysis was also in part descriptive,

¹¹¹ Turgot, “Reflections on the Formation and Distribution of Wealth,” in Meek, *Turgot*.

emanating from his of a realization that in a commercial society profits tended to concentrate in the hands of a select few entrepreneurs. One year after publishing the *Reflections*, Turgot made this oligopolistic tendency of entrepreneurial capital more explicit in a review of Saint-Péravy's memoir on indirect taxes, which the author had condemned as obstructions to the renewal of capital in productive enterprises. Turgot praised the theoretical neatness of the argument but argued that it assumed a "natural order" in which "complete liberty" and "competition" existed. In reality, it was "the absence of competition" that put "the entrepreneurs in the position of making profits which are higher than what is required for the continuation of those enterprises." The lack of complete liberty and competition—the existence of systematic biases in the economy—was, for Turgot, a good thing. It allowed for the "accumulation of moveable capitals, and these capitals are only accumulated for the purpose of obtaining a revenue or annual profit, which can only be done by employing this capital."¹¹² Progress and enlightenment were not hindered but encouraged by the hierarchical and agrarian structure of old regime society. The entrepreneur was a product of this social structure. We might think of him as a synthesis of, or at least a compromise between, Castanier and Melon—profit 2 idealized in political economy.

Turgot and the Gournay circle saw the entrepreneur as a medium through which the domestic economy of France would be gently reformed into something more like the nation in Cadiz. They presented the entrepreneur as a man of action, imbued him with characteristics of justice and warfare more readily associated with erstwhile chivalrous knights, in order to encourage emulation amongst the upper echelons of old regime society.¹¹³ The Physiocrats tried

¹¹² Turgot, "Observations on a Paper by Saint-Péravey," in *The Turgot Collection: Writings, Speeches, and Letters of Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, Baron de Laune*, David Gordon (ed.), (Auburn: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2011), 136-8. See also Grenier, *L'économie d'ancien régime*, 43-4. As Frank Manuel has argued, irony and unintended consequences play a crucial role in the notions of progress explored by Turgot and those social scientists who followed him: Condorcet, Saint-Simon, Fourier and Guizot. See Manuel, *Prophets of Paris*, 48 et passim.

¹¹³ Vérin, *Entrepreneurs, entreprise*, 90-9 ; Roche, *France and the Enlightenment*, 531-3.

to enlist the nobility in their program of agricultural improvement, because they thought what was needed was “not so much arms [i.e. labor] as capital”—and the nobility had lots of capital. Mirabeau even recommended that the state bestow official honors on “agricultural entrepreneurs” who directly supervised making their vast landed estates productive.¹¹⁴ The Gournay circle did the same, but for trade. By glorifying the entrepreneur who put his capital to work in overseas trade, they sought to render commerce noble and the nobility commercial.

According to old regime etiquette, any merchant entering the nobility had to renounce commercial activity, while nobles who gained from trade risked losing status. In reality this etiquette was widely ignored, but for the Gournay circle it nevertheless signified a cultural obstacle to commercial progress and French competitiveness. The War of Austrian Succession provided an opportunity to transform the longstanding aspiration of France’s merchant classes to abolish these customs into a sustained public campaign. On the eve of the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle Maurepas had received complaints that too many influential people in Paris, when they scorned mercantile activity, failed to make the distinction between the “*marchand en détail*” who made particular, self-interested profits and the “*négociant* who mobilizes fleets and who rescues wealth from foreign countries to enrich his own.”¹¹⁵ For Gournay this “disdain for commerce” betrayed a kind of physiocratic unconscious, a stubborn attachment to the soil as the source of all wealth, that pervaded French conceptions of value, leading to a neglect of the “influence that the sea has over the land.” Titles were only afforded to land, Gournay complained, and not to “*personnels*,” which “deprived the King of a way to excite emulation.”¹¹⁶ These attitudes

¹¹⁴ Georges Weulersse, *Les Physiocrates*, 75-80; Ranajit Guha, *A Rule of Property for Bengal: An Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996 [1963]), 106-7.

¹¹⁵ “Report on French commercial interests and how to protect them at the peace conference” (June, 1746). Cornell University, The Maurepas Collection, Box 15, Folder 38.

¹¹⁶ Gournay, “Moyens proposés pour agir le plus offensivement possible contre les Anglais.”

undermined not only commerce, diverting profits from reinvestment and towards the purchase of untainted offices and estates, but also war: the nobility, whose wealth could be mobilized to capture markets and “mobilize fleets,” was removed from the economic sphere of imperial competition. With the renewal of global conflict imminent, the abbé Coyer, a disciple of Gournay, published of *La Noblesse commerçante* in 1756, urging the *noblesse d’épée* to earn their honor by engaging in economic life, and by contributing to the international competition for markets. Coyer’s controversial tract was both the culmination of a decade-long attempt to assimilate commercial values into the upper echelons of the old regime, and a fitting reminder that the Gournay circle had originated as, and remained, a war party.¹¹⁷

As the nobility’s hostile response to Coyer’s arguments showed, the Gournay circle’s infiltration of the society of orders met resistance. Progress to commercial society would not be as seamless as Turgot had envisaged, with entrepreneurs reorienting the feudal apparatus of the old regime economy to capital accumulation from the inside. Nevertheless, Gournay had shifted the terms of public debate. Now all of the old regime’s resources, even those of the nobility, conceivably belonged to the imperial repertoire. The Gournay model of commercial imperialism had expanded the range of feasible, imaginable strategies of governance and accumulation. As a result, it had an enduring influence on a French state that would soon be desperately seeking reform after the Seven Years War.

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That war proved to be disastrous for the French empire. Louisiana and Canada were abandoned to European rivals, and the Compagnie des Indes was definitively confirmed unfit for purpose. Gournay’s conception of commercial hegemony provided a perfect model of reform for an

¹¹⁷ John Shovlin, *The Political Economy of Virtue*, 58-65.

empire that had lost territory. France had no claims over either Oaxaca or the Levant, and yet it dominated the cochineal commodity chain. Power could be exercised through the market—a market that consisted not of isolated individuals, but of entrepreneurs. For the Treaty of Paris in 1763 French negotiators were happy to sacrifice territory for valuable commodities. In the following decades members of the nobility, protected by the strong arm of the state, began to pour their vast reserves of capital into overseas commerce.

And yet as the deprivation of the Languedoc textile industry showed, the old regime economy could not simply be transformed in the image of the cochineal commodity chain and Gournay's market ideology. Merchant capital remained stubbornly attached to arbitrage. Gentlemanly capitalism conflicted with the desire to abolish privilege. Profit and political economy could not so easily be synthesized, despite Turgot's best efforts. In the decades of reform after the Seven Years War, the tensions between oligopoly and the science of use value, between the glorification of the entrepreneur and the accumulation of knowledge through the market, became more pronounced. And nor did the Gournay circle enjoy exclusive influence on the state in its attempt to reform the governance of the global economy. The public sphere was rife with competing projects for the improvement of overseas commerce, and not all of them were satisfied with the idea that land and labor could be so easily abandoned on the road to progress and civilization.

The Gum Atlantic

Like all of its European rivals, France experienced the Seven Years War as both a crisis and an opportunity. Sustained global conflict had exposed infrastructural weaknesses: a depleted navy, a bankrupt Compagnie des Indes, colonies vulnerable to invasion. Reform was imperative. As the war drew to an end, Étienne-François de Stainville, duc de Choiseul, the minister of the marine, solicited ideas about how the governance of empire might be improved. An array of proposals flooded the ministry and the public sphere. Acolytes of Gournay mobilized against trade monopolies and privileges. Physiocrats argued for the establishment of agricultural colonies. Botanists sought sponsorship for voyages of discovery. Many of these projects were carried out over the next decade or so by Choiseul, his successors, and independent colonial agents. The changes implemented after the Seven Years War were therefore eclectic and often contradictory, but they overhauled the governing institutions of France's global economy. Commercial imperialism, however, survived through to the end of the old regime. Informed by the ideals of Melon and Gournay, statesmen and investors continued to pursue the ideals of political economy through imperial bricolage, deploying the existing institutions and social relations of absolutist France to manipulate merchant capital through high-value and strategically important commodity chains. Dramatic manifestations of postwar reforms and enlightened colonialism—the Kourou experiment, the *Exclusif mitigé*, the dissolution of the Compagnie des Indes—can obscure these continuities. But the state's enduring commitment to commercial imperialism was evident at the Treaty of Paris in 1763, when Choiseul, in the words of one historian “inspired by the ideas of

économistes and *philosophes*,” abandoned Canada and Louisiana “to save the sugar of Antilles, the spices of the Far East, and the gum of Senegal.”¹

The latter was a typical object of commercial imperialism. Like cochineal, “true gum” was a vital component in the manufacturing of textiles, and it could only be procured from one place—in this case, from the acacia trees that grew in the Senegal River valley. And like cochineal, both ends of the commodity chain were essential to the state’s geopolitical ambitions. A healthy commercial presence in Senegambia ensured access to the west-African slave trade; in turn, the regular supply of gum to textile manufacturers helped maintain hegemony in the Spanish Atlantic. Over the course of the eighteenth century, the French became the dominant provider of gum to Europe. That status was challenged in the middle of the century, first because of a devastating drought in Senegambia, and then by British competition in the Seven Years War. In response, colonial agents in Senegal and speculators in the metropole harbored radical ambitions of overcoming the constraints imposed on French commerce in the region by ecological instability, political dependence, and foreign competition. After the Choiseul secured Ile Gorée, a toehold on the African coast, at the Treaty of Paris, new interests and ventures flooded into the gum trade seeking to act upon those ambitions. As a testament to the expansiveness of commercial imperialism in the ensuing period, west-African gum became inextricably tied to a colonial frontier in Guiana, on the northern coast of South America. This corridor of empire endured until the Revolution—a Gum Atlantic held together by capital, ideas, and institutions.

¹ Jean Tarrade, *Le Commerce colonial de la France à la fin de l’Ancien Régime: l’évolution du régime de l’exclusif de 1763 à 1789*, 2 vols (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1972), I: 14. See also Pierre H. Boulle, “Eighteenth-Century French Policies Towards Senegal: The Ministry of Choiseul,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, vol 4, no. 3 (Autumn, 1970), 305-20. Bertin, then controller general of finances, was also determined to maintain access to the Senegambian gum trade. See André Delcourt, *La France et les établissements français au Sénégal entre 1713 et 1763: La Compagnie des Indes et le Sénégal; la guerre de la gomme* (Dakar: IFAN, 1952), 82-5.

Analyzing the link between Gorée and Guiana through the lens of commercial imperialism yields a revisionist account of the French response to the Seven Years War. Historians have recently advanced two interpretations of the relationship between empire and enlightenment in this period. The first insists upon a symbiotic relationship between the state and science. After 1763, the argument goes, ministers collaborated with botanists, engineers and cartographers to construct a “colonial machine” in which knowledge was recruited in the service of global state power.² Governance of colonies and overseas commerce became increasingly centralized, gravitating away from the semi-private interests like the Compagnie des Indes and towards the ministry of the marine, which, from Paris, coordinated scientifically trained functionaries in their search for valuable knowledge at the colonial periphery.³ The second interpretation stresses the influence of physiocracy on colonial reform. Physiocrats who wrote about affairs beyond the metropole were concerned above all with the “defeudalization” of the mercantile system, with its irrational privileges and arbitrarily fragmented markets. Colonies should be agricultural, and they should be treated as “provinces” of the nation; the global economy of France would become a coherent space bound together by free trade.⁴ Choiseul

² The literature on the “colonial machine,” or the “European colonial science complex,” is vast. For some representative studies, James E. McClellan III & François Regourd, *The Colonial Machine: French Science and Overseas Expansion in the Old Regime* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011); Londa L. Schiebinger and Claudia Swan (eds.), *Colonial Botany: Science, Commerce, and Politics in the Early Modern World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); Londa L. Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004); Lisbet Koerner, *Linnaeus: Nature and Nation* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999); Richard Drayton, *Nature’s Government: Science, Imperial Britain, and the ‘Improvement’ of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000). For a critique, see Loïc Charles & Paul Cheney, “The Colonial Machine Dismantled: Knowledge and Empire in the French Atlantic,” *Past & Present*, no. 219 (May 2013).

³ On administrative centralization after 1763, see Jean Tarrade, “L’administration coloniale en France à la fin de l’Ancien Régime: projets de réforme,” *Revue historique*, t. 229, fasc. 1 (1963), 103-22; Marie Houlemmare, “Seeing the Empire Through Lists and Charts: French Colonial Records in the Eighteenth Century,” *Journal of Early Modern History*, vol. 22, issue 5 (2018), 371-91.

⁴ Pernille Røge, *Economistes and the Reinvention of Empire: France in the Americas and Africa, c.1750–1802* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); idem., “‘La Clef de Commerce’: The Changing Role of Africa in France’s Atlantic Empire c. 1760–1797,” *History of European Ideas*, 34, special issue (2008), 431–43; idem., “A Natural Order of Empire: The Physiocratic Vision of Colonial France after the Seven Years’ War,” in Sophus Reinert and Pernille Røge (eds.), *The Political Economy of Empire in the Early Modern World*, (London: Palgrave,

demonstrated his sympathy for this agenda in 1763 by supporting an expedition to create a free, white settler colony in Guiana.⁵ Thousands of Alsatians and Acadians died within months of arrival in Kourou due to disease and starvation—a debacle that revealed the difficulty of reforming old regime empire by way of a political economy intolerant of privilege, slavery, and trade restrictions.⁶ Nevertheless, some have argued that the selective colonial application of physiocratic doctrines towards the end of the old regime laid the foundations for nineteenth-century empire.⁷ Both the colonial machine and the physiocratic interpretations therefore share a narrative of modernization: sooner or later the French global economy would conform to Enlightenment science, its sovereignty rendered coherent, its markets efficient, its territories productive. The former sees this rationalizing process already happening in the final decades of the old regime; the latter sees eighteenth-century intellectuals anticipating modern imperialism.

Gum tells a different story. Core features of the “colonial machine” and physiocracy were apparent in both Gorée and Guiana. Botanists sought valuable discoveries and hawked their “useful knowledge” to the state; investors yearned for territorial expansion and agricultural colonialism; philosophes believed that French imperialism could be a vehicle for “civilization.” And yet the attachment of these ideals and desires to the Gum Atlantic led not to the centralization of power and knowledge, nor to the unification of imperial space through free

2013), 32–52; Madeleine Dobie, *Trading Places: Colonization and Slavery in Eighteenth-Century French Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 215–9.

⁵ Emma Rothschild, “A Horrible Tragedy in the French Atlantic,” *Past & Present*, No.192 (Aug., 2006), 67–108; Marion F. Godfroy-Tayart de Borms, “La guerre de sept ans et ses conséquences atlantiques: Kourou ou l’apparition d’un nouveau système colonial,” *French Historical Studies*, vol. 32, issue 2 (2009), 167–91; François Regourd, “Kourou 1763. Succès d’une enquête, échec d’un projet colonial” in Charlotte de Castelnau-L’Estoile & François Regourd (eds.), *Connaissances et Pouvoirs. Les espaces impériaux (XVIe-XVIIIe siècles): France, Espagne, Portugal* (Bordeaux: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2005); Barbara Traver, “After Kourou: Settlement Schemes in French Guiana in the Age of Enlightenment,” (PhD Dissertation, Washington State University, 2011).

⁶ For an extended discussion of the gulf between the radical proposals of the physiocrats and the existing institutional apparatus of French overseas commerce, see Paul Cheney, *Revolutionary Commerce: Globalization and the French Monarchy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 152–67.

⁷ Røge, *Economistes and the Reinvention of Empire*.

markets, but to the proliferation of privilege. Improvement projects were not taken up by an enlightened state but by a succession of proprietorships—the Compagnie d’Afrique, the Compagnie de la Guyane, and the Compagnie de la Gomme du Sénégal—that enjoyed a monopoly on the trade in gum to Europe, and occasionally on the trade in slaves to Guiana as well.⁸ These institutions perpetuated the fragmentation of sovereignty and commercial space that reformers and physiocrats were trying to abolish. What’s more, they were governed overwhelmingly by aristocrats, court capitalists of Versailles enticed into overseas investment by the paternalistic logics of natural history, the autocratic possibilities of colonial agronomy, and near guaranteed profits on gum and slaves. Enlightenment speculation about Senegal and Guiana generated a French species of “gentlemanly capitalism.”⁹ In the Gum Atlantic, the escalation of capital and critique led to the intensification of traditional social forms.

In part this was down to the nature of the commodity itself. Unlike sugar and spices, Choiseul’s other priorities in 1763, gum was neither substitutable nor scalable.¹⁰ Some botanists and merchants suggested that acacia trees might be grown in Guiana, but supply remained (and remains) rooted in Senegal. The gum trade therefore resembled less the high-volume commodity

⁸ Lauren Benton has argued that through to the twentieth century European imperialism has been characterized by uneven configurations (“fragments,” “corridors,” “enclaves”) of geography and sovereignty. Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). See also L.H. Roper & B. van Ruymbeke (eds.), *Constructing Early Modern Empires: Proprietary Ventures in the Atlantic World, 1500-1750* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 1-20. As Roper and van Ruymbeke write, the continued reliance of governments “on medieval forms” like proprietorships for colonial ventures “demonstrate the durability of older ideas and forms and provide further evidence of the ambiguity of the ‘transition to modernity.’” Ibid., 9.

⁹ Chris Bayly identifies “gentlemanly capitalism”—“the successful oligarchy of land and commerce” and the “amazing consensus of aims between land and business”—as a central feature of the British empire at the turn of the nineteenth century. C.A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780-1830* (London: Longman, 1989). He takes the term from the classic study of P.J. Cain & A.G. Hopkins, “Gentlemanly Capitalism and British Expansion Overseas, I: The Old Colonial System, 1688-1850,” *The Economic History Review*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Nov., 1986) 501-25. On “gentlemanly capitalism” in the French Atlantic, see Paul Cheney, *Cul de Sac: Patrimony, Capitalism, and Slavery in French Saint-Domingue* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 11 et passim.

¹⁰ Sugar, of course, could be grown on both sides of the Atlantic, in the Canaries and the Antilles, and in different forms (i.e. brut and muscovado). Spices were also adaptable to different environments. In the 1760s, in another episode of “enlightened colonialism” generated by Choiseul’s eclectic reform agenda, Pierre Poivre transplanted nutmegs and cloves from the Dutch Moluccas to Ile de France.

trades of modernization, which consolidated contiguous geographic spaces and markets, and more the industries surrounding rare earth minerals in the twenty-first century, with extraction and supply secured in privately administered “enclaves,” and capital shuffling between discrete points of globally distended commodity chains.¹¹ And so the dynamics of this particular fragment of the French overseas economy did not necessarily correspond to those of the sugar trade, for instance. Treating the Gum Atlantic as an expression of commercial imperialism after the Seven Years War does nevertheless illuminate and account for widespread, paradoxical consequences of reform that the colonial machine literature leaves unexamined and the physiocratic interpretation leaves unexplained: namely, how the attempt to “improve” resources and rationalize commercial space and sovereignty produced market fragmentation and traditional forms of governance. Accumulation and profit still relied on monopoly and protection. Bricolage—in the form of aristocratic proprietorship—was still an adequate method of controlling global commodity chains. The full range of the imperial repertoire remained open.

For all these continuities, the Gum Atlantic also represented another turn in the dialectic of capital and critique. Investment in overseas commerce flooded in from exalted circles, which in turn generated increasingly grandiose justifications and norms. Commercial imperialism was no longer satisfied with just securing access to commodities like gum, as Gournay might have wished. Colonial agents, intellectuals, and investors began to chafe at the constraints of a market ideology, popularized by the former *intendant du commerce*, that put land and labor at the margins of the state’s priorities. They justified their projects by invoking the promethean improvement of nature and the civilization of subject populations. Whether they were committed

¹¹ James Ferguson, “Seeing Like an Oil Company: Space, Security, and Global Capital in Neoliberal Africa,” *American Anthropologist*, vol 107, issue 3 (2005), 377-82; Hannah Appel, “Offshore Work: Oil, Modularity, and the How of Capitalism in Equatorial Guinea,” *American Ethnologist*, vol. 39, no. 4 (2012), 692-709.

those objectives, or whether they sought only to make profits on gum, is in many ways immaterial to what people wanted and expected, towards the end of the old regime, out of France's institutionally fragmented, environmentally unstable, intellectually ambitious, and financially lucrative global economy.

Privilege and Impotence in Senegambia

Since 1725, when it renounced its monopoly on the French slave trade, the Compagnie des Indes had focused its African activities in Senegambia because of the region's strategic importance in global trade: unlike slaving outposts further south it was navigable throughout the year, and ships could depart from there either for the West Indies or directly back to Europe. This was of further benefit because Senegal was not exclusively, or even principally, attractive to Europeans as a source of slaves. In the scheme of the Atlantic slave trade as a whole Senegambia "was a supplier of secondary importance."¹² The situation in Senegambia continued to resemble Atlantic trade in Africa of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: Europeans went there not to secure labor but to complement their existing resources and economic networks.¹³ Such continuities might prompt a degree of skepticism towards claims, most recently advanced by Pernille Røge, that after the Seven Years War Europeans began to think of the region as a potential site of territorial expansion and incorporation.¹⁴ Well into the nineteenth century commercial dynamics between

¹² Boubacar Barry, *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 61-5. Barry estimates that something like two to three thousand slaves were exported from the region per year, which is on the high side among historians. For more conservative estimates, see James F. Searing, *West African Slavery and Atlantic Commerce: the Senegal River Valley and Atlantic Commerce, 1700-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 32, 65 et passim; Philip D. Curtin, *Economic Change in Precolonial Africa: Senegambia in the Era of the Slave Trade* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975); Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (Cambridge, 1983); David Richardson, "Slave Exports from West and West-Central Africa, 1700-1810: New Estimates of Volume and Distribution," *Journal of African History*, 30 (1989).

¹³ John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998 [1992]), 43-71.

¹⁴ Røge, *Economistes and the Reinvention of Empire*, 153-203.

the littoral establishments of European empires and Senegambian polities remained similar to those that existed in the seventeenth century. And throughout this period, the most attractive resource in the region for Europeans was gum.

Acacia trees that grew along the southern fringe of the Sahara, in a band running east to west along the northern side of the Senegal River valley, provided Europe with its sole global source of “true gum”—the best quality of the gums that Europeans purchased from Africa (another variant, “gum Arabic,” came from the Sudan) and which they had for centuries used as binders in the mixing of watercolors, and as an ingredient in confectionaries, medicines, and the production of paper. In the eighteenth century, and especially as European industries began producing their own imitation *Indiennes* (printed textiles), these gums became increasingly used as a mordant in the dyeing process, and gum Senegal was recognized as by far the superior variety (gum Arabic tended to ruin fabrics dyed in certain colors).¹⁵ The acacia forests existed firmly within the territories controlled by the Trarza and, further east, the Brakna. Supply of gum, which grows organically on the acacia tree, was dictated by complex arrangements between local politics and merchants and their slave caravans who would arrive for seasonal harvests. From around 1717 Dutch, English, and French merchants began to compete violently for coastal access to this trade, urged on by growing demand from domestic manufacturers, precipitating a series of “gum wars” that lasted until the end of the eighteenth century, when the French emerged more or less on top.¹⁶ In the 1740s Compagnie des Indes had claimed a monopoly on European supply of gum. As a result, in the decades preceding the Seven Year War

¹⁵ Jutta Wimmmler, *The Sun King's Atlantic: Drugs, Demons, and Dyestuffs in the Atlantic World, 1640-1730* (Leiden, 2017), 47-55; Christopher Leslie Brown, “1758: War and Trade on the Senegal Coast,” unpublished paper.

¹⁶ André Delcourt, *La France et les établissements français au Sénégal entre 1713 et 1763*, 179-346.



Fig. 4.1. *Carte de l'Afrique Française, ou du Sénégal*, Guillaume Delisle, 1745. Note the prominence, towards the top of the map just north of the Senegal River, of the gum forests (“*Forets ou on cueille de la Gomme*”).

the commodity chain in gum resembled that of cochineal: French merchants, with no control over production or even the territorial source, nevertheless enjoyed at least superiority (if not outright dominance) over the provision of a commodity that a booming textile manufacturing industry in Europe saw as increasingly necessary.

Both the size and value of the gum market are difficult to gauge; evidence is sporadic and anecdotal. Most sources do not distinguish between prices Europeans paid to the supplier on the Senegal River, the “free on board” price (when the gum was about to leave the coastal trading post, having incurred costs of downriver transportation and storage), and costs of insurance, credit, and transportation bound up in the price of sale in Europe.¹⁷ There are also no consistent

¹⁷ Curtin, *Economic Change in Precolonial Africa*, 217.

figures for the amount of gum traded; both harvests and European access to markets fluctuated year on year. Nevertheless, historians have established some general trends. Philip Curtin has ventured that although the volume of the gum trade scarcely changed between the 1730s and the 1780s, its value increased by nearly 500 per cent, primarily as a result of the higher prices that European manufacturers and wholesalers were willing to pay.¹⁸ In addition, the 1740s appear to have been something of a turning point, both in terms of the price of gum in Europe and, as we will see, in terms of the political pressure European merchants and manufacturers placed on their governments to secure access to Senegambian trade.¹⁹ All of which suggests that gum was a strategic commodity of transcendent importance. Several sectors of the French global economy—consumption of domestically produced printed textiles; demand for colonial dyes like cochineal and indigo; dominance of New Spain through Cadiz—hinged on its availability. And as a testament to the old regime’s imperial capacity in the decades after the Law system, by the middle of the century the Compagnie des Indes had established control over this vital commodity chain.

The fact that in 1763 Choiseul had to scramble to keep Gorée in French hands reveals much about the company’s struggles in the intervening decade. Between the War of Austrian Succession and the Seven Years War, supervision of the trade was delegated out from the company and into the hands of port merchants who had grown wealthy and powerful during the golden age of commerce. Based on the French Atlantic seaboard, these merchants had little familiarity with conditions in Senegambia. But they saw an opportunity in the alienation of the company’s trading privilege in Africa coinciding with the rising prices of gum in Europe. What

¹⁸ Ibid., 331, Table 8.8.

¹⁹ James L.A. Webb Jr. estimates that between 1744 and 1751 wholesale purchases in England went from 30s to £11.10s per metric ton. See Webb, *Desert Frontier: Ecological and Economic Change along the Western Sahel, 1600–1850* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 109, Table 5.5.

they didn't account for was the relative impotence of European merchants in the gum trade, and the ecological and political contingencies of Senegambian markets in general. This combination—high incentives, but meagre leverage—informed French attitudes towards Gorée and Senegal after the Seven Years War, as well as the radical proposals surrounding gum that saw its future tied, in one form or another, to Guiana. And so the conjuncture needs to be scrutinized further. On the one hand this means taking into account structural changes within French commercial imperialism that saw the fragmentation of company privilege in the 1750s, during a brief interval between global wars. On the other, it means taking a closer look at Senegambia and the gum trade.

The journey of this commodity from tree to market was a complex process; its extraction and exchange brought together economies of desert, savanna and ocean. Caravans of desert Moors, merchant-marabouts of the Idaw al-Hajj, would descend on the river valley with the dry November winds, when the gum harvest began. Kinsmen who resided permanently in Waalo and northern Kajoor would act as brokers, extending provisions to the merchants and their slaves while they picked gum during the harvest, which peaked in March. Extracting gum was labor-intensive, carried out by slaves who had been purchased by the moors hundreds of miles east in the middle Niger valley. Because the acacia trees were widely dispersed, an individual slave could only pick around six pounds of gum per day; each marabout supervisor owned about twenty pack animals and forty slaves—only the wealthiest merchants could afford such a commitment of time and resources. Once picked, the gum would be sent to market at *escales* on the river, where the moors would convene representatives of host societies, as well as with French merchants, who would themselves use *laptots*: intermediaries or brokers recruited from

among the slave populations at their coastal establishments, as sailors, translators, and—whenever necessary—military protection.²⁰

The encroachment of Atlantic commerce throughout the eighteenth century brought structural changes to the socio-ecological balance of the Senegambia. European demand for gum both empowered the desert moors who controlled the trade—receiving guns from Europe, rum from the Americas, and prestigious cloths from Asia in exchange—and gradually integrated them into the savanna economy around the Senegal river. Slavery became more prevalent, providing the necessary labor for both the harvest of gum and the cultivation of grain needed to support heightened economic activity and sustain the growth of European settlements on the coast. Those settlements were obliged to pay customs and duties to Senegambian states, which gained authority as a consequence. Because of its access to the Atlantic seaboard the unified kingdom of Kajoor-Bawol in particular solidified its preeminence, and would frequently boycott the provision of food and water to French establishments in order to extract further tribute. The French would in turn try to make themselves indispensable by maintaining an ample supply of indigo-dyed “guinea cloth,” imported via France from India and highly sought after by both desert moors and Wolof elites. But by and large their commercial success in the region, and especially in the gum trade, was determined by social and ecological forces beyond their control.

That much became acutely apparent towards the end of the 1740s, when the growing European demand for gum was frustrated by a severe ecological crisis in Senegambia. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were a dry period for the region, prompting what James Webb has described as the gradual “desiccation of the southern Sahara.”²¹ Over the long run this

²⁰ Philip D. Curtin, *Economic Change in Precolonial Africa*, 215-17; Searing, *West African Slavery*, 75-7 and 168; James L. A. Webb Jr., “The Trade in Gum Arabic: Prelude to French Conquest in Senegal,” *Journal of African History*, 26 (1985), 149-68.

²¹ Webb, *Desert Frontier*, 97-131.

was propitious for the gum trade: the northern limit of the acacia forests moved further south, closer to the river and therefore closer to market. But it also increased the likelihood of drought. Acacia trees exude gum once their bark has been split by hot, dry Saharan winds. Excessive rainfall hampers this process, but consecutive years of drought will halt it altogether. After a number of years of low rainfall beginning in 1746, drought hit Senegambia, bringing famine, plagues of locusts, and social and political upheaval that annihilated the gum trade and fundamentally altered the terms of French existence in the region.²²

By the early 1750s even French merchants on the coast, so often oblivious to events up-river, found the ecological crisis impossible to ignore. Eschewing luxury for necessity, desert moors and Wolof states had shifted their attentions away from gum harvesting, focusing instead on growing millet in the few areas around the river that were sufficiently irrigated for cultivation. As a result the Moors seldom did business at the river factories; if they traded gum at all they did so further north, and closer to the acacia forests, with English “interlopers” at Portendick.²³ Conditions were so desperate that company memoirs reported that poor subjects of Kajoor and Wolof were migrating to Brakna despite knowing that they would be sold from there into French captivity, seeing a future of slavery as the only alternative to the more immediate prospect of death by famine.²⁴ These morbid observations were welcomed by traders who sporadically visited Gorée and Saint-Louis to transport slaves across the Atlantic, but the intensification of the slave trade put pressure on the administration of those *comptoirs*. Resources everywhere were scarce: more captives meant more mouths to feed, and neither livestock nor grain were

²² Curtin, *Economic Change in Precolonial Africa*, 110.

²³ AN Col C 6 14 f 45, “Mémoire à la Compagnie,” 3 juin 1754: “The certitude that they would be made captives could not deter them from coming to the only place where they could relieve their misery, and since they have no alternative other than death or captivity, one can presume that the [slave] trade will continue until the harvest of millet, that is to say until the end of September.” See also See Searing, *West African Slavery*, 136-41.

²⁴ AN Col C 6 14 f 17, “Extrait de la lettre du Conseil Supérieur du Sénégal à la Compagnie,” 11 juillet 1754.

forthcoming from depleted neighboring kingdoms. By the middle of the decade, the windfalls made on gum ten years previously, when some years brought a thousand tons to the coast, were a distant memory. Like all societies in the region, the French establishments in Senegambia were faced with a fundamental problem of subsistence. Gum was a luxury.

In short, French merchants were constrained at each point of the commodity chain of gum in Senegal, from forest to river to coast. Acacia harvests were variable and in the 1750s non-existent; both access to markets and the provision of basic goods depended on tributes to and the good favor of powerful host societies; and English “interlopers” to the north were cutting into French control of the provision of gum to Europe.

Crisis in Senegal coincided with what one historian has labelled a “period of euphoria” in French colonial commerce.²⁵ Between 1748 and 1756, a hiatus between the treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle and the Seven Years War, capital flooded into a commercial sector recovering from the privations of conflict. Enthusiasm for overseas trade coincided with the discussion of commercial affairs in the public sphere, and indeed the institutional forms adopted by new colonial ventures conformed to the ideals that would be articulated by the Gournay circle in the 1750s. Wealthy merchants pooled their capital to set up companies, protected by the state, that would manage and improve designated areas of the global economy, leading to the creation, between 1748 and 1751, of the Société du Canada and the Société pour l’établissement d’une maison du commerce à Cadix (to facilitate the exploitation of a silver mine in Mexico), as well as, for the west coast of Africa, the Société de Guinée and the Société d’Angola, which assumed the Compagnie des Indes’s monopoly on trade in Senegal. (Just as it had in Bourbon in the 1730s, the company preferred to abandon its monopoly rather than confront disruptions to the

²⁵ Lüthy, *La Banque Protestante en France*, II: 42-3.

normal operations of trade.) The Guinea and Angola companies were based respectively in Le Havre and Nantes: they were outsiders to the Compagnie des Indes's established commercial networks in Senegambia, and specialized almost exclusively in the slave trade.²⁶ They saw in the region a relatively untapped source to meet demand for slave-labor in the Antilles, which had grown as a result of the interruption in transatlantic trade during the War of Austrian Succession. And unlike gum, the supply of slaves in Senegambia benefited from war and famine. These companies' supervision of Senegambian trade produced almost immediate results: rather than the usual 200 slaves exported annually from Saint-Louis and Gorée, the French exported 750 slaves in 1754 and as many as 1,100 in 1755.²⁷

The British response to the gum shortage contrasted radically with this French pivot to the slave trade. A coalition of textile manufacturers successfully petitioned the House of Commons in the spring of 1752 to allow the importation of gum from Europe, rather than directly from British colonies as the Navigation Acts required. The concession was prompted by an overestimation of French control of the trade. In any case it was soon met with a backlash that generated more aggressive proposals on how to secure the supply of gum not from French re-exports, but from Senegal directly. It was this latter course of action that eventually won the day, culminating in the 1758 capture of Saint-Louis by a coalition of cotton manufacturers, slave traders, and the Royal Navy.²⁸ And so just as the British political elite were engineering tighter cooperation between domestic manufacturing and militarized imperial trade, their French

²⁶ Delcourt, *La France et les établissements français au Sénégal*, 73–80; Herbert Lüthy, *La Banque Protestante en France*, II: 168–71 and 303–6.

²⁷ AN Col C 6 14, July 11, 1754; *ibid.*, July 31 1755. The figures are cited by Searing in *West African Slavery*, 31.

²⁸ This venture, led by Samuel Touchet and Thomas Cumming, is recounted in both Maxine Berg, "In Pursuit of Luxury: Global History and British Consumer Goods in the Eighteenth Century," *Past & Present*, No. 182 (Feb. 2004), 137–40, and Joseph E. Inikori, *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England: A Study in International Trade and Economic Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 396–403. See also Brown, "1758: War and Trade on the Senegal Coast."

counterparts were overseeing the effective outsourcing of commercial imperialism to factions more concerned with the immediate gratifications of the slave trade than with maintaining hard-won French control of a strategically important commodity. When the gum supply returned with the end of drought and war, it was the British who had control of provision to Europe.

Loss of hegemony in Senegambia in the 1750s exposed the costs of delegating commercial responsibility to entrepreneurs who, however wealthy and resourceful, lacked incentives to consider the broader implications of their business decisions. Like in the Languedoc after Gournay had abolished the regulations on the Levant trade, in Senegambia a commodity that was essential to domestic improvement and imperial competition was sacrificed for short-term profits. The company's outsourcing of monopolies in Senegambia also prefigured broader developments in the French global economy after the Seven Years War. In 1769 Diderot, as debate raged in 1769 over the abolition of the Compagnie des Indes, correctly predicted that in the place of a quasi-public institution controlled by "thirty to forty thousand citizens" (the company's shareholders) would emerge an intensified form of privilege, an oligopoly that in any case consisted of the former company's investors and directors. "*Les particuliers subalternes seront écrasés.*"²⁹ Such corporate consolidation is precisely what had enabled the creation, two decades before, of the Angola and Guinea companies, which were owned by syndics and directors of the Compagnie des Indes who could still profit on west-African trade without taking responsibility for the long-term coherence of commercial policy.³⁰ As we have seen, some

²⁹ Georges Dulac, "Les gens de lettre, le banquier et l'opinion: Diderot et la polémique sur la Compagnie des Indes," *Dix-huitième Siècle*, 26 (1994) 177-99; Anoush Terjanian, *Commerce and its Discontents in Eighteenth Century French Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 147-62. Diderot's reflections on the affair over the course of the summer of 1769 can be consulted at BNF NAF 24937 f 168-181, and are published in Diderot, *Oeuvres Complètes* (édition DPV) t XX.

³⁰ Lüthy, *La Banque Protestante en France*, II: 303-6; Delcourt, *La France et les établissements français au Sénégal*, 77-80; Pierre H. Boulle, "French Mercantilism, Commercial Companies and Colonial Profitability," in L. Blussé and F. Gaastra (eds.), *Companies and Trade: Essays on Overseas Trading Companies During the Ancien Régime* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 1981), 97-118.

fragmentation of privilege was necessary if insufficiently centralized states and imperfectly integrated companies wanted access to overseas markets.³¹ But the Angola and Guinea companies were cases of fragmentation ad absurdum. They suggested an economy with wealthy actors eager to invest in overseas trade, but desperately lacking an overarching structure to organize that investment. This somewhat paradoxical condition, in which wealth and power were both more concentrated and more incoherent, would come to define French commercial imperialism after the Seven Years War.

As a result, in west Africa the enduring legacy of this moment of unbridled euphoria in the interwar 1750s lay not so much in the short-term loss of power but in the emergence of competing visions of what that power might be for. The frustrations of metropolitan-run companies with their Senegambian concessions, which from the perspective of 1748 had been safe bets, provoked harsh recriminations of established French practices in the coastal comptoirs as well as quite radical proposals for how those deficiencies could be overcome.

From an on-the-ground perspective, there was not much that a French institution—Compagnie des Indes or otherwise—could do to change its fortunes in the region. Commercial success existed quite literally downstream from ecological and political factors in the Senegal River valley.³² Administrators who had long worked for the company in Gorée and Saint-Louis insisted that the early 1750s crisis was down to “accidental causes” beyond their control, including consecutive years of “bad harvests,” but more significantly the revolution and subsequent civil war that had taken place in Kajoor-Bawol.³³ The Angola and Guinea companies

³¹ Roper & van Ruymbeke (eds.), *Constructing Early Modern Empires*, 1-20; Jeff Horn, *Economic Development in Early Modern France: The Privilege of Liberty, 1650–1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

³² AN Col C 6 14 f 1, “Mémoire sur la diminution du commerce de la gomme au Sénégal,” 25 April 1754.

³³ AN Col C 6 14, “Réponse du Conseil Supérieur au Mémoire et Observations,” February 1754. In 1749, three years into the drought, the Geej dynasty that had been established with the unification of the kingdoms by Latsukaabe Faal in 1695 was overthrown by rival aristocratic factions, setting off a struggle for power that lasted

disagreed, vehemently. From a metropolitan perspective, the problem lay neither in natural disaster nor political instability but in company mismanagement that had allowed the populations of Saint-Louis and Gorée to swell beyond carrying capacity. What's more, the companies' shareholders and slave traders—who did business on the coasts, but rarely stayed for too long—were outraged at the particular cultures, and above all the exceptional gender and race relations, that had developed in the French comptoirs in Senegambia.

Their main grievance centered on what they saw as the outsized influence of creole women—the French-African *signares* who provided company employees access to African commercial networks.³⁴ Slave traders especially resented these local economic arrangements, which didn't exist elsewhere along the coast and which mediated their affairs with the interior economy. Their hostility was palpable in a 1754 census of Saint-Louis prompted by the famine. Out of a population of 2,500, only 800—all of them male—were deemed as “useful” in their contribution to the colony's commercial and military needs. The remaining 1,700 were women and children, domestic slaves of mulatto *habitants*. On Gorée, too, *signares* had acquired wealth and status; the richest of them could call upon retinues of up to eighty slaves and servants.³⁵ *Signares* would “marry” company administrators *à la façon du pays* (meaning for the duration of the administrators' stay in Senegal; once he left, the *signara* would be free to marry again) and would retain and pass on to their children property rights inherited from the marriage.³⁶ Metropolitan merchants blamed these female *habitants* for fostering a culture of decadence,

until 1766, and that sporadically pulled other states of the region into the turmoil. See Searing, *West African Slavery*, 131.

³⁴ George E. Brooks, “The Signares of St. Louis and Gorée: Women Entrepreneurs in Eighteenth Century Senegal,” in Nancy J. Hafkin & Edna G. Bay (eds.), *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976), 19-44.

³⁵ Brooks, “The Signares of St. Louis and Gorée”; Marie-Hélène Knight Baylac, “Gorée au XVIIIe siècle du sol,” *Revue Française d'histoire d'outre-mer*, tome 64, no. 234, 1er trimestre, 1977, 33-54; Jean-Luc Angrand, *Céleste ou le temp des signares* (Paris: A. Pépin, 2006).

³⁶ Brooks, “The Signares of St. Louis and Gorée,” 30.

contraband and excess. As far as they were concerned, the *signares*' retinues were a "surplus" slave population that rightly belonged to the French global economy, and as such they ought to be sent across the Atlantic, where they would be more productive and profitable. Even the gum trade had to be carried out through collaboration with the *signares*, since they often owned or employed the intermediaries that were crucial for upriver transportation and business. If there was a crisis in west Africa, the Angola and Guinea companies argued, it was above all because of the presence of matriarchal slave societies on Gorée and Saint-Louis.³⁷

Both the Angola and Guinea companies dissolved during the Seven Years War, as the British captured Saint-Louis and reduced the French presence in Senegambia to Gorée. Despite overseeing the decline of French commerce in the region, the companies, in retrospect, set the blueprint for how the gum trade would be managed after 1763: by proprietorships, owned by powerful investors, that assumed the burdens and benefits of managing a fragment of France's commercial empire. After the war, the companies' dissatisfaction with existing arrangements in Gorée and Saint-Louis convinced administrators and merchant elites that a radical change of policy was required to regain control of the gum trade. Reports submitted to Bertin and Choiseul before the Treaty of Paris exhibited an overwhelming desire to overcome a perceived sense of impotence, whether gendered, commercial, political or ecological. And many of the remedies that were suggested for the gum trade were articulated in the discourse of agronomy.

The Jealousy of Plants

The postwar period of euphoria in overseas commerce that saw the creation of the Angola and Guinea companies also generated a heightened scientific curiosity about France's colonial

³⁷ The accusations of merchants can be found in AN Col C 6 14, "Mémoire et Observations, Compagnie des Indes au Conseil Supérieur du Sénégal," février 1754.

territories in general. In 1748, at the conclusion of the War of Austrian Succession, a young Michel Adanson left for west Africa, having secured via his father the patronage of Robert David, a director of the Compagnie des Indes. As he wrote in *A Voyage to Senegal*, the memoir he published in 1757, the primary appeal of traveling to the tropics was the possibility of making botanical discoveries. After studying under Réaumur and Antoine and Bertrand de Jussieu at the Jardin du Roi, the twenty-one year old Adanson concluded that there was nothing left to learn about the natural history of France; equatorial Africa, hitherto ignored by European naturalists, was a place where he could make a name for himself.³⁸ During his five-year posting on Gorée the eccentric Adanson cultivated ideas about European systems of botanical classification and Senegambia's natural resources that both reflected the frustrations and fragmentation of merchant capital in the region, and also hinted at how French commercial imperialism would respond to the disappointing 1750s. In the theories that Adanson developed in west Africa, we can trace the emergence of a scientifically informed critique that, after 1763, would shape the future of the Gum Atlantic—a critique that sought to move beyond market ideology, Gournay's world of exchange, by embracing land, labor, and the production for resources.

Adanson is primarily known for developing a baroque classificatory system in opposition to the regnant Linnaean approach to botany, which identified plants according to their reproductive organs. For Adanson, this system was arbitrary and reductive. He insisted that any attempt establish identity and difference should consider each of the 66 “characters” of plants. Only this comprehensive approach would capture the infinite diversity of all living plants, known and unknown. Naturally Adanson's “universal method” lacked the simplicity of the Linnaean

³⁸ Michel Adanson, *Voyage au Sénégal*, (Sainte-Étienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, 1996 [1757]), 3-4.

system: he thought there were 92,000 possible combinations of melons.³⁹ But it was a lifelong obsession. In 1763 he published the initial fruits of his method in his *Familles des plantes*. A decade later he had extended the project to quixotic proportions, submitting to the Académie des Sciences a proposal for an immense work of 150 volumes that would apply the universal method to all beings, substances, and even to metaphysics and morality. The immodest proposal had a suitably immodest title: *Plan figuré de la méthode naturelle, c'est à dire de la marche de la Nature dans la conservation et perpétuation de toutes les existences connues ou possible, ou Orbe universel du Monde*.⁴⁰ Not many botanists adopted Adanson's "universal method"; it was derided by Linnaeus and his disciples, and largely ignored in France.⁴¹ Recognition from the academic and scientific communities did, however, arrive in piecemeal fashion: in 1759 he was nominated as a member of the Académie des Sciences as an adjunct botanist, and in 1760 he became a member of the Royal Society in London. But he would always remain an awkward fit in such exalted circles, both personally and intellectually. He lacked the patience and political acumen to climb institutional ladders and his extreme sobriety (he rarely ate and seldom drank wine, preferring sugared water) and unusual physical appearance rendered him something of a social outcast.

Socially and intellectually, Adanson's long period of isolation as a young man in Senegal was formative.⁴² Georges Cuvier speculated in a eulogy for his academic colleague that in these exotic conditions it was inevitable that Adanson's ideas—and character—would assume an

³⁹ François-Félix Nogaret to Adanson, with a draft of Adanson's reply, 1 Ventose an 8 (20th February, 1800), Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation, Pittsburgh (H.I.), Adanson Collection, AD 225.

⁴⁰ Jean-Paul Nicolas, "Adanson, the Man," in George H.M. Lawrence (ed.), *Adanson: The Bicentennial of Michel Adanson's 'Famille des plantes'* (Pittsburgh: The Hunt Botanical Library, 1963), 64-8.

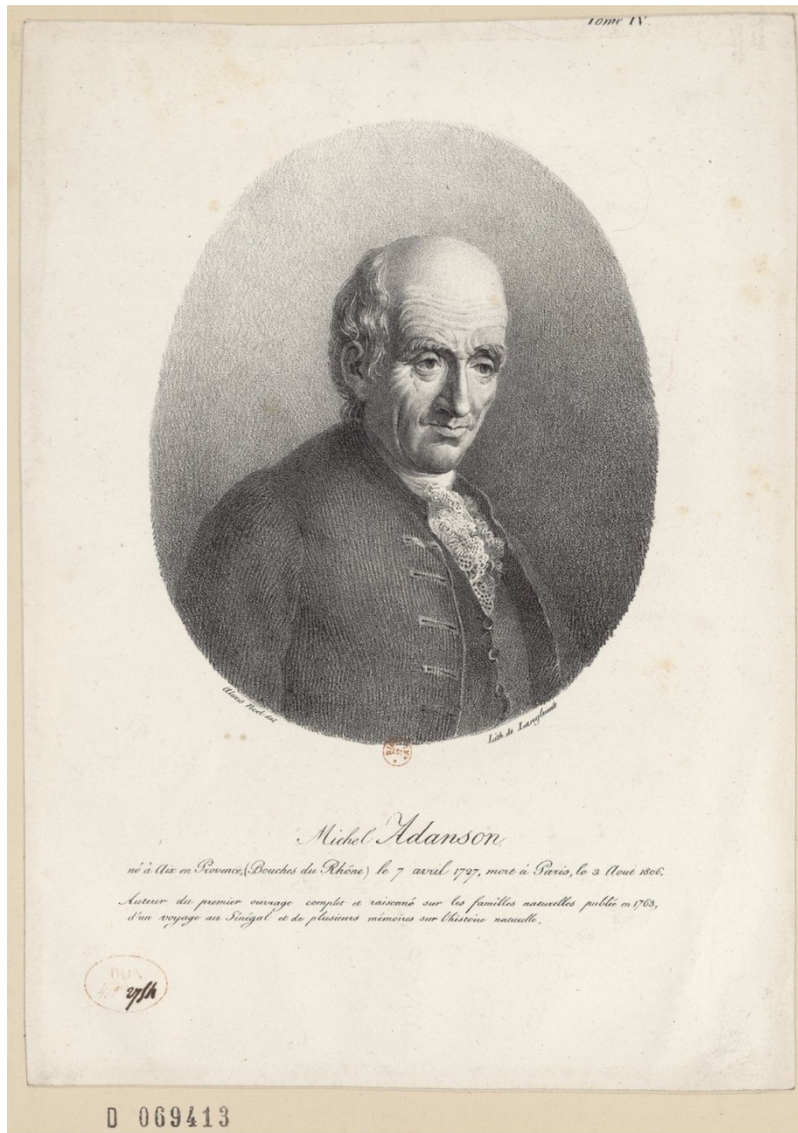
⁴¹ For Linnaeus's own adverse reactions to Adanson's *Famille des plantes*, see Nicolas, "Adanson, the Man," 50-3.

⁴² Biographical details on Adanson can be found in Alfred Lacroix, *Figure de Savants*, Tome IV, *L'Académie des Sciences et l'étude de la France d'Outre-Mer, de la fin du XVII^e siècle au début du XIX^e* (1938); Georges Cuvier, *Eloge historiques de Michel Adanson* (1806); Auguste Chevalier, *Michel Adanson, voyageur, naturaliste et philosophe* (1934); and Nicolas, "Adanson, the Man."

awkward originality: “Always alone with himself and... never exposed to those little struggles of society that make one aware of the limits of their abilities,” Cuvier wrote, it was no wonder that Adanson “would be inclined to develop exaggerated ideas about his talent, and not hesitate to frankly express them.” Almost everything that Adanson encountered in Senegal he took to be a novelty, a great discovery for European knowledge. In “the torrid zone,” he would later write, he had found plants “so singular in form... that they elude most of our systems, whose limits hardly extend beyond the plants of our climate.”⁴³ He had taken volumes of Linnaeus and Tournefort with him to Saint-Louis and Gorée, but found them to be completely useless: what he read on the page did not conform to what he saw on the ground. In his estimation, at least, the categories of natural history broke down in Senegambia—an insight that, in retrospect, mirrored the fragmentation of mercantile privilege in the region. He concluded that all existing classificatory systems were irreparably Eurocentric. In order to apprehend nature’s infinite variety, all naturalists had a duty to travel to the furthest corners of European empires and even go beyond their frontiers, just as Adanson had when he ventured inland from France’s coastal comptoirs to record the flora and fauna of Senegambia. All plants should be known not by Latin neologisms but by what they were called in local languages. Adanson’s encounter with “the torrid zone” therefore led him to make uncompromising demands of the entire representative regime of natural history. He even came up with a new orthography that dispensed with superfluous letters (replacing “qu” with “k,” and “y” with “i”). It was, he thought, a more primitive language, one that got him closer to nature.⁴⁴

⁴³ Adanson, *Familles des plantes* (Paris: Vincent, 1763), 1: clvii.

⁴⁴ François Dagognet, *Le Catalogue de la vie: étude méthodologique sur la taxonomie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1970), 45-73.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Fig. 4.2. A portrait of Michel Adanson. A posthumous biography written by an acquaintance offers the following portrait, worthy of the naturalist's attention to detail: "Adanson's bearing was extraordinarily dry and eminently nervous: the fire that ran through all his organs had not allowed his muscles to grow. He had red hair. He had rough, hairy skin furrowed by large veins; a vast skull and a high forehead; sunken eyes; thick eyebrows, long and messy; grey, passionate eyes, by turns restless and surprisingly focused: one couldn't mistake it: it was the scrupulous look of genius, of an observant mind. His face, a gaunt oval, was made remarkable by a long, large nose. The lower jaw protruded slightly; the mouth was large with a thick lower lip. His voice, very animated, was both mordant and agreeable. His gestures were lively and impatient. He was scarcely five feet tall." Claude François Le Joyand, *Notices sur la vie, les travaux, les découvertes, la maladie et la mort de Michel Adanson* (1806), 26.

Curious and bombastic, Adanson nevertheless provided a language for those who had seen potential in the region—whether commercial or scientific—only to be frustrated by the crisis of the early 1750s. Adanson, too, recognized that French power was constrained, although not by environmental factors. Somewhat embarrassingly for an observant naturalist, he didn't seem to notice that he had arrived in west Africa in the middle of a drought. Like the Angola and Guinea companies, Adanson blamed French impotence on the functionaries of the *Compagnie des Indes* who had grown corrupt and passive after years spent in the torrid zone. Adanson hated his fellow inhabitants on Saint-Louis, and the enmity was mutual.⁴⁵ The letters he sent to Antoine and Bernard de Jussieu, his patrons in the Académie des Sciences, were full of complaints about the ignorance of company employees and their disdain for his work.⁴⁶ Ostracized, Adanson busied himself with learning the Wolof language, taking instruction about the region from an inhabitant of Galam (who went by the name of the “Grand Scipion”), and busying himself with his small garden, where he experimented on indigo samples. All of which led him to insist repeatedly to the Jussieus that the “interior” of the country was “beautiful and fertile,” and that given all the new resources that could be found there, the company, or better yet the crown, had both a scientific and a commercial “obligation” to conquer Gambia, “the most fertile country in the universe.”⁴⁷

Adanson's reports on Senegal exhibited many of the tendencies that would come to define “enlightened” reforms of French empire after the Seven Years War. Like later physiocrats

⁴⁵ A helpful if slightly hagiographic summary of Adanson's experience in Senegal can be found in Xavier Carteret, “Michel Adanson au Sénégal (1759-1754): Un grand voyage naturaliste et anthropologique au siècle des lumières,” *Revue d'histoire des sciences*, 2012/1 (Vol. 65), 5-25.

⁴⁶ Alfred Lacroix transcribed the majority of Adanson's correspondence to the Jussieu brothers (the letters he received in return have not been found) in “Lettres d'Adanson,,” *Michel Adanson au Sénégal (1749-53)*, Extrait du *Bulletin du Comité d'Etudes historiques et scientifiques de l'Afrique Occidentale Française*, Tome XXI, No.1, Janvier-Mars, 1938.

⁴⁷ Adanson à Messieurs de Jussieu, 1 August 1750; Adanson à Messieurs de Jussieu, 10 February 1751.

and functionaries of the colonial machine, Adanson balanced a heightened interest in and appreciation of indigenous people and their knowledge of local resources—a kind of humanism that suggested, sometimes explicitly, opposition to slavery—with demands for greater territorial incorporation and more efficient exploitation.⁴⁸ In the margins of his copy of Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie*, he hastily sketched a blueprint for colonizing the region:

Make Senegal, along the Niger from its mouth, and along the Gambia to Galam, not a white settlement, but, under the direction of five to six hundred whites at most, a vast cultivation to occupy all negroes, all free and voluntary slave farmers of the country, to supply the whole of Europe with its consumption of sugar, coffee, cocoa, gum arabic, and incense.⁴⁹

There is much in this passage that will be familiar to historians of Enlightenment botany and empire. Despite his hostility towards the Eurocentric nomenclature of other naturalists, Adanson nevertheless participated in the grand project of collecting and classifying the world, coaxing imperial powers into the vast “interiors” of continents, where out of fertile chaos science could produce order and wealth. Administrative elites saw the possibility of territorial control in the expertise of naturalists, whose taxonomic grids, as François Dagognet has pointed out, resembled the cultivated fields of the familiar European countryside, their ridges and furrows monuments to the taming of nature by human ingenuity.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, as Mary Louise Pratt has argued at length, the more colloquial travel journals served the same function for a broader public.⁵¹ Adanson published his own version, *Voyage to Senegal*, in 1757, full of thrilling tales of

⁴⁸ In that sense Adanson participated in what Michèle Duchet labelled the “colonial ideology” of the Enlightenment. See Duchet, *Anthropologie et histoire au Siècle des Lumières: Buffon, Voltaire, Rousseau, Helvétius, Diderot* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995 [1971]), 135-70.

⁴⁹ Quoted in André Bailly, *Défricheurs d’inconnu: Peiresc, Tournefort, Adanson, Saporta* (Aix-en-Provence: Edisud, 1992), 142.

⁵⁰ Dagognet, *Le Catalogue de la vie*, 42.

⁵¹ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 30-7.

courageous encounters with snakes and crocodiles, pleasant dealings with local populations, and lush descriptions of the “pure nature” of Gambia, “a veritable cabinet of natural philosophy.”⁵²

Yet in addition to its generic qualities, the passage quoted above expressed ambitions that were particular to France’s presence in Senegal. Insistence on the region’s potential for natural improvement was fundamentally at odds with a prevailing determination to stick to the coasts, ensnaring whatever resources that arrived there from the Senegal River. Neither the *Compagnie des Indes* nor the Angola and Guinea companies, with their preference for slave trading, were likely to find Adanson’s “colony of universal cultivation” desirable. But it was a vision of empire in which France had more control: where it produced things in the interior, rather than simply receiving them from the interior. Adanson was advocating the incorporation of the Antilles into Senegambia, where not only gum Arabic but also coffee and sugar could be cultivated. Moreover, the productivity of the Antilles would be replicated without incurring the moral cost of a brutal labor regime: all would be grown by “free and voluntary slave farmers.” This nonsensical category can be seen as a clumsy but explicit articulation of the limits of Enlightenment humanism, and of the inherent paradoxes of commercial imperialism. Just as Gournay mutually embraced the emancipatory potential of “market society” and the hard power of the antimarket, so Adanson apparently envisaged colonial cultivation as a compound of freedom and slavery. In their immediate context, Adanson’s suggestions, despite being at odds with the intentions of his superiors, represented the emergent desires of those who wished to reverse the traditional constraints of French trade in Senegal through the “enlightened” management of people and natural resources.

⁵² Adanson, *Voyage au Sénégal*, 54 and 164.



Fig. 4.3. Adanson, “Carte générale du Sénégal, Juillet 1757.” H.I. AD 260. Adanson’s annotations contain political commentaries and brief remarks on the natural resources of various regions.

Adanson's suggestions and publications were always likely to be ignored by company administrators. But after returning to France in 1753, his patience with his merchant companions exhausted, the naturalist soon found common cause with the "new agriculture" movement that was gaining prestige towards the end of the 1750s. Thanks largely to the efforts of Duhamel de Monceau, reformist statesmen (especially Bertin) and a significant number of the upper nobility and country gentleman interested in "improvement" turned to agronomy, a scientific approach to agriculture that borrowed much, including taxonomical and statistical methods, from botany. Agronomy was accepted as a legitimate discipline by the Académie des Sciences in 1753; between 1757 and 1763 sixteen royal agricultural societies were created. Several new editions of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts on French agriculture were published, including Olivier de Serres's *Théâtre d'agriculture* and Louis Liger's *La nouvelle maison rustique*.⁵³ After establishing a relationship with Duhamel in 1758, Adanson went on to become an enthusiastic agronomist in his own right.⁵⁴ Throughout the 1760s he experimented on wheat cultivation around Paris (Fig. 4.4.), and in 1768 he wrote to the controller general of finances, de Laverdy, offering his services as censor and editor of the *Gazette d'Agriculture et de Commerce*, as well as to the Compagnie des Indes, which he claimed was lacking expertise in mining, natural history and agriculture.⁵⁵ In a lengthy proposal to Choiseul in 1763, Adanson recommended, as if in passing, that he supervise an agricultural improvement project for the whole kingdom, in

⁵³ André Bourde, *Agronomie et agronomes en France au XVIIIe siècle*, 3 vols (Paris: S.E.V.P.E.N., 1967). On agricultural societies see Daniel Roche, *Le siècle des lumières en province*; idem., *France in the Enlightenment*, 498-505. For the *philosophes'* embrace of agronomy see John Shovlin, *The Political Economy of Virtue*, 49-79.

⁵⁴ As well as the wheat experiments mentioned here, Adanson corresponded with Duhamel, his colleague in the Academy of Sciences (Duhamel du Monceau to Adanson [ca.1765], H.I. AD 192; idem., 3 mai 1772, H.I. AD 193) and until his death he was a reader of agronomic literature: his library contained Serres's *Théâtre d'agriculture* (H.I. AD 119) and an annotated copy of Flamen d'Assigny's *De l'agriculture considérée dan ses rapports avec l'économie politique d'ou l'on déduit la nécessité d'établir des fermes expérimentales pour fonder l'art agricole* (1804) (H.I. AD 59).

⁵⁵ Adanson to Laverdy, 20 mars 1768, H.I. AD 130.

which he would test the land of each province, gauge the current revenue of each landowner, and seek to retrieve old crops and introduce new ones.⁵⁶ These endeavors, as was so often the case with Adanson, never amounted to much. Nevertheless, Adanson's taste for agronomy was in keeping with European elites' general infatuation with the practical benefits of natural science, as politicians and Enlightenment thinkers sought the roots of progress—economic, social, and moral—in land and soil. As Emma Spary has written, both natural history and agronomy “appeared to offer solutions to the problems of moral and physical degeneration of the nation.”⁵⁷ And towards the end of the Seven Years War, they offered solutions to the same problems in the colonies.

As that conflict was drawing to a close and Choiseul was soliciting scientific projects that would help revive the fortunes of the empire, a faction of agronomists saw an opportunity to carry out their regeneration project in Guiana. The principal agitators were Brûletout de Préfontaine, a longtime inhabitant of Cayenne, Etienne-François Turgot, the brother of the famous *philosophe*, and Adanson. The three of them had in all likelihood met at the salon of the Jussieu brothers towards the beginning of 1762.⁵⁸ Turgot was close friends with Duhamel de Monceau, and counted Hector Saint-Jean de Crèvecoeur, the future “American farmer,” as his protégé. He was a founding member of the Société d'Agriculture de Paris (1761) and as the “Chevalier of Malta” he had spent years on the island experimenting with the naturalization of bananas, coffee, cotton and mulberry trees.⁵⁹ Préfontaine was an ambitious improver in his own right. In 1763 he released an instruction manual for aspirational plantation owners. He called it

⁵⁶ AN C 6 15 f 2.

⁵⁷ Emma C. Spary, *Utopia's Garden: French Natural History from Old Regime to Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 125.

⁵⁸ Godfroy-Tayart de Borms, “La guerre de sept ans et ses consequences atlantiques,” 184.

⁵⁹ Bourde, *Agronomie et agronomes en France*, 444-5. See Crèvecoeur, *Lettres d'un cultivateur Américain* (Paris, 1784), 2 vols.

Maison rustique: à l'usage des habitants de la partie de la France équinoxale, connue sous le nom de Cayenne, burnishing his credentials with a nod to the venerable title of Louis Liger and, before him in the sixteenth century, Charles Estienne, whose *Prædium Rusticum* of 1554 was the foundational text in the invented tradition of Enlightenment agronomy.⁶⁰ Préfontaine's *Maison rustique* (about which more below) was dedicated to Choiseul and was published by Jean-Sébastien Bauche, who was also responsible for the publication in the same year of *Voyage à la Martinique* by Thibault de Chanvalon, leader of the disastrous expedition to Kourou alongside Turgot. It appeared with a note of approbation for the censors, written by Michel Adanson, honorable member of the Académie des Sciences.

Adanson, though, had a slightly less public role in this campaign for the agronomically informed colonization of Guiana. In 1762, after the meeting of minds at the Jussieu salon, Choiseul commissioned reports on the agricultural potential of Guiana from two naturalists: Jean-Baptiste Christian Fusée Aublet and Adanson. The minister wanted affirmation that Guiana was the new frontier, a colony untarnished by the failings of past ventures and a place where France's colonial commodities could grow. Senegal, which Adanson knew best, was the opposite: a site of markets in which the French had once been dominant, but which were now controlled by the British, and where the history of the failing Compagnie des Indes cast a long shadow. In addition, it was hard to see how the French could make significant inroads to the gum trade from Gorée, likely to be their one remaining possession after the war, so much further south than Saint-Louis and the mouth of the river. Not that this stopped Adanson from presenting himself as useful. In the summer of 1763—one year after being commissioned, and four months

⁶⁰ Emilie d'Orgeix et Céline Frémaux, "La petite maison dans les abattis ou l'art de rédiger aux bois par Jean Antoine de Brûletout, chevalier de Préfontaine dans son habitation de la France équinoxale (1754-1763), *In Situ*, 21 (2013), 1-13; Regourd, "Kourou 1763. Succès d'une enquête, échec d'un projet colonial," 237-43.

after the Treaty of Paris—he eventually submitted to Choiseul a sprawling, two-part memoir, just shy of one hundred manuscript pages and all written in his idiosyncratic orthography, in which he offered his services as imperial botanist-at-large, whose responsibilities would include a decade-long grand tour of the crown’s remaining Atlantic possessions, herborizing and speculating about the economic potential of the natural terrains he would encounter.⁶¹

Adanson framed his proposal with a prologue designed to capture the minister’s reluctant attention—a remarkable theory of botany and war. Turning to antiquity, he listed the “long and ruinous wars” that had been caused by the jealousy of plants: Adrian had destroyed Jerusalem so he could possess cedar; Xerxes invaded Athens and Cato Carthage for figs. “How many troubles has the date tree stirred up in the Levant? And in our times, hasn’t nutmeg armed the Dutch in the Indies? Is mahogany not the subject of war between the diverse nations in Brazil?” And the Seven Years War, Adanson reminded Choiseul, had been fought over gum.⁶²

“As I was doing research on this tree that produces true Gum Arabic,” he went on, “I easily foresaw that Senegal”—and with it “this object so useful to commerce”—“might one day be taken from us.” Fortunately for Choiseul and France, Adanson boasted “exclusive knowledge” of the acacia tree that produced “true gum,” the commodity that generated so much hostility but about which all Europeans were ignorant. This was not a topic that Adanson had been particularly exercised about during his stay in Senegal. He had briefly mentioned acacia gum in his project for a colony of universal cultivation, but only because acacia trees already

⁶¹ Despite the enormity of the project some of Adanson’s immediate personal demands were modest: a *rente viagère* of 4,000 l.t. for himself and an “annual gratification” of 500 l.t. for his mother, who would be abandoned in his absence. He did however request to be named the heir apparent to Buffon’s position at the Jardin du Roi.

⁶² Adanson laid out his proposal over two documents. The first, a general description of Gorée, can be found at AN F 3 60 f 3; the second contains the details of how Adanson envisaged executing the proposal, and can be found at AN C 6 15 f 2. The title he gave to the project as a whole was “Pièces instructives, concernant l’isle Gorée, avec un projet et des vues utiles relativement au nouvel établissement de Cayene, communiquées et présentées à monsieur le duc de Choiseul, ministre de la guerre et de la marine, par M Adanson de l’Académie des Sciences et de la Société Royale de Londres, mai et juin 1763.”



Fig. 4.5. Detail of Adanson's map of the Senegal River valley (Fig. 4.3). In the center reads the inscription: "These 3 forests provide the gum of Senegal." The attention Adanson paid to gum in this map is negligible in comparison to Delisle's rendering (Fig. 4.1), which is consistent with his general lack of interest in the commodity prior to 1763.

grew in the unparalleled fertility of Gambia. In his map of the region the gum forests were practically an afterthought, especially when compared to contemporary cartographic representations of Senegambia by Europeans (see Figs. 4.5). Indigo and the possible introduction of coffee were far more prominent in his correspondence and youthful proposals. Ten years later he was claiming a unique understanding of the particular acacia tree that produced the "true gum Arabic," a distinction that even the inhabitants of Senegambia were unable to make. Staying true to his passion for taxonomic disputes, Adanson insisted only he could name the *vrai gommier*, and as Dagognet has argued about eighteenth-century botany, "anyone who knew the exact name could use it as a sort of talisman to discover the thing itself and everything related to it."⁶³ In this case, Adanson's expertise gave him the ability to move the acacia tree across the Atlantic.⁶⁴

⁶³ Dagognet, *Le Catalogue de la Vie*, 33.

⁶⁴ Adanson was not alone in calling for this continental gum transplant. A year before he submitted his memoir to Choiseul, a merchant from La Rochelle who had apparently spent 27 years in Gorée made the exact same suggestion "Mémoire concernant la transplantation des gommiers arabiques à la Guyane," BN NAF 5398. (I have not yet had the opportunity to consult this manuscript.) Cited in Victor de Novion, *Extraits des auteurs qui ont écrit sur la*

Reversing the logic of his project for universal cultivation in Senegal, in 1763 he proposed to Choiseul that west Africa could be recovered in Guiana.

The minister was intrigued but ultimately unpersuaded. Fusée Aublet was the naturalist dispatched to Guiana. Above an eight-page extract of Adanson's project forwarded to the marquis de Fénélon, the governor of Martinique, someone from the Secretary of the Marine had scrawled: "The king is not in a position to commit to such a considerable expense, however commendable the project."⁶⁵ Briefly convinced by the physiocratic critique of the French mercantile system, Choiseul opted to throw his weight behind the Kourou expedition instead of a project that recuperated a strictly commercial commodity. Adanson moved in the same circles as Turgot and Chanvalon, and he paid lip service to their conviction that Guiana should be populated by productive white colonists—not Alsatians, certainly, but laborers, gardeners, and fishermen from the Languedoc and Provence, and certainly not "ignorant" slaves and "self-interested" merchants.⁶⁶ But his project, in all its eccentricity, did not conform to the physiocratic doctrine, which held that colonies could only generate progress and prosperity if they were agricultural and afforded equal status with the metropole. Choiseul wanted Guiana to serve as a continental backstop to the Antilles, providing both markets for and provisions to the plantation complex. Gum would fulfil neither of these objectives.

The dramatic failure of the Kourou expedition—evident as soon as 1765, by which time most of the nearly 10,000 Alsatian pioneers had succumbed to malnutrition or disease—was quickly received as an illustration of the impossibility of creating a physiocratic utopia in the

Guyanes: suivis du catalogue bibliographique de la Guyane (Paris: Betheune et Plon, 1844), 612; Godfroy-Tayart de Borms, "La guerre de sept ans et ses conséquences atlantiques," 176 fn38.

⁶⁵ AN C 8b 11 f 14, Secrétariat d'État à la Marine à François Louis de Salignac de Lamotte, marquis de Fénélon, gouverneur de la Martinique, 6 août 1763.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

colonies.⁶⁷ It is also an episode that sits uneasily with the “colonial machine” interpretation of post-Seven Years War reform. Along with Fusée Aublet, Choiseul dispatched to Guiana cartographers, hydrographers and astronomers, whose research, if it reached the Bureau des Colonies, was ignored.⁶⁸ By contrast, Adanson’s proposed link between the gum trade and Guiana, notably overlooked by the state in 1763, endured until the end of the old regime. Gum continued to be an object of financial speculation, but also a symbol—a sort of talisman, following Dagoguet—of all that Guiana represented: a place where the constraints and frailties of French trade and overseas power could be overcome, and where the experiences of Senegal over the previous decades could be reversed. The philosophical underpinnings of Adanson’s project are therefore worth a closer look. Ironically, this awkward botanist, so often an outcast, seemed to capture in his speculations the ascendant intellectual fashions of French commercial imperialism after the Seven Years War: a celebration of the economic utility of botany and the virtues of agrarianism; an emphasis on the organization of land and the disciplining of labor; and a fascination with logics of civilization and racial hierarchy.

Colonial Agronomy

In Guiana, French reaction to the humiliations of the Seven Years War manifested itself in a desire to control the land. Préfontaine’s *Maison rustique* came equipped with engravings detailing best practices for clearing land, growing crops, and managing slaves. The pièce de résistance came on the last page in a plate, two-thirds of which consisted of a bird’s eye depiction of Préfontaine’s existing estate in Macouria, an impressive plot with all the trappings of a profitable and moral organization (sugar mill, warehouse, chapel), and the final third

⁶⁷ Rothschild, “A Horrible Tragedy in the French Atlantic,” 88-9.

⁶⁸ Charles & Cheney, “The Colonial Machine Dismantled,” 156-9.

dedicated to an idealized rendering of the rational plantation, more organized and symmetrical, promising heightened discipline and productivity (Fig. 4.7).⁶⁹ Geometry became a motif in the post-63 Guiana literature. Jean-Samuel Guisan, a Swiss engineer stationed in the Approuage region in the 1770s, dedicated large chunks of his *Traité sur les terres noyées de la Guyane* to calculating the perfect size of concession and the exact number of slaves to weed and cultivate each parcel of land in each concession.⁷⁰ As with the depictions of the Lower Mississippi Valley by Andrew Jackson's General Land Office or the linear arrangements of contemporary Prussian forestry, the purpose of imagining the swamps and marshes of Guiana as abstract, rectangular grids was to make them appear more legible and therefore governable: to transform unruly territory into valuable property (Fig. 4.8).⁷¹ Representations of Guiana, a relatively unknown frontier, were therefore in keeping with the technocratic template that the "new science" of agronomy was applying to land in France.

That is not to say that the particularities of Guiana's natural resources were ignored or obscured by an abstract, improving worldview. Guisan began his *Traité* with a chapter distinguishing the four qualities of soil to be found in the low-lying lands (*terres basses*), which ended with an assertion that the top two qualities would grow anything: "they will produce all the colonial commodities [*les denrées coloniales*], in whatever proportion satisfies the cultivator."⁷² It was crucial, however, not simply to assume the quality of the soil from the trees

⁶⁹ See the extended commentaries in d'Orgeix et Frémaux, "La petite maison dans les abattis" and Regourd, "Kourou 1763. Succès d'une enquête, échec d'un projet colonial."

⁷⁰ Jean-Samuel Guisan, *Traité sur les terres noyées de la Guyane, appelées communément Terres-Basses: sur leur dessèchement, leur défrichement, leur culture et l'exploitation de leurs productions, avec des réflexions sur la régie des esclaves et autres objet* (Cayenne: l'Imprimerie du Roi, 1788), 313-33.

⁷¹ See respectively Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 34-42, and James C. Scott, *Seeing Like A State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 11-52.

⁷² Guisan, *Traité sur les terres noyées*, 5-17.

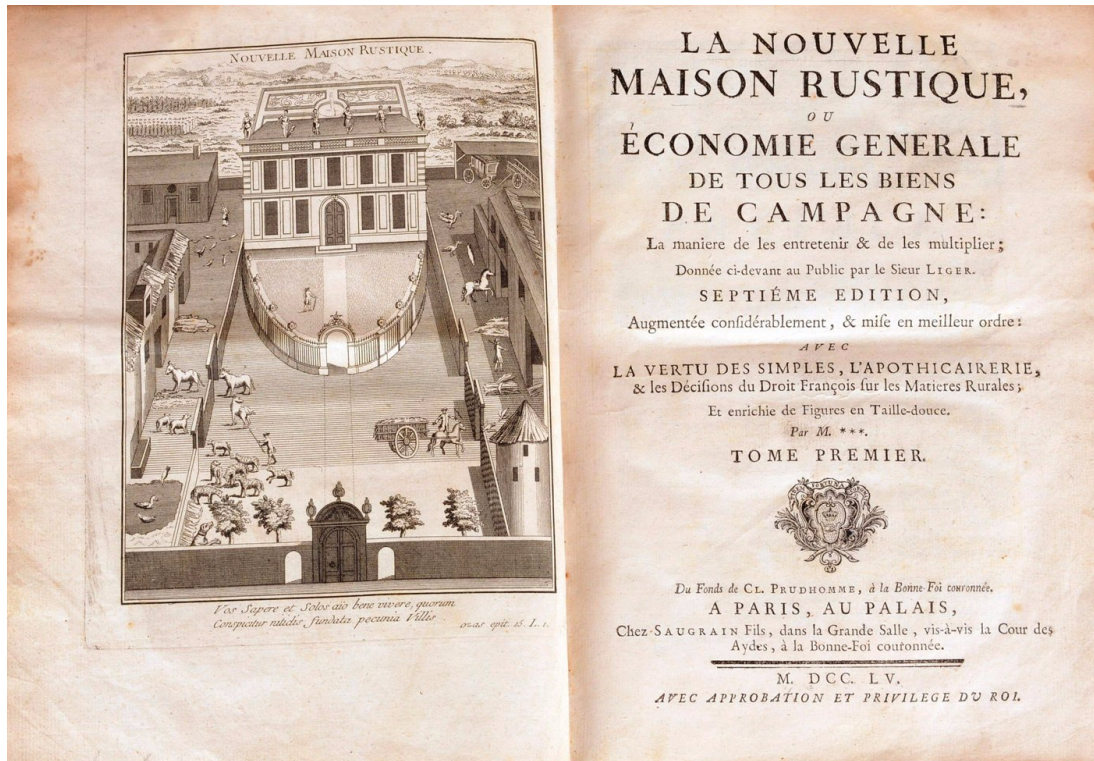


Fig. 4.6. Frontispiece of an eighteenth-century edition of Louis Liger's *La nouvelle maison rustique*. The similarity with Préfontaine's idealized plantation (below right) is striking.

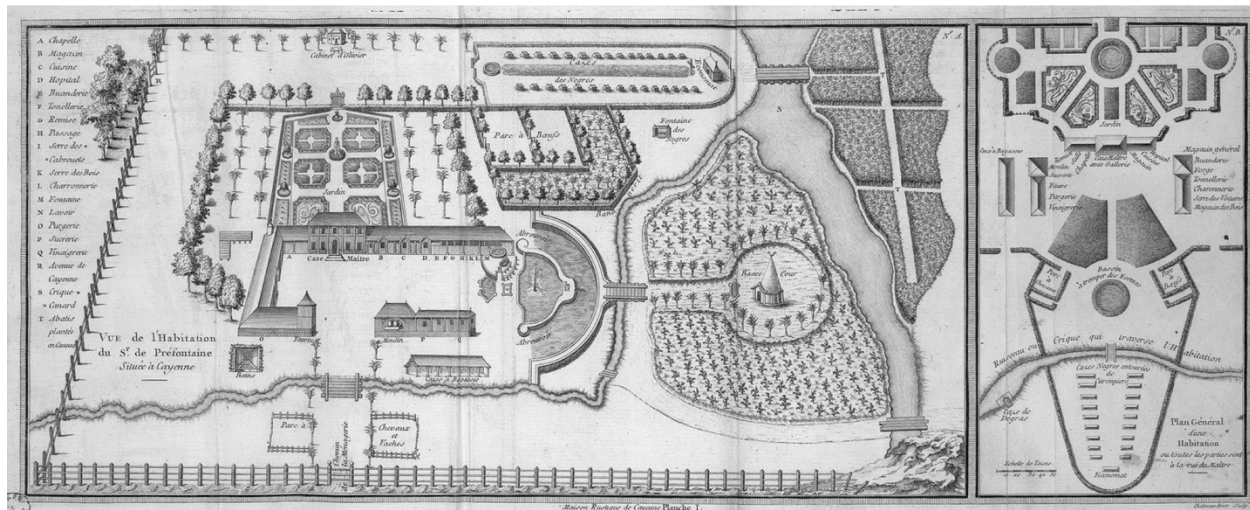


Fig. 4.7. The final plate of Bruletout de Préfontaine's *Maison rustique*. On the left is a depiction of his plantation in Cayenne as it apparently existed in 1763. On the right, from a top-down perspective, is Préfontaine's plan for the ideal plantation. Captives' houses are now situated at the bottom of the plan, in full view of the estate, behind which is a classical garden.

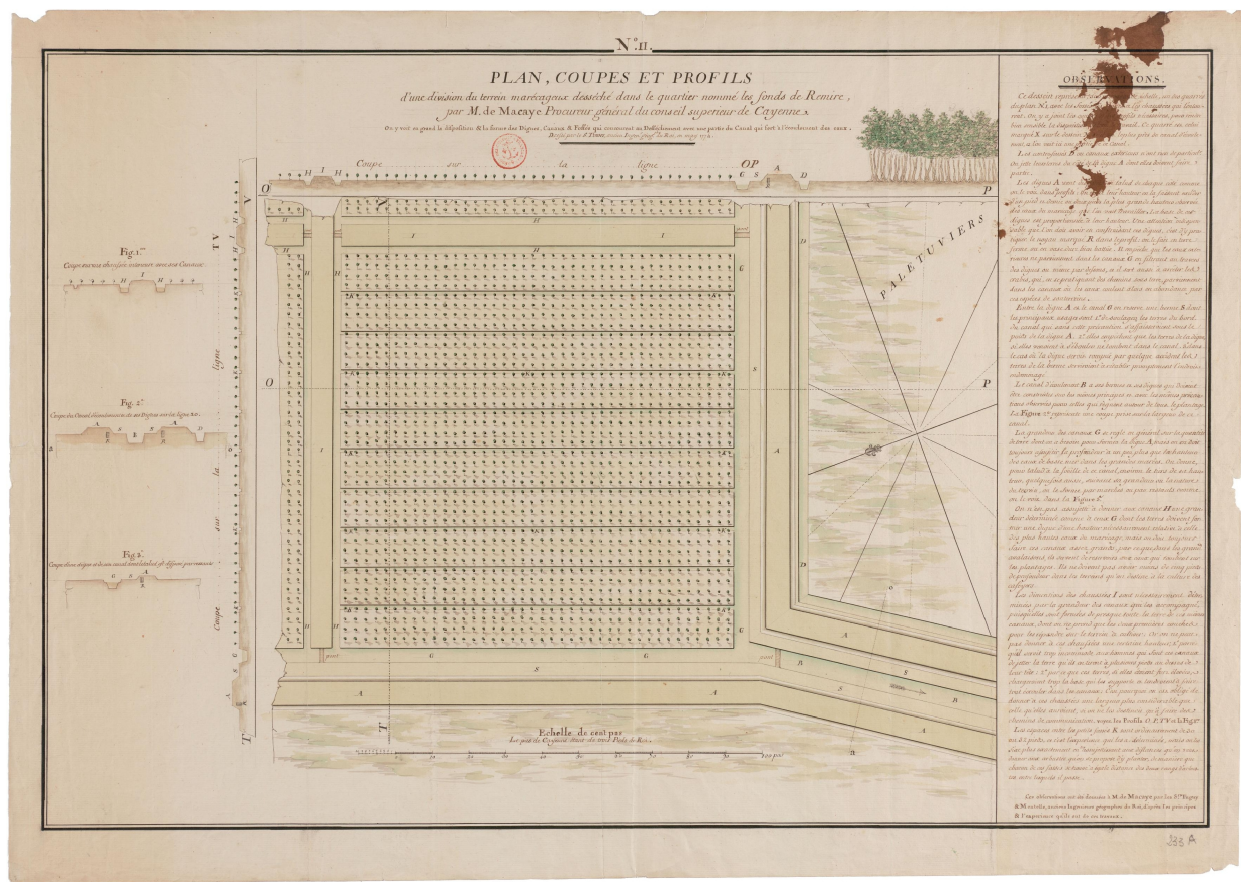


Fig. 4.8. Plan to impolder land around Fonds de Rémire, Cayenne, by Claude de Macaye, 1774, FR ANOM 14 DFC 233A. The irrigation of marshland on the northern coast of Guiana was widespread in the 1770s and 80s, allowing settlers to grow cash crops in organized lots of the sort envisaged by Adanson in his plan for the gum plantations.

and plants by which it was already covered. The improver had to hack away at the natural foliage to discover the potential beneath. Speculations on the commercial potential of the colony were almost always ventured amidst discussions of the fertility and carrying capacity of the land. In 1777 Bertand Bajon, a doctor who had accompanied the Korou expedition, published a natural history (dedicated to Sartine, then minister of the navy) of the diseases and epidemics that had afflicted Cayenne, but he digressed in a penultimate chapter on the *culture des terres*. Bajon confessed in the preface to not having developed his own *habitation*, but pleaded that “agriculture is not indifferent to my research,” before expounding at length on the proper sites

and methods for the cultivation of sugar, cotton, coffee, cacao and tobacco. In general, this survivor of Kourou insisted, “the soil is not as barren as people have been led to believe.”⁷³ Guisan, who was altogether more sanguine about the colony’s potential, also included his most optimistic calculations in his chapter “On Climate,” where he pointed out that in 1775 the soil of neighboring Surinam had produced 320,000 lbs of sugar, 387,000 lbs of coffee, 970,000 lbs of cotton, and 790,000 lbs of cotton. Or, to translate the fertility of the land to a pecuniary value, that year Surinam had produced revenues of 32 million l.t.. There was no reason that Guiana, with exactly the same land, could not produce the same, so long as that land was subjected to the right management.⁷⁴

In Guiana as in France, agronomy allowed the improver to tackle questions of labor and profit through considerations of climate, soil and health—an empirical approach that was largely absent in the Kourou expedition, informed above all by the uncompromising tenets of physiocracy. It is perhaps no surprise that, after Kourou, this ascendant science would attach itself above all to Guiana, a new frontier in the global economy, where French imperial interests were relatively unencumbered by past failures or foreign competition. As Michèle Duchet has remarked upon at length, despite the disastrous outcome of Kourou the region remained the focal point of “enlightened colonialism” in the final decades of the old regime.⁷⁵ Most commentary on this phenomenon has focused on debates surrounding the productivity and humanity of slavery, with the positions of improvers ranging from hyper-disciplinarian to abolitionist. What this commentary often overlooks is that the broader context of these debates can be found in the

⁷³ Bertrand Bajon, *Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire de Cayenne et de la Guiane Française, dans laquelle on fait connaître la nature du climate de cette contrée, les maladies qui attaquent les Européens nouvellement arrivés, et celles qui regnent sur les blancs et les noirs* (Paris, 1777) I: xiii-xiv & 2: 360-402.

⁷⁴ Guisan, *Traité sur les terres noyées*, 335-42.

⁷⁵ Duchet, *Anthropologie et histoire au siècle des Lumières*, 120-9, 158 and 170-5.

agronomic zeal that first directed the attentions of philosophes and elites to Cayenne in 1763.⁷⁶ And what has been almost entirely ignored is the strange relationship between this new frontier and Ile Gorée. From 1763 onwards, these two poles of the Gum Atlantic shared demographic, financial, and institutional fates, despite—or perhaps because of—the fact that Guiana was supposed to be everything that Senegal was not: a landscape where abundant water could be managed, rather than one afflicted by drought; a place where Frenchmen controlled local populations, instead of relying on them; and above all an agricultural colony, not a purely commercial one.

For Adanson, Guiana was not so much the polar opposite of Senegal as a climatic substitute. He figured that Ile Gorée and Cayenne were situated on roughly the same latitude, two Atlantic terminals in what he referred to as the “torrid zone” of the “Boreal hemisphere.”⁷⁷ Adanson had never been to Guiana. His main if not only source of information was Préfontaine’s *Maison rustique*, whose virtues Adanson extolled in his memoir to Choiseul (in addition to writing the censors’ approval for the book), and which had persuaded him that the climate around Cayenne was “analogous” to that of Senegambia, enough so to facilitate a kind of Columbian Exchange of natural resources between the two regions.⁷⁸ All told, forty-one species of plant would be sent across the Atlantic, along with as many cows, goats, elephants and camels

⁷⁶ See François Regourd, “Maîtriser la nature: un enjeu colonial. Botanique et agronomie en Guyane et aux Antilles (XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles),” *Revue française d’histoire d’outre mer*, 322-3 (1999), 39-63.

⁷⁷ They are not on the same latitude: Gorée is situated on 14 degrees North, Cayenne on 5 degrees North. The itinerary Adanson proposed to Choiseul for his global botany tour clarified the parameters of this geography, which stretched from the Canary Islands down to Cape Verde, along the west coast of Africa (Gorée, Senegal, Sierra Leone), and across the Atlantic to Cayenne, Martinique, Guadeloupe, Saint Domingue, and Louisiana. In this context, “Boreal” simply means “northern hemisphere.”

⁷⁸ Alfred W. Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport: Greenwood, 1972). Adanson argued that many of the natural resources that northern Europeans took for granted had initially “migrated” or been transferred from elsewhere: “Wasn’t wheat,” he asked rhetorically, “which serves as the principal resource for so many people in France, first transplanted there from Egypt?”

that the French could get their hands on.⁷⁹ Gorée did still have value, then, in its proximity to the natural bounties of west Africa he had “discovered” ten years previously. The little coastal island should be repurposed, Adanson argued, to serve not as a gateway to African commerce but as a “nursery” (*pépinière*) from which specimens, seeds and saplings of Senegal’s resources could be sent to Cayenne, where the land was that much more fertile and hospitable.

A growing colony would therefore gain, as if overnight, resources for agriculture, medicine, transport and artillery. But most crucially it would get gum. Far more so than at any point in his youthful correspondence from Senegal, Adanson displayed a keen knowledge of the prices and market behavior of gum in peace and war. Costing typically between 3 and 6 l.t. per pound, he continued, a gum trade of around 600 tonnes would bring in around 3.6 million and 7.2 million l.t.. And that was in a bad year. In a good year, with roughly three times as much gum, the market would be anywhere between 10.8 million and 22.4 million l.t.. Under Adanson’s supervision, Guiana could recuperate that within twenty, maybe even fifteen years. All he needed was a terrain that could accommodate two one-league-squared plantations. (One league squared, or 7 square miles, is enough to cover Manhattan from Midtown to Morningside Heights.) From that point on, the geometric logic of growth would take its course. Supervising the first transfer of seeds from Gorée himself, he would begin by planting one-sixteenth of the first plantation, which would accommodate 360,000 saplings, each spaced 3 *toises* apart.⁸⁰ Each year more seeds would arrive, until within “five or six years” one quarter of the first plantation would be covered in 1,140,000 *pieds d’arbres*. After ten years the first plantation alone, now at capacity with 5,760,000 acacia trees, would produce 2 million l.t. of gum for the market; after fifteen the value

⁷⁹ The detail for the preceding paragraph and what follows is all based on Adanson’s “second memoir” to Choiseul, AN Col C 6 15 f 2.

⁸⁰ One *toise* is roughly six feet.

would rise to 10 million l.t.. (Among the conditions that Adanson demanded of Choiseul was a 10 per cent share on the annual profits of Guianan gum.) Depending on the market, the plantations could be extended to three, maybe four leagues squared. Either way, the colony would soon enough provide “more gum than is produced in Senegal, and as much as Europe’s manufactures would be able to consume in a given year.”

In Senegal this lucrative trade was haphazard, relying on the seasonal rhythms of weather and migrant labor. Acacia forests existed wherever they happened to grow, which was in inaccessible places deep in the river valley. And from the French perspective, the gum was owned by other people, and scraped off of trees by other people’s slaves. In Guiana the opposite was true. Gum forests would grow in a controlled and convenient space near Cayenne. Every link in the commodity chain would be contained within the French empire. Ultimately, Adanson’s vision of cultivating a Manhattan of acacia trees in Guiana remained a pipe dream. But the cornucopian assumptions that informed it, as well as the agronomic methods he proposed to realize it, were widely shared, and were powerful enough to transform French commercial imperialism in both Guiana and Senegal, regardless of what happened to gum itself.

As a science of improvement and regeneration, agronomy promised solutions to the commercial and environmental grievances harbored by the French in Senegal over the previous decades. It also addressed the misgivings of those who had invested in the region after the War of Austrian Succession—the Angola and Guinea companies especially—about the gendered and racial dynamics on Gorée and Saint-Louis. As André Bourde has demonstrated, agronomic texts were so often manuals for the scientific management of both land and society. Tracts on soil chemistry and land drainage occupied the same space in the libraries of improving landlords as treatises like Madame de Villers Billey’s *Instructions historiques, dogmatiques et morales en*

faveur des laboureurs et autres habitants de la campagne (1746), which insisted that the regeneration of countryside depended on the reinforcement of paternalist, hierarchical and spiritual values among the peasantry. This could lead to a variety of ideological positions, ranging from what Bourde has labelled the “*despotisme éclairé de l’agriculture*” to a more sustained interest in the conditions of rural life and an almost ethnographic concern with the peasantry.⁸¹ In contrast to physiocratic colonialism, which insisted on the improvement of the land through “free” white labor, agronomy could encompass a range of labor regimes, making it a flexible resource for reformers chastened by the Kourou affair.

Guiana became the principal site of botanical experimentation as well as debates about the necessity, amelioration, or abolition of slavery not because it was a blank canvas upon which metropolitan minds could project their enlightened preferences, but because those responsible for the colony’s “improvement” were motivated by this capacious discourse of agronomic ethnography. Regardless of a given authors’ view on slavery, a natural history of Guiana’s plants would so often entail a natural history of its workers. (This was not a combination unique to the colonies: Linnaeus, prior to devising his biological taxonomies, had pioneered anthropological classifications of the people of Lapland in the 1730s.)⁸² Fusée Aublet, in his *Histoire des plantes de la Guiane française* (1775), slipped a thoroughgoing condemnation of slavery into the penultimate chapter of a two-volume work on botany, bearing sympathetic witness to the political life and cultural rituals of enslaved communities. If slaves were given property and a salary in accordance with their work, he argued, they would “become laborious,” and “the land would be better cultivated and more fertile.”⁸³ Guisan, far more comfortable with the institution

⁸¹ Bourde, *Agronomie et agronomes en France*, 985-96.

⁸² Lisbet Koerner, *Linnaeus: Nature and Nation*, 56-81; Bayly, *Imperial Meridian*, 125.

⁸³ Jean-Baptiste Christian Fusée Aublet, *Histoire des plantes de la Guiane française* (Paris: Didot, 1775), 115-21.

of slavery, felt that its costs (strictly economic and demographic) could be ameliorated if the slaves learned to internalize discipline and work ethic by adopting Christian values, thus minimizing the need for severe punishment—a neat reconciliation of the Enlightenment tropes of “humanity” and “interest.”⁸⁴ Préfontaine also appealed to plantation owners to instill in their slaves the Christian virtues of labor. His *Maison rustique* opened with a poem, “Messe en Cantiques, à l’usage des nègres,” in which a chorus of slaves exclaim: *Que nos travaux, nos peines / Réparent nos péchés / Qu’elles brisent les chaines / Qui nous ont attachés*. Just as in France, colonial agronomy’s celebration of religious paternalism and laborious cultivation proved to be effective techniques for attracting state sponsorship and investment from the aristocracy—as we will see shortly.

From the outset, these improvement projects in Guiana had been informed by memories of Senegal. In his proposal to Choiseul, Adanson went out of his way to address the disorder he had witnessed as a young man in Saint-Louis and Gorée. He bemoaned the influence that *signares* exercised over the French, condemned the size of their retinues, and provided taxonomic breakdowns of the *négresses*, *nègres*, *mulatresses*, *mulattes*, and *captifs* owned by some of the richest *habitants*. Adanson could not understand why the children of “marriages” between *signares* and French officials (“bearing more of the colour of their white fathers than their black mothers”) acquired the rights of French subjects. He despaired of the privileges accorded to “domesticated” *signares*, “who had once been slaves,” “because of the bad management of a colony so far away from the eye of its master.” “Women of that species,” he complained, received “double or triple” rations when the rest of the colony went wanting. In terms of the health of the colony as an organism, the *signares* and their domestic slaves were

⁸⁴ Guisan, *Traité sur les terres noyées*, 267-306. On “humanity and interest,” see Duchet, *Anthropologie et histoire au siècle des Lumières*, 145-60; Cheney, *Cul de Sac*, 71-104.

“bloodsuckers.”⁸⁵ Adanson insisted, and subsequent agronomic improvers agreed, that such indulgent displays of domestic consumption and racial disorder were to be avoided in Guiana.

Ironically, it was these Eurafrican elites of Gorée who established the first material link in Adanson’s imagined Gum Atlantic. In 1767, with the Kourou disaster fading in administrative memory, Adanson’s former patron in the Compagnie des Indes, Pierre-Félix-Barthélemy David, proposed a “project of emigration” between Gorée and Guiana to the duc de Praslin, the new minister of the marine. Although there is no suggestion that he shared in Adanson’s visions of a gum cornucopia in Guiana, David, who had been governor of Saint-Louis in the 1740s, was similarly motivated by a desire to reverse Senegambian disorder on the other side of the Atlantic. David pledged to Praslin that he would enlist at least fifty elite families of Gorée and around three thousand of their slaves to relocate, voluntarily, to Guiana.⁸⁶ Praslin accepted the terms, loaning to David’s agents (Eyriès and Brüe, both formerly of Saint-Louis) one of the navy’s ships to conduct the transplant.⁸⁷ In August 1768, the first Gorée contingent arrived in Cayenne, including members of the families of two of the most influential *signares*, Hélène Aussenac and Caty Baudet.⁸⁸ But not many were to follow. In all, only around forty free people, along with two hundred captives, made the journey to Guiana. They all soon realized that they had left their privilege and status in Gorée. *Signares* and their domestic servants were now expected to work the land and provide for themselves, all under the punitive supervision of French elites. By some accounts David exercised “a particularly barbaric rule” in the colony.⁸⁹ In the apt summary of

⁸⁵ Adanson to Choiseul, AN Col F 3 60 f 3.

⁸⁶ The events discussed here are analysed at length in Barbara Traver, “‘The Benefits of Their Liberty’: Race and the Eurafricans of Gorée in Eighteenth-Century French Guiana,” *French Colonial History*, vol. 16 (2016), 1-25. See also Tarrade, *Le Commerce colonial*, 336-8. AN Col C 14 39 f 33.

⁸⁷ AN Col F 3 62 f 92, lettre du ministre à M de la Gastien, 24 novembre 1767; AN Col B 131 f 208, Praslin au contrôleur général, 6 avril 1768.

⁸⁸ AN Col E 111, doss. David.

⁸⁹ Rothschild, “A Horrible Tragedy in the French Atlantic,” 101: “David, the former governor [of Senegal], introduced a particularly barbaric rule into his plantations. Campet [a medical officer] described operating in the

Barbara Traver, the Eurafrican elite of Gorée went from enjoying power and influence in west Africa to experiencing, as one contemporary described it in the mid 1770s, perhaps the worst oppression meted out to *gens de couleurs* in any European colony.⁹⁰ Which is, one suspects, exactly as David—and before him Adanson—had intended.

A failure, David's project nevertheless contained all the elements that would come to define the Gum Atlantic. Kourou was no longer the model: neither free trade nor free labor were viable in the torrid zone. Instead, Guiana would be governed by sporadic arrangements, like that between David and Praslin, with the state offering support in the form of privileges, subsidies, and protection. The recipients of that support would in turn improve Guiana according to the norms of Enlightenment agronomy, or at least manage French trade in Senegal. A racialized, productive labor regime would be supplied by resources from west Africa—if not in the form of acacia trees, as in Adanson's version of the Gum Atlantic, or in the form of *signares*, as in David's, then through profits from gum and slaves. This combination—hierarchy and improvement in Guiana, profits in west Africa, support from the state—proved attractive to powerful investors at court, who saw in the Gum Atlantic an arena in which they could exercise their “aristocratic liberty.”⁹¹ As in Britain and its overseas possessions, reform and experimentation after the Seven Years War produced an empire that was aristocratic, autocratic,

Cayenne hospital in 1770 on a slave who had fled from David's estate and been recaptured: ‘The operation succeeded perfectly. But as this negro was to be broken alive once he was cured... the consequences were not happy. The patient sighed and appeared to be agitated by afflicting ideas,’ and eventually died.”

⁹⁰ Traver, “The Benefits of Their Liberty,” 3 & 18 fn5.

⁹¹ On “aristocratic liberty” in the colonies, see Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery*, 306 fn.46. Foucault traces the emergence of this idea of aristocratic liberty to Boulanvilliers at the beginning of the eighteenth century: “According to Boulanvilliers, freedom is the direct opposite of equality. It is something that is enjoyed thanks to difference, domination, and war, thanks to a whole system of relations of force.” See Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 1997), 157.

and agrarian.⁹² Unlike in Britain, however, these developments were not coordinated by the state, but instead by the court, and the centrifugal forces of merchant capital.

Aristocratic Gum Companies

As the elites of Gorée were making their way across the Atlantic, the elites of Paris were coordinating to give institutional form to Adanson's speculations and David's experiment. Starting in 1767 aristocrats at court, in concert with colonial officials, formed private companies to govern the Gum Atlantic, first through Compagnie d'Afrique, then the Compagnie de la Guyane, and finally, in the 1780s, the Compagnie de la Gomme du Sénégal. These nominal mutations were not superficial: they signaled consequential changes in ministerial favor and the shifting attentions of improvers and speculators, as an imagined frontier of improvement alternated between Guiana and Gorée. But beneath these surface transformations the investors and beneficiaries of the company remained the same. An oligopoly had after all been established, not in the image of Gournay's idealized market society, but instead through the plutocratic capture of the overseas economy that Diderot had feared. A whole corridor of empire was governed by the *noblesse d'épée*. In the wake of enlightened reform, commercial imperialism reverted to bricolage. Versailles took charge of Gorée and Guiana.⁹³

This "refeudalization" of the French mercantile system directly contradicted the rationalizing impulses of state administrators and physiocrats after the Seven Years War. That is not to deny that those impulses existed, or that they had no effect. After all, the ideals of improvement in the Gum Atlantic—the discourses of natural history, civilization, humanity and

⁹² C.A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian*, esp. 121-6 and 147-60.

⁹³ Charles and Cheney, in their critique of the colonial machine literature, insist on the enduring influence of court favor over colonial policy. See their "The Colonial Machine Dismantled," 49.

interest, and above all agronomy—attracted unprecedented investment: in 1783, fifteen years after David’s threadbare operation, the Compagnie de la Gomme du Sénégal had an estimated worth of 3 million l.t.. But it does raise the question of why, particularly in the Gum Atlantic, the efflorescence of enlightened reform coincided with the retrenchment of privilege. And, in addition, how this paradoxical relationship between ideas and institutional forms maintained, for three decades, the integrity of two previously disparate spaces in the French global economy. There are, it seems, only two explanations for the enduring existence and particular sociology of the Gum Atlantic: the intellectual allure of Guiana, and the financial allure of west African resources.

After the shortcomings of David’s experiment became clear, improvers on the ground and administrators in Versailles began to agree on the need for more investment in Guiana. Towards the end of 1768, Jean Dubuc, a planter from Martinique who had been appointed by Choiseul to reform the Exclusive, created a company with a capital of 1.2 million l.t. to take charge of improving Guiana.⁹⁴ “The success of this plan,” he wrote to Choiseul, “depends on the extent to which the government can persuade capitalists” to commit their funds, which entailed an array of state favors. Each colonist would be accorded an entire parish by the government; the crown would loan them buildings abandoned since Kourou for up to seven years; commodities would be exempt from duties in France. Dubuc insisted on the society enjoying a ten-year monopoly in Guiana before the introduction liberty of commerce. Otherwise a fierce critic of privileges and regulations in colonial commerce, in this instance Dubuc was keen to have his

⁹⁴ Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, *The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century: from Feudalism to Enlightenment*, trans. William Doyle ([1976] Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 96. For more on Dubuc and his role in reforming the Exclusive, see Tarrade, *Le Commerce colonial*, 185-222.

investments sheltered from market competition.⁹⁵ He also drew a distinction between “capitalists,” who would fund this project from Versailles, and the “entrepreneurs” who would represent the company on the ground—a semantic deconstruction, however unwitting, of the Gournay model of commercial imperialism, which was based on the identity of the “capitalist-entrepreneur,” the enlightened risk-taker who invested his own funds in productive enterprises, and who operated across deregulated markets.

In any case, by 1774 Choiseul had been dismissed from the ministry and Dubuc’s project was showing little sign of success. Once again disappointment in Guiana spawned funding and greater ambition. As Pernille Røge has shown, ministerial reshuffles gave Antoine de Sartine control of colonial policy, Jacques Necker greater influence at court, and, as a result, a troupe of aristocrats access to the Gum Atlantic.⁹⁶ In January 1776 the Compagnie d’Afrique, which had exclusive rights to the slave trade from Senegal, was authorized to take charge of the colonization of Guiana.⁹⁷ It became La Compagnie de la Guyane, and counted amongst its shareholders the duc de Duras, the baron de Beaumanoir, both the marquis and the comte de Saisseval, the comte de Jumilhac, and Jean-Baptiste Lemoyne de Bellisle, the chancellor to the duc d’Orléans. As Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret writes, “The company was dominated by the traditional nobility, followed by farmers-general, officers of the King’s Household and those of the princes, and widows, that indispensable element of any joint-stock company. Not a single merchant.”⁹⁸

⁹⁵ AN Col C 6 14 f 124, Société pour la Guyane, 1768. On Dubuc making an exception to his own rule, see Tarrade, *Le Commerce colonial*, 336.

⁹⁶ Røge, *Economistes and the Reinvention of Empire*, 184-7. For the interactions between the court and Sartine, see Tarrade, *Le Commerce colonial*, 432 and 468-72.

⁹⁷ AN Col F 3 62 f 136.

⁹⁸ Chaussinand-Nogaret provides a detailed account of the formation of this company, including a list of the shareholders and their stakes in the company. See Chaussinand-Nogaret, *The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century*, 96-100. He cites the following sources: AN Col C 14 46-7; T 514 (14); T 200 (1); minutier central, XXX, 483.

In just over seven years the administration of Guiana and Senegal had grown from an affair of merchants and colonial inhabitants into “a great joint stock company whose managers and entire body of shareholders were nobles.”⁹⁹ On a broad level, this development was the culmination of the slow assimilation of merchant capital and political economy into the institutions and hierarchies of old regime society. Now even court aristocrats saw the value in developing strategic commodity chains. More particularly, the emergence of gentlemanly capitalism in the Gum Atlantic signified that the promotional memoirs on agronomy in Guiana were reaching a receptive audience, not only in the public sphere beyond the state—to which Melon and Gournay had typically addressed their political economy—but in the court, the traditional seat of power, where reform-minded ministers and plutocrats shaped colonial policy.

A key figure in closing this loop between colonial theorizing and elite metropolitan attention was the baron de Bessner, Alsatian architect of Kourou, who held fast to the belief that Guiana should be a predominantly white colony, a French New England in the south. His projects laced an anxious desire for control and security with enlightened notions of improvement and benevolence—a palatable combination for aristocrats in Paris. Bessner’s notorious reflections on the demographic make-up of Guiana can be seen as an Atlantic variant of the new concern among the “gentlemen cultivators” of France for the rural peasantry. Both were fundamentally anxieties about labor: how subaltern populations could be encouraged to work, or, in the case of Guiana, prevented from undermining the entire productive system (neighboring Surinam had been the site of a major slave revolt in 1763). Most often Bessner’s texts would focus on the size and racial constitution of the colony, as well as potential disruptions caused by widespread *marronage*. These ideas gained recognition with the

⁹⁹ Ibid., 99.

publication of his 1774 memoir, *Précis sur les Indiens*, in which Bessner made the case for “civilizing” an estimated 100,000 “natives” of Guiana and a further 20,000 fugitive slaves from Surinam by submitting them to Jesuit conversion and diligent cultivation of the land.¹⁰⁰

Pierre-Victor Malouet—a naval administrator, absentee Saint-Domingue planter and resolute fixture of the French colonial establishment—wrote in his memoirs that Bessner was instrumental in the formation of the Compagnie de la Guyane. “Bessner,” he wrote, was associated with “savants, financiers, people at court”; he “sent them his memoirs and attracted their interest in the success of his plans, which he adapted to the tastes and the *lumières* of those he was addressing.” He appealed to the authority of “M. Buffon” and other naturalists in testifying for the natural capacity of Guiana.¹⁰¹ As Malouet’s commentary makes clear, the ideals of natural history and civilization lent Bessner’s Guiana a certain allure for the bankers and courtiers of the *beau monde*. It certainly attracted those who were already interested in agronomy. Malouet claims that Bessner’s greatest influence was over the farmer-general Paulze, who brought in as a company shareholder his son-in-law, the famous chemist and enthusiastic agronomist Lavoisier, as well as Bellisle, who in 1764 had published a tract calling for the free export of grain.¹⁰² Bellisle and Paulze were the principal managers of the Compagnie de la Guyane, and took an active interest in—or at least showed an avowed concern for—attempts by company employees, including the medic-cum-naturalist Bertand Bajon, to improve their plantations in Guiana.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ AN Col F 3 95 f 74. See Duchet, *Anthropologie et l’histoire*, 46-7, 128, 152-60 & 171-4 for extensive commentary on Bessner’s civilizing projects.

¹⁰¹ Pierre-Victor Malouet, *Mémoires de Malouet, publiés par son petit-fils le Baron Malouet* (2nd ed., Paris: E. Plon et cie, 1874), 84-106.

¹⁰² Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bellisle, *Mémoire sur la liberté de l’exportation et de l’importation des grains* (Paris: 1764).

¹⁰³ See the correspondence between Paulze, Lavoisier, and Monsieur and Madame de Beaumanoir in Paris, with Bajon, “Pierre” and “Claude Julien” in Oyapock, Guiana, June 6th 1780, [n.d.] June 1780, July 1st 1780, in Cornell University, Lavoisier Manuscripts and Graphics Collection, Box 33 ff 31-33.

Not everyone was persuaded by the agronomic appeal of Guiana. Malouet himself was skeptical. Though he admired those involved with the Guiana company—singling out David, “the former governor of Senegal” as a reassuringly experienced presence—he derided its greed and its ambition to tend to “large plantations of coffee, tobacco, cacao” and to cultivate nutmeg and cloves sent from the Indian Ocean.¹⁰⁴ Having made his objections clear to Sartine, Malouet was dispatched to Guiana in 1776 to judge firsthand the feasibility of Bessner’s proposals. He quickly condemned them as naïve, but could do nothing to stem aristocratic investment in the company. And even in his dissent he could see the merits of Bessner’s attempt to reform slavery through paternalism. Calls to reform slavery were gaining force, and Malouet was anxious to defend the plantation system from charges of despotism. From Cayenne in 1776 he wrote “Du traitement et de l’emploi des nègres,” in which he likened the “good master” to a benevolent but stern father. With the specter of rebellious Surinam in close proximity, Malouet argued that plantation societies ought to be organized around the pillars of religion and strict surveillance if they were to enjoy peace.¹⁰⁵ Malouet’s attitude was indicative of how in this reformist period of French colonialism, and especially in Guiana, capitalist speculation, enlightenment moralism and an attitude of *noblesse oblige* could coordinate in the search for order and progress. Later in Saint-Domingue, on the eve of Revolution, Malouet would combine all of these elements to respond to radical antislavery arguments by proposing legal reforms that would recast slaves as “serfs” and plantations as “fiefs,” a proposal described by one historian as “a throwback to the feudal ages.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Malouet, *Mémoires de Malouet*, 113.

¹⁰⁵ Malouet, “Du traitement et de l’emploi des nègres,” AN Col F 3 90 f 165 For commentary, see Malick W. Ghachem, *The Old Regime and the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 152-6.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 224-7.

And maybe this was Guiana's fundamental appeal. Certainly it is hard to account for the nobility's repeated investment in failed colonization schemes purely by reference to economic incentive. In 1780 the new governor of the colony, Jacau de Fiedmont, blamed Bessner's Panglossian ambition for tarnishing the reputation of the colony. The "new Peru" that was promised had failed to materialize, and "now the name alone of Cayenne is enough to terrify all those capitalists" whose fortunes had been sunken into a succession of companies—"the Compagnie de la Guyane will probably be the last of this genre," Fiedmont wryly noted.¹⁰⁷ But it should not be assumed that the aristocrats behind that company were motivated solely by the prospect of a quick return on investment. As Cain and Hopkins wrote of contemporary developments in British overseas expansion, "feudal remnants, and the tendency for aristocrats and gentlemen to behave in an 'economically irrational' manner, could be useful assets in occupations which placed a premium on organizing men."¹⁰⁸ It is quite plausible that the French aristocracy, chastened by defeat in the Seven Years War, threatened by ascendant social classes, and charged with harboring a culture of effeminacy, would seek to exercise its virtue by assuming patriarchal authority over the slaves and natural resources of a fledgling colony. Just as the planter elite in the French Antilles adopted an idea of "aristocratic liberty" over the course of the eighteenth century, seeing in the plantation an opportunity to recover "medieval" inclinations towards war and domination, so the courtier elite of Paris found in the companies of the Gum Atlantic an opportunity to recover lost sovereignty—institutions in which they could still wield social power.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ AN Col F 3 21 f 453.

¹⁰⁸ Cain & Hopkins, "Gentlemanly Capitalism," 508.

¹⁰⁹ Joseph Schumpeter, *Imperialism and Social Classes*, trans. Heinz Norden (New York: Meridian, 1955) 64-74. Both Bayly (*Imperial Meridian*, 136) and Cain & Hopkins ("Gentlemanly Capitalism," 504) pick up on this argument. On the application of this argument to post-Seven Years War France, see Schumpeter, 136: "[defeat in war] means failure, and failure applies particularly to ruling classes." On the traditional aristocracy's increasing involvement in the colonization of Saint-Domingue over the course of the eighteenth century, see Pierre de

The civilizational logics of agronomy and, more broadly, natural history therefore remained, just as they had been in 1763, a powerful impetus for investment in Guiana. Perceived as a fertile but savage place—as Fiedmont put it in 1780, it was “of all the countries in America the most recently departed from the hands of nature”—France’s botanists and improvers continued to believe as Adanson had that with the right expertise it could be tamed and put in order.¹¹⁰ Some went even further in their optimism. Buffon, in the seventh and final installment of his *Époques de la nature* (1778), cited the recent history of Guiana as evidence that man was now master of nature. Most of the colony, he pointed out, was covered in thick forests where the sun could scarcely penetrate. But around Cayenne, where land had been cleared and cultivated, the climate had become hotter and drier. The same effects could be extended throughout the colony with an increase in population and the encouragement of agriculture. For Buffon the stakes were geological. “The great energy of Nature depends more or less on temperature,” he argued, and without the spread of civilization—of which the colonization of Guiana was a prime example—the earth was inexorably cooling towards death.¹¹¹

If the grandiose narratives of natural history helped attract the investment of gentlemanly capitalists at court, they also impressed themselves upon the inhabitants of Guiana. In 1790, with news of the Revolution having just arrived from France, a deputy of the Colonial Assembly of Cayenne by the name of Leclerc wrote a manifesto for Guiana. Leclerc’s memoir, which he titled *L’agricole cayennois*, began with a bowdlerized passage from Buffon’s *De la Nature: Première vue* (1764), presenting the improvement of the land as a divine obligation, a laborious but

Vaisseière, *Saint-Domingue: La société et la vie Créoles sous l’ancien régime (1629–1789)* (Paris: Perrin, 1909), 355-6. For the “effeminacy” of the French nobility, see Éliane Viennot, *La France, les femmes et le pouvoir, vol. 2: Les résistances de la société (XVIIe-XVIIIe siècle)* (Paris: Perrin, 2006).

¹¹⁰ AN Col F 3 21 f 453.

¹¹¹ Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, *Les Époques de la Nature* (Éditions du Muséum national d’Histoire Naturelle, Paris, 1988 [1778]), 242-6.

necessary contribution to a Second Creation.¹¹² He called for the establishment of an agricultural society to promote the cultivation of the land, that “most noble” occupation, which would ultimately allow the colony to take “a new existence, to become useful for the first time.” Against abolitionists Leclerc took Malouet’s line: since “anyone who is destined to live by his labor is in fact the slave of the person who employs him,” there was really no difference between a slave in Guiana and a “French peasant.” With responsible supervision and with “the extension of their industry” new slaves from Africa would “understand as well as we do that the Creator has lavished upon us all of His gifts.”¹¹³ *Alors*, wrote Leclerc, reverting to the gospel of Buffon, *une nouvelle Nature va sortir de nos mains*.¹¹⁴

Leclerc’s manifesto reads like a synthesis of the Enlightenment discourses that had surrounded Guiana over the previous three decades. The interests and aspirations placed in Guiana in the decades after the Seven Years War amounted to a colonial ideology that was directly at odds with French experience in Senegal in the 1750s. In Guiana capitalists, entrepreneurs and colonists sought a reversal of their Senegalese impotence. Adanson’s proposal in 1763, as well as Préfontaine’s *Maison rustique*, were early indicators of how the techniques of agronomy and the more abstract principles of natural history would provide the philosophical underpinning for this new model of colonization that was to be, at least in theory, disciplined,

¹¹² AN Col F 3 21 650 f 1, “L’agricole cayennois: Mémoire sur la Guyane Française. Discours Préliminaire: Tableaux de la Nature tirré de l’histoire de la nature de M. de Buffon.” The famous passage can be found in Buffon’s *Histoire Naturelle*, XII, 113: “La nature est le trône extérieur de la magnificence divine: l’homme qui la contemple, qui l’étudie, s’élève par degrés au trône intérieur de la toute-puissance; fait pour adorer le Créateur, il commande à toutes les créatures; vassal du ciel, roi de la terre, il l’anoblit, la peuple et l’enrichit; il établit entre tous les êtres vivants l’ordre, la subordination, l’harmonie; il embellit la nature même, il la cultive, l’étend et la polit, en élague le chardon et la ronce, multiplie le raisin et la rose.”

¹¹³ AN Col F 3 21 650 f 155, “L’agricole cayennois: Mémoire sur la Guyane Française. Chapitre 5: Projet d’une Chambre d’agriculture, suivie de moyen pour multiplier les établissements, la population, raison pour faire prendre un effort convenable pour cette colonie.” Leclerc began this “chapter” with an epitaph from Buffon: “Man, ever since he has existed, has been condemned to work. He cannot exist without work or from the product of work.” For a discussion of Malouet on slaves and peasants, see Caroline Oudin-Bastide and Philippe Steiner, *Calcul et morale: Coûts de l’esclavage et valeur de l’émancipation, XVIII-XIXe siècle* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2015), 85-7.

¹¹⁴ AN Col F 3 21 650 f 5, “L’agricole cayennois, Discours Préliminaire.”

industrious, religious and patriarchal.¹¹⁵ The French would populate and police Guiana, and in doing so would prove the virtue of their own civilization. “An empire, a monarch, a family, a father: these are the two extremes of society,” wrote Buffon; “they are also the limits of nature.”¹¹⁶ Michèle Duchet was correct to argue that this anthropology, of which Buffon was merely the most articulate proponent, provided an intellectual foundation for “a new model of colonization,” but she might have erred in restricting its appeal to a bourgeoisie seeking atonement for colonial barbarism through humanistic reform.¹¹⁷ The paternalist logic of this colonial ideology was also attractive to aristocratic capitalists in Paris. As Guy Richard has argued, noble participation in the large joint-stock companies that emerged towards the end of the old regime in industry and commerce proceeded “more from a ‘feudal’ state of mind than a nascent bourgeois ideal.”¹¹⁸

From imperium to dominium

But what did any of this have to do with gum? When enthusiasm to improve Guiana diminished in the 1780s, attentions turned back across the Atlantic. Senegal too, as Røge has shown, was the subject of the “expansionist interests of private capitalists.” Adanson’s desire to create a “colony of universal cultivation” in the Senegambian interior, which had resurfaced periodically over the intervening decades, was now being propagated by the Compagnie de la Guyane. As in Guiana, territorial consolidation remained elusive. But it would be a mistake to dismiss these ambitions as disingenuous, or as the deceitful propaganda of rent-seekers. Unlike in Guiana, the state was

¹¹⁵ The role of the “classificatory logic” of natural history in providing “philosophical underpinnings” to the agrarian and aristocratic aspects of British imperialism is underscored by Bayly in *Imperial Meridian*, 7 & 121-6.

¹¹⁶ Buffon, *Histoire Naturelle*, XI, 91, quoted in Duchet, *Anthropologie et histoire*, 240.

¹¹⁷ Duchet, *Anthropologie et histoire*, 280 (for “new model”) et passim.

¹¹⁸ Guy Richard, *Noblesse d’affaires au XVIIIe siècle*, 242.

resolutely opposed to “improving” west Africa.¹¹⁹ Expansionist interests were real, but they remained well beyond the reach of French power. Instead, the more immediate consequence of these ambitions was the intensification of trade through the existing infrastructure of merchant capital. The spatial arrangement of commercial imperialism in the Gum Atlantic remained in its existing form: an assemblage of enclaves, with capital jumping from point to point—Gorée, Cayenne, Versailles—rather than spreading through the consolidated territorial grids envisioned by physiocrats and agronomic improvers.¹²⁰ What’s more, this spatial arrangement remained profitable—indeed in the 1780s it was more profitable than ever. As Guy Richard also pointed out, although such companies might have proceeded from “reactionary” impulses, they nevertheless had “modern” consequences; there was a “double aspect” to gentlemanly capitalism in the late old regime.¹²¹ In the Gum Atlantic this was also the case—except “modernity” meant not territorial expansion but the intensification of existing commodity chains.

Small enclaves of territory on both sides of the Atlantic were necessary for the mutual administration of the slave and gum trades to be viable. Having secured in 1774 the ownership of Guiana between the Oyapock and Approuague rivers, the directors of the Guiana company turned their attention to Ile Gorée. Article 9 of a contract drawn up in 1776 stipulated that the Compagnie de la Guyane would have “preference for six years for the provisioning of French establishments on the coast of Africa.”¹²² Far from quailing at the costs of upkeep, the company found these responsibilities to be insufficient; they wanted not the “preference” but the right to

¹¹⁹ Røge, *Economistes and the Reinvention of Empire*, 165-75.

¹²⁰ Ferguson, “Seeing Like an Oi Company,” 378.

¹²¹ Richard, *Noblesse d'affaires au XVIIIe siècle*, 242-3. Richard makes this argument in the context of noble investment in metallurgy, but it applies just as well to colonial commerce. See also Fox-Genovese & Genovese who, for all their emphasis on the conservative tendencies of commerce, insist upon the “Janus face” of merchant capital: *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

¹²² AN Col C 14 46 f 16.

control the supply of necessary materials to Gorée. Over the course of several months, directors and administrators, spearheaded by Paulze and the abiding David, lobbied Sartine to that end. Their objective was “to stop the commerce of *signares*, officers and soldiers of the garrison, by taking from their hands any kind of merchandise of trade.” The past indulgences of the Compagnie des Indes were to be avoided at all costs: all wealth and power was to be in the hands of the Guiana company. “Without this precaution,” they beseeched the minister, “it would not be possible for us to fulfill your aims and undertake the clearings and the cultivation of crops in Guiana,” referring him to an adjoined memoire on the urgent necessity to reestablish the slave trade out of Gorée. “We demand this less for pecuniary benefit,” they continued, but to have access “to the number of *noirs* that will be necessary for our establishments.”¹²³

The company successfully acquired the exclusive right to supply Gorée in June of 1776.¹²⁴ In addition, it would receive a 150 l.t. bounty for each of the first 1,200 slaves it brought to Guiana.¹²⁵ Paternalist improvement schemes were after all consistent with profit-seeking. Soon people began to question the agrarian patriotism of the company’s aristocratic investors. One anonymous memoir sent to Sartine charged that for the “so-called Guiana company” the South American colony was “but a second branch” of its affairs that were “maybe more lucrative than loyal.” Commenting on the company’s contract line by line, and citing Malouet’s skepticism about colonizing Guiana with approval, the author claimed that the zeal with which the company sought bounties and the exclusive control of Gorée betrayed its “secret aim, very closely guarded”: to capture as much of the slave trade as possible.¹²⁶ Within just a few years this

¹²³ AN Col C 14 46 f 21.

¹²⁴ AN Col C 14 46 f 27.

¹²⁵ AN Col C 14 46 f 48. See also AN F 3 62 f 163, “Arrêt du Conseil d’État du Roi, Qui accorde pour le terme et espace de quinze ans, aux Syndics, Administrateurs, et Intéressés dans la Compagnie de la Guyane Française, le privilège exclusif de la traite des Noirs et du commerce en l’île de Gorée...Du 14 Août 1777.”

¹²⁶ AN Col C 14 46 f 73-89.

was an open secret, and complaints were being leveled against the company by the chambers of commerce of La Rochelle and Nantes.¹²⁷ In the context of an ongoing war in America in which France stood to make gains over the British in Atlantic commerce, the government was willing to withstand such complaints. The ministry encouraged the governor of Gorée to sell its “excess” slaves to the company, which it saw as an instrument to create new markets that would further weaken the British in the Americas.¹²⁸ So extensive was the sovereignty afforded to the Guiana company that it alone took charge of recapturing Saint-Louis and the Senegal river from the British in 1779.¹²⁹

At the beginning of the 1780s, then, the Guiana company controlled not just the majority of land in Guiana itself but also the Senegal river and the west African coast between Cap Verde and the Cassamance river. The transatlantic relationship that had first been mooted by Adanson in 1763 and then incrementally pursued by David and others had eventually assumed an institutional form, thanks to the financial clout of Parisian investors and the exigencies of a wartime government. War in the Americas had been beneficial to the French slave trade in general, which for a decade after the resumption of peace in 1783, with British traders largely excluded from French markets, entered its most productive period.¹³⁰ The trade out of Senegambia was no exception. Slave exports from the region between 1781 and 1790 have been estimated at 17,400—far outstripping the combined total of captives exported in the 1740s and 1750s, when famine had driven the slave trade to unprecedented heights.¹³¹ While the

¹²⁷ AN Col C 14 47 f 18, Pays d’Aunis, 16 avril 1778; Ibid. f27, Nantes, 23 mai 1778.

¹²⁸ As Robert Louis Stein writes, “the problem of supplying slaves to economically questionable areas led to the creation of... the Compagnie de la Guyane.” See Stein, *The French Slave Trade in the Eighteenth Century: An Old Regime Business* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), 39.

¹²⁹ AN Col C 14 47 f 211, Eyriès, Mémoire pour la Compagnie de la Guyane sur l’expédition et la conquête du Senegal.

¹³⁰ Stein, *The French Slave Trade*, 38-42; Philip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969) 178.

¹³¹ Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 170 (Table 49).

improvement of Guiana floundered, the company's shareholders could no doubt find solace in their share of the 1780s slave-trade boom.

While in this sense the slave trade in Senegal was consistent with general trends in French colonial commerce, the relationships and institutional forms that had coalesced around the Gum Atlantic over the previous three decades ensured that trade there operated according to its own logics. The particular privileges afforded successively to the Compagnie d'Afrique, the Compagnie de la Guyane and then the Compagnie de la Gomme du Sénégal fundamentally shaped the development of the slave trade out of Senegal. As Philip Curtin has shown, the available data demonstrate that "slaves from Senegambia and its hinterland went disproportionately to Martinique and Guiana."¹³² (Dubuc, it should be noted, remained a shareholder in the Compagnie de la Guyane, and owned a plantation in Martinique.) Curtin speculates that French planters developed "market preferences" based on the first slaves to arrive, and sought "to buy more people from the ethnic groups they were accustomed to."¹³³ It is equally likely that such market preferences were based on the oligopoly carved out in Paris and administered through colonial agents like David who had both connections in Senegal and plantations in Guiana.

But as we have seen, access to slaves was not the only, nor even the principal, incentive to maintain a presence in Senegal. Gum prices had risen sharply since the 1750s and the English

¹³² Ibid. 183. He also observes that French Guiana "appears to have had a very strong pro-Senegambian bias," 182. Based on a sample of the Nantes slave trade between 1748-92, 15.9 per cent of slaves from Senegambia went to Guiana, an amount wildly disproportionate to the size of the colony. See Table 51 on 182, "Statistics on the regional origin of slaves imported into the French Caribbean colonies, 1748-92." See also David Geggus, "The French Slave Trade: An Overview," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 58, No. 1, New Perspectives on the Transatlantic Slave Trade (Jan. 2001) 137, Table V: Sources of Africans Sold in the French Caribbean by French Ships. Geggus's figures suggest that the Senegambian bias of planters in Guiana was even higher than Curtin estimated, with 22.9 per cent of slaves from the region ending up in Guiana.

¹³³ Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 190.

were by the 1770s trading more gum than ever.¹³⁴ Thanks to their presence on Gorée, the French had been able to share in some of the spoils, but with English forces weakened and distracted in the Americas and European prices of gum continuing to spiral, French merchants began to hope of reasserting hegemony in the region. Seemingly in harmony with nascent commercial aspirations, Michel Adanson addressed a memoir to the Académie des Sciences in the summer of 1778 on “*le Gommier blanc, le Gommier par excellence, le Gommier du Sénégal.*” Since 1763, the only time he had written about gum was in another memoir presented to the academy in 1773, on a species that he claimed was often confused with the true kind. That memoir had largely amounted to a justification of his method of description and classification.¹³⁵ Such issues were entirely absent from Adanson’s 1778 memoir, where he dwelt at length on the history of the French and the gum trade. He argued that thanks to his discoveries about distinctions in gum species, as well as his knowledge of the location of acacia forests in close proximity to Saint-Louis (which, if utilized, would remove reliance on desert traders) the trade in gum ought to reliably exceed 1,000 tons a year.¹³⁶ Questions of species-transfer, cultivation, and colonial governance were nowhere to be seen. Given his audience, the content of the memoir was shockingly commercial. Just six months later forces belonging to the Compagnie de la Guyane captured Saint-Louis. France was once again in control of the all-important Senegal river.

The company’s reward for its conquest was a monopoly on the gum trade.¹³⁷ In demonstration of where its priorities lay—the improvement of Guiana or the profits of west-Africa—the company was reconstituted on 24 May 1784 as the Compagnie de la Gomme du

¹³⁴ For the rise in prices, see above, p17: the price had risen from £3.46 per metric ton in 1746 to £23.31 in 1776. For the volume of trade, see Figure 5.1, Gum imported by England, 1699-1808, from Webb, *Desert Frontier*, 101.

¹³⁵ Adanson, “Premier mémoire sur l’acacia des anciens... appelée communément Gomme Arabique,” *Mémoires... de l’Académie Royale des Sciences*, 1773.

¹³⁶ Adanson, “Deuxième Mémoire sur le Gommier blanc,” 11 Juillet 1778.

¹³⁷ AN Col F 3 62 f 184, Arrêt du Conseil d’État du Roi, 11 janvier 1784.

Sénégal. It had a capital of 3 million l.t., combined with the 2,000 shares of the Guiana company (valued at 1,200 l.t. each) whose holders would sell to the gum company their fixed assets in Senegal and Guiana. This was a case of the right hand selling to the left: as Chaussinand Nogaret has shown, the partners of the Guiana company “bought up most of the new shares, so that although its name had changed, the company had not changed shareholders.”¹³⁸ Like the Guiana company, the gum company was funded—and to a greater extent—by the duc de Duras, the marquis de Saisseval, the marquis de Chaillou, the chevalier de Belleisle and other assorted luminaries from the previous venture. Their interest in colonial commerce had not waned, though like Adanson they demonstrated less of a commitment to improvement than they had during the high-Enlightenment years after the Seven Years War.

By the end of the old regime, the gum company was presenting as more capitalist than gentlemanly. The returns on gum in the 1780s did not disappoint. In 1790 the company claimed to be satisfying French manufacturers’ demands by taking over 1,000 tons of gum from Senegal per year. In addition, it reported bringing in 3 million l.t. through reexports.¹³⁹ But these figures were cited with an air of desperation. Two years into the Revolution, the company was tarnished by a long association with the corruption of the *ancien régime* court; once a blessing, a history of easy access to privilege now hung like an albatross around its neck.¹⁴⁰ Beginning a pamphlet in defense of the company’s service to “humanity and *la patrie*,” an “administrator-director” of the company, Fraisse, protested the “slanderous” ways in which the company was being denounced by rival commercial interests as a “society of avid particulars, profiting from the abusive favors

¹³⁸ Chaussinand-Nogaret, *The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century*, 99.

¹³⁹ AN Col F 3 62 f 262, *Précis pour la Compagnie du Sénégal*, 1790.

¹⁴⁰ On similar attitudes towards Calonne’s *Nouvelle Compagnie des Indes* in the Revolution, see Elizabeth Cross, “The French East India Company and the Politics of Commerce in the Revolutionary Era” (PhD Dissertation, Harvard University, 2017).

of the old regime.” Fraisse argued that if trade in Senegal were to be liberalized it would not be “other French [merchants] who benefit but Moors, Nègres, in a word, Africans, who count for nothing, neither in the political world nor really in the moral world.” He even made a desperate appeal to the prevailing economic sentiments of the time by redefining the company’s privilege as a “sacred title of property,” revealing the company’s willingness to conform its aristocratic identity to a more appropriate bourgeois category.¹⁴¹

Fraisse’s semantic defense was more revealing than he might have realized. For decades, the apparent justification for the companies of the Gum Atlantic had been to counter pre-Seven Years War impotence in Senegal with post-Seven Years War productivity in Guiana. Their privilege was necessary because they had a noble cause: the pursuit of *imperium*, the government of people and territory. Over the course of the 1780s, though, its objectives had devolved to *dominium*: the ownership of things, whether commodified people or simply gum.¹⁴² Despite all the institutional upheaval and intellectual ferment, French commercial imperialism in the Gum Atlantic had scarcely moved on from its condition in the 1750s. More gum was traded, and more captives were shipped across the Atlantic, but French commercial imperialism in Senegal remained fragmented, unproductive, and ultimately reliant on forces beyond its control.

What’s more, public opinion was now far less tolerant of the business the company was carrying out. Antipathy to privilege coalesced with patriotic rhetoric and abolitionist sentiment, forms of critique that, ironically, had roots in the Gum Atlantic. Discourses that had once encouraged investment in the gum and Guiana companies—colonial agronomy and natural

¹⁴¹ AN Col F 3 62 f 262, Précis pour la Compagnie du Sénégal, 1790.

¹⁴² The distinction between imperium and dominium, which derives from Kant and Schmitt, has recently been deployed by Quinn Slobodian to explain the emergence of neoliberalism out of the end of European imperialism in the twentieth century. See Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018). On the semantic separation between imperium and dominium, between the state and the market, during the French Revolution, see Rafe Blaufarb, *The Great Demarcation: The French Revolution and the Invention of Modern Property* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

history, the ethnographic concern with the laboring classes, the normative progress of civilization—were now used to question the company’s right to existence. In 1791 a habitant of Saint-Louis, Lamiral, published a pamphlet that vilified the company’s history of bankruptcy, cupidity, “chimerical projects” and “tyranny.” In the political culture of the Revolution, the title of Lamiral’s pamphlet—*Les métamorphoses aristocratiques, ou généalogie de la Compagnie exclusive du Sénégal*—was damning enough. Others questioned the “feudal” sovereignty of the company and demanded the abolition of aristocracy, despotism and slavery on Gorée and Saint-Louis, where colonies of free cultivation should be brought into existence, in imitation of the English “free colony” in Sierra Leone.¹⁴³ The supplications of the company were ultimately no match for such widespread hostility. In January 1791 the National Assembly declared freedom of commerce in Senegal.¹⁴⁴ Shortly after the company definitively folded.

*

What was the legacy of the Gum Atlantic? Guiana certainly did not “improve” in the way philosophes had hoped. But the gum trade itself continued to gain in value, and French merchants remained in control of the European supply. From the perspective of 1763 this was by no means guaranteed, and in a curious way the association between Gorée and the new frontier of Guiana contributed to the maintenance of French interests in west Africa. In the long run, looking beyond the old regime, this transatlantic connection was to prove crucial. During the Napoleonic wars in 1804, establishments along the Senegambian coast were prized away from the English by Victor Hugues, “the colonial Robespierre,” along with a regimen of exiled

¹⁴³ François Lanthenas, *M. Larimal, réfutée par lui-même: ou, Réponse aux opinions de cet auteur, sur l’abolition de la traite des noirs* (Paris: L. Potier de Lille, 1790).

¹⁴⁴ AN Col F 3 62 f 268, Loi relative au commerce du Sénégal, 23 Janvier 1791.

Jacobins from—where else?—Guiana.¹⁴⁵ The gum trade subsequently underwent a boom, accounting for 72 per cent of Senegambian exports in the 1830s, all to the benefit of a renascent French overseas empire, which later reconsolidated its interests in the region through the peanut industry.¹⁴⁶ To the present day France has remained the primary importer and re-exporter of “Gum Arabic” from Senegal.¹⁴⁷ However contingent its origins, and however *ancien régime* its institutional forms and ideals, the Gum Atlantic was a pivotal chapter in the longer story of French globalization.

In the context of the eighteenth century, the peculiar transatlantic phenomenon of the Gum Atlantic evinced the enduring compatibility between merchant capital and the institutions of old regime France. The value chains of the Gum Atlantic became ever more profitable under the supervision of court capitalists in Versailles. Attempts to render France’s overseas economy legible, uniform and “less feudal” had resulted in a corridor of empire being governed by logics of single commodity, a “gum company” owned by aristocrats. In part this odd duality was a function of the commodity itself: with a single source of production and reliable demand, gum was more prone to monopoly and financialization than it was to the kind of innovations that Adanson had proposed. Why try to make a scalable industry out of a trade that already guaranteed profits? Why move acacia trees across the Atlantic, or colonize Senegal, when littoral enclaves satisfied mercantile ambitions and secured the state’s interests? Lack of “improvement”

¹⁴⁵ Yves Benot, *La démence coloniale sous Napoléon* (Paris: Découverte, 1992), 102. On Victor Hugues, see Laurent Dubois, ““The Price of Liberty”: Victor Hugues and the Administration of Freedom in Guadeloupe, 1794-1798,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. 56, no. 2 (1999), 363-93; and the novel by Alejo Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, trans. John Sturrock (London: Gollancz, 1963). (The original title is *El siglo de las Luces*, 1962).

¹⁴⁶ Curtin, *Economic Change in Precolonial Africa*, table 8.6; Kazuo Kobayashi, “Indian Textiles and Gum Arabic in the Lower Senegal River: Global Significance of Local Trade and Consumers in the Early Eighteenth Century,” *African Economic History*, vol. 45, no. 2 (2017), 27-53.

¹⁴⁷ The Observatory of Economic Complexity (MIT), <https://oec.world/en/profile/hs92/130120/> (accessed April 2020).

in Senegal and Guiana was therefore less a sign of the weakness of commercial imperialism as it was a testament to the persistent success of bricolage. France could still, even in the age of high enlightenment, global war, and colonial reform, compete in a global economy with the resources at hand.

And yet it is also hard not to see the institutional and intellectual volatility of the region as symptomatic of an empire searching for new form and purpose. Each new improvement project justified itself in terms that went beyond anything imagined by Melon or Gournay. The Gum Atlantic had staged the last act of aristocratic liberty, but also the early rehearsals of abolitionism, of “humanity and interest.” These ideals were dangerously incompatible with bricolage. Commercial imperialism was no longer oriented towards the mere provision of luxury, the progress of society, or even French hegemony in commercial war. The development of commodity chains now entailed, at least in theory, the development of provinces, of colonies, of “civilization.” The contradictions between capital and critique were becoming more apparent. What’s more, those contradictions were not being resolved by a centralized state, or by a coherent public sphere, a society with a unified purpose. Instead they were being worked out in semi-autonomous corridors of empire like the Gum Atlantic. As debates over what overseas power was for and how it should be wielded became more contentious, commercial imperialism was coming to seem incoherent. How long could a global empire operate while remaining internally fragmented, carved up into competing sovereignties and privileges, each one generating new ideas and ambitions?

Two Paths for Commercial Imperialism

One consequence of the Seven Years War was to redirect French attentions to the Indian Ocean. The Mascarene islands had remained French possessions, although colonial ambitions there had diminished since the failure of the Bourbon coffee project. As in the Gum Atlantic, the 1760s brought hopes that in the Indian Ocean enlightened science might create value where before there had only been costs. Around the Cape of Good Hope, it was the state and not smaller corporations that stepped into the breach left by the bankrupt Compagnie des Indes. But just as a succession of ministers had allowed the gum companies to assume control of a corridor of empire between Gorée and Guiana, on Ile de France colonial administrators had been encouraged to cultivate self-reliance, and to reduce the burdens of oversight that would otherwise be assumed by a distant metropolitan state. And so in the final decades of the old regime, France's Indian Ocean empire was invested with new aspirations while being afforded greater autonomy.

The following chapter explores two distinct paths of commercial imperialism that emerged out of this conjuncture. The first path, which was inspired by Enlightenment sciences concerned with the conservation of value, is represented by the construction of a gunpowder factory on Ile de France. The project was spearheaded by Joseph-François Charpentier de Cossigny, a botanist turned engineer who first gained political influence on the island under the regime of Pierre Poivre in the late 1760s. Poivre's administration has since been identified as an early instance of environmental governance—of “Green Imperialism,” in the terminology of one study—because of its attention to the ecological bases and consequences of European colonialism.¹ His reforms, devised with Cossigny's assistance, addressed practices that had been

¹ Richard H. Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

taking place for decades on the Mascarene islands and that, as we have seen in chapter two, left physical evidence of the potentially unsustainable nature of existing patterns of settlement and cultivation. One overlooked legacy of Poivre's brief tenure, this chapter argues, was the gunpowder factory. Cossigny used the powder mill as an opportunity to continue his mentor's task of conserving the ecological value of Ile de France. The factory was a unique colonial offshoot of the more famous and thoroughly successful state-led attempt after the Seven Years War to improve the gunpowder industry in France through the application of chemistry and the aid of public science. In the context of French commercial imperialism, it evinced a desire to cultivate an empire in the Indian Ocean that was capable of conserving and generating its own resources—of relying on and fighting for itself.

The second path was for an empire that leaked value. Whereas the gunpowder factory resembled the more idealistic elements of the Gum Atlantic—another instance of enlightened reform applied to an enclosed corridor of empire—this second path was more reminiscent of Castanier, the aristocratic gum companies, and the world of profit.² As we have seen, for the elites and governing institutions of commercial imperialism after the Seven Years War, there were definite benefits to letting the overseas economy abandon itself to the centrifugal forces of merchant capital. This proved to be the case in the French Indian Ocean during the final decades of the old regime, when merchants, statesmen, and financiers, faced with diminishing returns and the likelihood of crisis in the Atlantic, turned their attentions east. In the absence of the now bankrupt *Compagnie des Indes*, this “spatial fix” was carried out by elementary agents of early-modern commerce: groups of merchants held together by kinship and patronage.

This chapter focuses on the contribution of one such group, the Monneron brothers, to the reorientation of late-old regime merchant capital towards the Indian Ocean. Initially from

Annonay in the Ardèche, by the 1780s the Monnerons were prominent Indian Ocean actors. They were at once merchants, privateers, slave traders, Parisian financiers, and plantation owners. In many respects they were exceptional: they led eventful, picaresque lives, profiting from colonial wars in India in the 1780s, sitting as deputies in the Estates General and National Assembly, causing financial scandals throughout the 1790s, and ending their lives scattered to the four winds of the French empire.² But their affairs across the revolutionary divide allow us to make sense of how French merchant capital secured a foothold in the booming markets of the Indian Ocean during the Age of Revolutions. If Cossigny's gunpowder factory represented a desire—shared by local elites and state ministers—for something approaching a self-reliant empire that made use of its own resources, then the machinations of the Monnerons demonstrated that Ile de France was increasingly welded to and dependent on the circuits of the global economy. They also serve as yet more evidence that, towards the end of the old regime, the ambitions of enlightened reform and the tendencies of merchant capital were increasingly at odds.

As divergent as these two paths were, they both encountered the same obstacles during the Revolution. Simultaneously following the trajectories of Cossigny and the Monnerons as they gravitated towards France in the 1790s, the chapter reveals how both the capital and critique of commercial imperialism were disavowed in the revolutionary public sphere. In Paris, the Monnerons soon realized that the politics of merchant capital had changed: that profit would no longer be tolerated. Cossigny, meanwhile, was ostracized by the scientific elites who

² Brief references to the Monnerons exist in the colonial and financial historiography of the Revolution, and they are cited throughout this essay. For relatively sustained treatments, see Paul Butel, "Réorientations du négoce Français à la fin du XVIIIe siècle: les Monneron et l'Océan Indien," in Paul Butel & L.M. Cullen (eds.), *Négoce et industrie en France et en Irlande aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles* (Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 1980), 65-73; and Jean-François Klein, "Un chaînon manquant impérial? Les Monneron, un fratrie d'armateurs au tournant du monde," in Jean-François Klein and Bruno Marnot (eds.), *Les Européens dans les ports en situation coloniale* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2015), 43-70.

spearheaded the Revolution's gunpowder industry. The metropole now condemned the diabolical circuits of global trade; it also dismissed enlightened perspectives from the colonies. Commercial imperialism was a casualty of the Revolution. And yet the dialectic of capital and critique did reach some form of synthesis. Both Cossigny's empire of conservation and the Monnerons' spatial fix generated intellectual and economic investment in Ile de France, which, during the 1790s, as the Antillean plantation complex was dismantled by revolution, witnessed the introduction of widespread sugar cultivation. Cossigny and the Monnerons, chastened by their failures in the revolutionary public sphere, returned to the Indian Ocean, where they each contributed to the take-off of the sugar industry on the Mascarenes. Rejected by a transformed, pre-occupied metropolitan state, the now autonomous dynamics of commercial imperialism ensured the persistence of the old regime at the colonial periphery.

Value out of Waste

Gunpowder is a mixture of six parts saltpeter, one part sulfur, one part charcoal. It explodes upon ignition because the latter two ingredients are combustible and the saltpeter, which is potassium nitrate, acts as an oxidizing agent. Whereas charcoal (from forests) or sulfur (from mineral springs) were fairly easy to come by, saltpeter, the major ingredient, was scarce and expensive. It was either imported, usually from Russia or, increasingly, Bengal, or it was extracted from soil rich in urine and excrement, from stables, rabbit warrens, or dunghills. Extraction entailed digging, transporting, boiling, and leaching the soil.³ At least a week of this arduous, expensive, pungent work was required to yield crude saltpeter, which still needed refining to work in gunpowder. Improvements to this process were elusive, because nobody knew what saltpeter

³ Leaching involved treating the soil with percolating water and applications of lime, ash, or alum.

consisted of—whether it was mineral or vegetal, something to be mined or grown.⁴ In France the trade was particularly inefficient. Since the ministry of Colbert the French state had farmed out production and supply to the Salpêtriers du roi, “a guild of gothic harpies,” in Charles Coulston Gillispie’s memorable depiction, who raided the kingdom’s wine cellars, mangers, and dovecotes, hunting for nitrous truffles in the discharge of livestock and punters.⁵ Or they would simply import crude saltpeter instead, before selling it on to the crown at the rate stipulated by their monopoly. During the Seven Years War, unable or unwilling to meet the state’s heightened demands, the saltpetermen were forced to buy the commodity from the Netherlands, for a price greater than the Dutch had paid to ship it from India.⁶ In that same war the British capture of Bengal and its vast reserves of saltpeter provided the state with the impetus to fix this deficient industry.

Reform eventually came under the enlightened guidance of Turgot, who in 1775, as controller general of finances, enlisted the Académie des Sciences to investigate more efficient methods of extraction and to explore the production of artificial nitrates.⁷ The Academy turned the pursuit of saltpeter into a public cause, inviting the contributions of provincial scientific societies and private experimenters through a prize essay contest, and promoting the issue through journals and encyclopedias.⁸ Meanwhile, the corporate and corrupt powder farm was

⁴ David Cressy, “Saltpetre, State Security and Vexation in Early Modern England,” *Past & Present*, vol. 212, issue 1 (August 2011), 73-111.

⁵ Charles Coulston Gillispie, *Science and Polity in France: The End of the Old Regime* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004 [1980]), 51.

⁶ Ibid., 56; Robert P. Multhauf, “The French Crash Program for Saltpeter Production, 1776-94,” *Technology and Culture*, vol. 12, no. 2 (Apr., 1971), 164.

⁷ Sweden and Germany, compensating for relative lack of maritime access to India, had already developed successful artificial nitrification plants, but they only worked on a small scale. The process involved combining sea salt with sulfuric acid, fusing the resulting sodium sulfate with charcoal and limestone in a furnace, and then refining the raw soda to concentrate the alkali content. See Lissa Roberts, “Agency and Industry: Charles C. Gillispie’s ‘The Natural History of Industry,’ Then and Now,” *Technology and Culture*, vol. 54, no. 4 (Oct., 2013), 928. On the Swedish model of import substitution as an alternative to empire, see Lisbet Koerner, *Linnaeus: Nature and Nation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).

⁸ Roberts, “Agency and Industry,” 928-31; Multhauf, “The French Crash Program for Saltpeter Production.”

replaced with the Régie des poudres, a supervised bureaucracy of 1,100 personnel employed at forty powder mills and refineries across France. Under the leadership of Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier, who from his offices in the Arsenal experimented with the chemical composition of saltpeter and meticulously oversaw accounts, the Régie became a rational, technocratic, and productive affair of state.⁹ By 1788 France was self-sufficient, drawing an annual supply of nearly 4 million lbs of powder, a threefold increase on the post-Seven Years War malaise.

In the gunpowder industry, the old regime state succeeded where it had failed in the Gum Atlantic, enlisting the institutions, social networks, and expertise of science to reform industries and infrastructures that had been found wanting in the Seven Years War.¹⁰ The contrast is all the more apparent when we consider that the Régie des poudres and the Gum Atlantic were animated by many of the same ideals and desires. (Lavoisier, as we know, invested in the Compagnie de la Guyane.) Both were concerned with maximizing the potential of France's existing natural resources. The task was to turn waste into value: a metaphorical transformation in the Gum Atlantic (from prodigal Gorée to cultivated Guiana), a quite literal one in the case of saltpeter extraction. Ironically, given their respective achievements, whereas the Gum Atlantic generated a discourse of improvement, of civilization, of the promethean transformation of nature, the gunpowder project was motivated by the comparatively modest aim of conservation.

Lavoisier is practically synonymous with this concept, not least because of his realization that the conservation of mass and elements in chemical reactions (*"rien ne se perd, rien ne se*

⁹ Gillispie, *Science and Polity in France*, 57.

¹⁰ A number of historians have held up the munitions industry as an example of the late old-regime state's modernizing, industrial capacity. See Patrice Bret, *L'état, l'armée, la science: l'invention de la recherche publique en France, 1763-1830* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2002); Gillispie, *Science and Polity in France*, 51-73; Ken Alder, *Engineering the Revolution: Arms and Enlightenment in France, 1763-1815* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997). This is not to overlook their contrasting views on the relationship between politics and technology. See Gillispie and Alder, "Exchange: Engineering the Revolution," *Technology and Culture*, vol. 39, no. 4 (Oct., 1998), 733-54.

crée”) allowed for quantitative, algebraic readings of material transformations. “Conservation” was the unifying precept of Lavoisier’s eclectic interests. It underpinned his *De la richesse territoriale du Royaume de France*, a work of political arithmetic published in 1791, which proposed an overall equality between the production and consumption of the national economy.¹¹ It guided his agricultural methods at Fréchines, where each parcel of land was carefully monitored, with balance sheets quantifying inputs (seeds, fertilizer, labor) and harvest yields.¹² And it guided his own experiments with artificial nitrification, which he saw primarily as a task of agronomy. As Lavoisier knew, techniques of saltpeter harvesting already existed in France: beds were dug out of earth from which nitrous soils had been extracted, left to stand for three years, and then cow manure was systematically mixed and layered into the earth every eight months. Lavoisier thought that the process could be recreated and improved in controlled conditions, with “saltpeter beds” of soil arranged in sheds and perforated by porous wooden pipes that enabled the circulation of air and the regular supply of urine.¹³ Each of these projects—the statistics of French wealth, the account books for each parcel of land at Fréchines, the saltpeter sheds—were attempts to build models that allowed him to see and to quantify how the value that existed in nature, in the mineral and vegetal properties of the subsoil, could be better conserved for national use.¹⁴

¹¹ Jean-Claude Perrot, *Une histoire intellectuelle de l'économie politique (XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles)* (Paris: Éditions de l'EHESS, 1992), 377-437.

¹² Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent, “The Balance: Between Chemistry and Politics,” *The Eighteenth Century*, vol. 33, no. 3 (1992), 226.

¹³ Lavoisier, *Instruction sur l'établissement des nitrières et sur la fabrication du salpêtre* (Paris, 1777); idem., “Sur les fabrications artificielles de salpêtre” (1786), *Oeuvres*, vol. 5 (1786), 494-7; Multhauf, “The French Crash Program for Saltpeter Production,” 172; Patrice Bret, “Lavoisier à la régie des poudres: Le savant, le financier, l'administrateur et le pédagogue,” *La Vie des Sciences. Comptes rendus de l'Académie des Sciences, série générale*, vol. 11, issue 4 (November 1994), 302-6.

¹⁴ Julien Vincent, “La regard de la sentinelle terre, topographie et économie politique après Thermidor,” *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, n. 399, 1 (2020), 74.

Lavoisier was not alone in linking an interest in conservation with close attention to the properties of soil. By the late eighteenth century conservation was an organizing category for any human or natural science that concerned itself with the earth. Savants were slowly assembling an understanding of nature as a great “circulatory system,” containing cycles of vegetable matter, nitrogen, water, and photosynthesis. Buffon, for instance, believed in the ability of nature to renew itself on an inexhaustible “fund,” with the “organic molecules” of decaying matter “circulating continually from body to body.”¹⁵ But as his own preoccupation with forest management revealed, he did not take this process of renewal for granted.¹⁶ Nature’s cycles required careful husbandry. The same dynamics—a natural tendency towards conservation, but only under the right conditions—were also evident in political economy, especially amongst the agriculturally inclined physiocrats. As Quesnay had made clear in “Grains,” his *Encyclopédie* article, value did not “conserve,” “increase,” or “renew” itself; it required intelligent supervision, a rational system.¹⁷ His *Tableau économique* invited readers to follow the cycle of a value substance through a closed system (“the kingdom”) as it was produced, exchanged, and transformed into surplus, and to see how inefficiency or wastefulness (i.e. “the sterile” classes of merchants and manufacturers spending money on luxuries rather than contributing to agricultural production) would lead to the loss of national wealth.¹⁸ Quesnay’s *Tableau* was a

¹⁵ Paul Warde, *The Invention of Sustainability: Nature and Destiny, c. 1500-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 235-54.

¹⁶ Grégory Quenet et Jan Synowiecki, “Ce que conserver veut dire: praxis et historicité de la nature (1770-1810),” *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, n. 399, 1 (2020), 106.

¹⁷ François Quesnay, “Grains,” in Denis Diderot and Jean-Baptiste le Rond d’Alembert (eds.), *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.* (Paris: Briasson, 1751-88), vol. VII, 812-31 (1757). University of Chicago: ARTFL Encyclopédie Project, Robert Morrissey and Glenn Roe (eds.): “[...] les richesses d’un état ne se soutiennent pas par elles-mêmes, elles ne se conservent & s’augmentent qu’autant qu’elles se renouvellent par leur emploi dirigé avec intelligence. Si le cultivateur est ruiné par le financier, les revenus du royaume sont anéantis, le commerce & l’industrie languissent [...].”

¹⁸ Philip Mirowski, *More Heat Than Light: Economics as Social Physics, Physics as Nature’s Economics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 156-7; Paul Cheney, *Revolutionary Commerce: Globalization and the French Monarchy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 163.

macroeconomic precursor to Lavoisier's urinated saltpeter sheds: a model that enabled the visualization and quantitative analysis of a vital natural process. Administrative interest in both physiocracy and the gunpowder project emanated from a technocratic mindset that saw in Enlightenment science the means of conserving value.

But as we have seen, enlightened governance was not always applied effectively in imperial contexts. And for all its domestic success, the gunpowder project was an inherently imperial affair. It was made necessary by French failures in a global conflict, it was given urgency by Britain's enclosure of Indian saltpeter, and it was oriented towards controlling international markets and colonial spheres of competition. In 1776 and 1777 the Régie des poudres supplied 1.7 million lbs to the armies of the United States; shortly thereafter it was selling provisions to Dutch and Spanish fleets, as well as to an increasing portion of the Atlantic slave trade (Europeans traded gunpowder for captives on the west-African coast).¹⁹ Although France could not, like Britain, draw upon overseas territories for saltpeter, administrators hoped that, with the right application of science, its empire might provide opportunities for import substitution. In 1774, with Turgot as minister of the marine, and one year before the domestic gunpowder reforms began in earnest, the state authorized the development of a gunpowder factory on Ile de France. Built the following year at Pamplemousses, next to the Jardin du Roi constructed by La Bourdonnais and more recently made famous by Pierre Poivre, the self-styled traveling *philosophe*, the powder mill remained in operation until 1810, a colonial machine in the Indian Ocean.

Like the metropolitan reforms that led to the establishment of Lavoisier's Régie des poudres, the powder mill at Pamplemousses was designed for the conservation of value. Upon

¹⁹ Gillispie, *Science and Polity*, 65.

purchasing the Mascarene islands from the bankrupt Compagnie des Indes in 1764, the crown was confronted with accounts that indicated a growing but inefficient Indian Ocean empire with Ile de France at its center, a colony that, in large part because of La Bourdonnais's embrace of police and commerce, was overwhelmingly reliant on external aid. Choiseul immediately dispatched Enlightenment around the Cape in the form of Pierre Poivre, who, guided by a loose commitment to the reigning ideals of physiocracy, agrarian reform, and knowledge of nature's "cycles," was tasked with turning French commercial imperialism in the Indian Ocean into something more like a closed system that used its own resources, that conserved its value. The gunpowder factory on Ile de France emerged out of this confluence of intellectual trends from the metropole—a fascination with conservation shared by chemists, political economists, agronomists, and state ministers—with the desire for colonial reform in the Indian Ocean. Its history therefore provides another case study of Enlightenment applied to empire, a chance to account for where and when science had institutional purchase in the French global economy, and to tease out the relationship between capital and critique at the colonial periphery.

The Green Roots of Black Powder

The choice of Ile de France as the site for the only colonial gunpowder mill within the French empire must be understood in the context of recent developments on the island. In the two decades prior to 1764, Ile de France had continued to reap the commercial benefits of the infrastructure projects La Bourdonnais had initiated in order to steer the Mascarenes' future away from the doomed Bourbon coffee experiment. The population of Ile de France had increased sixfold, from around 3,000 in 1740 to nearly 20,000 by 1767, when Poivre arrived. Poivre's agenda resembled the ambitious projects that Choiseul had sponsored in the Gum

Atlantic. Like Adanson, he was a bioprospecting enthusiast: in 1771 he facilitated the elicit transplant of nutmegs and cloves from the Dutch Moluccas to the botanical garden at Pamplémousses, which he envisaged as a potential nursery for any number of Indian Ocean spices and profitable plants.²⁰ And like the agronomically inspired administrators of the gum companies, Poivre saw natural history as a means to stimulate the moral and economic regeneration of a colony corrupted by the Compagnie des Indes. Historians have documented Poivre's role in nurturing an interest in conservation amongst the scientific and reform-minded inhabitants of Ile de France.²¹ What has been overlooked, however, is that Poivre's tenure laid the intellectual and institutional foundations for the gunpowder factory.

Poivre is more readily associated with the development of modern environmentalism, rather than the industrial production of war materiel. According to Richard Grove, Poivre formulated a conservationist ideology out of hitherto disparate intellectual traditions: “Newtonian” understandings of the relationship between vegetation and atmosphere, a “physiocratic” emphasis on the land as the sole source of wealth, a “romantic” sensitivity to the aesthetic value of nature, and a “cosmopolitan” awareness of Indo-Chinese techniques of land management. Ideas were forged into policy under Poivre's administration thanks to the renewed importance of the Indian Ocean to French commercial imperialism, and because the ecological consequences of European settlement were so conspicuous on Ile de France, a fragile tropical island on which necessarily limited resources had been systematically stripped over two centuries of European settlement. In addition, conservationist measures were made urgent by

²⁰ Madeleine Ly-Tio-Fane, *Mauritius and the Spice Trade: The Odyssey of Pierre Poivre* (Port Louis: Esclapon, 1958); Emma C. Spary, ‘Of nutmegs and botanists: the colonial cultivation of botanical identity’, in, Londa Schiebinger and Claudia Swan (eds.), *Colonial Botany: Science, Commerce, and Politics in the Early Modern World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 187-203; Dorit Brixius, “A hard nut to crack: nutmeg cultivation and the application of natural history between the Maluku islands and Isle de France (1750s–1780s),” *The British Journal for the History of Science*, vol. 5, issue 4 (Dec. 2018), 585-606.

²¹ Grove, *Green Imperialism*, 168-253; Quenet et Synowiecki, “Ce que conserver veut dire,” 111-16.

ongoing demographic growth that put further strain on the island's carrying capacity, and by the French state's aspiration after 1763 to generate as much wealth as possible from its existing imperial resources. As in the Gum Atlantic, the desire to eliminate waste and overcome dependence on capricious markets encouraged administrators on Ile de France to pursue reforms inspired by enlightenment science. The bioprospecting and conservationism of Poivre and the powder mill had the same conditions of existence. They shared a center of operations at Pamplémousses, and they shared the ambition of turning French commercial imperialism in the Indian Ocean into a self-reliant, circular economy orbiting around Ile de France.

Poivre's conservationist measures focused on forests. In the seventeenth century the Dutch had felled and exported a good portion of the island's ebony trees. After these first settlers had abandoned the colony in 1710—with the forests of the interior increasingly inaccessible, and the native fauna having been extensively depleted—the French took over, and proceeded to clear land for habitations and agriculture once La Bourdonnais moved the administrative capital of the Mascarenes to Port Louis in 1735. As a result, Ile de France experienced similar deforestation to that which was taking place on Bourbon.²² By the early 1760s administrators had begun passing regulations and even bans on logging that left the island's coasts exposed to attacks, and that threatened the long-term supply of timber resources for France's shipping and construction needs in the Indian Ocean.²³ Grove's argument is that under Poivre these practical measures became understood in climatic terms. Influenced by the "botanico-meteorological" theories of Stephen Hales and Duhamel du Monceau, which linked vegetation to atmospheric moisture, Poivre sought to protect the forests of Ile de France not only for their own sake but also to encourage

²² See Selhausen's map of the island, Fig 2.9..

²³ Grove, *Green Imperialism*, 181-4. Grove's analysis of this period is based entirely on the documentation cited in N. R. Brouard, *A History of Woods and Forests in Mauritius* (Port Louis: J.E. Félix, 1963).

rainfall and prevent drought. Before leaving France in 1767 Poivre had been warned by the duc de Praslin, foreign minister and cousin of Choiseul, that “if the forests do not regenerate on the island rain will be less frequent and the overexposed soil will be burnt in the sun.”²⁴ Improving the environment was in turn necessary because more demands were being made of the island’s soil by a growing population and a planter elite that relied on commercial agriculture.

Poivre wasted no time in blaming deforestation and drought on absentee landlords and speculators who spent brief periods on the island only to extract profits from cash crops. In his first speech on Ile de France, Poivre attributed the island’s shortcomings to opportunists who had “regarded this colony as nothing other than a temporary abode and with no significance other than as a place to make a fast fortune and return as quickly as possible to France”—a business practice not dissimilar to that carried out by Hégouerty a few decades before on neighboring Bourbon.²⁵ These “reckless and ignorant men,” he went on, “have ravaged the island, destroying the trees by fire to make a fortune at the expense of the colony, leaving nothing for their successors but arid lands abandoned by rain and exposed without relief to storms and the burning sun.”²⁶ Most of Poivre’s proposed solutions were informed by his enthusiasm for agronomy, and so resembled the reforms that enlightened administrators were pursuing elsewhere in France’s commercial empire: a sustained effort to improve cultivable land, a more scrupulous distribution of property, the desire for colonists to be inspired by industriousness and agrarian virtue rather

²⁴ Brouard, *Woods and Forests*, 16.

²⁵ Poivre’s critique here resembled the remarks of Thibaud de Chanvalon, another of Choiseul’s enlightened administrators and a leader of the doomed Kourou expedition, about the impatient French colonists of Martinique, who did not stay long enough (they were “birds of passage”) to appreciate the colony’s resources. See his *Voyage à la Martinique, contenant diverses observations sur la physique, l’histoire naturelle, l’agriculture, les mœurs, et les usages faites en 1751 et dans les années suivantes* (Paris: Claude J. B Bauche, 1763). For commentary, Cheney, *Revolutionary Commerce*, 93-4.

²⁶ Grove, *Green Imperialism*, 200-9.

than commercial incentive or coercion.²⁷ As Grove has noted, though, on Ile de France it was over the issue of deforestation that “the most innovative developments in land-use control started to take place,” and that a coherent alternative to the commercial frenzy of the pre-Seven Years War decades began to form.²⁸

In 1768 Poivre commissioned Philibert Commerson and Joseph-François Charpentier de Cossigny to conduct a survey on the state of woodlands and forests on Ile de France. Their recommendations were passed into law through the *Règlement économique* of 15 November 1769. Fires were prohibited; a quarter of all concessions were to be reserved for trees; uncultivable areas, especially on mountain slopes, were to remain forested; denuded areas were to be planted within fifteen months, bringing a penalty of 1,000 l.t. for non-compliance.²⁹ The regulations were designed to combat the extremities of the environment, with tree roots preventing soil erosion when the monsoons came, and vegetation encouraging rain when otherwise there would be drought. Rather than being exposed to the elements and dependent on external aid, the colony would be able to control its climate and provide for itself. Grove, tracing the origins of these forest ordinances to what he perceives as a combination of physiocratic, romantic, and Zoroastrian concepts harmony and balance in nature, suggests that the emphasis on trees in Poivre’s reforms was symbolic of a new awareness of the “interdependence” of man and environment, and of new conceptions of “circular flows” and “cycles of wealth” in economic systems, both of which could only have arisen on an island colony striving for self-sufficiency.³⁰

²⁷ Ibid., 209, for details on how Poivre tried to encourage the cultivation of grain and rice, and to introduce livestock from Madagascar.

²⁸ Ibid., 219.

²⁹ Brouard, *Woods and Forests*, 18-9.

³⁰ Grove, *Green Imperialism*, 221.

According to Grove, this radically environmentalist approach to colonial governance was short lived. Due to the factional squabbles with the colonial elite and ministerial changes in Paris, Poivre was recalled to France after only five years in office. Concerns about desiccation on Ile de France endured, but they reverted to a practical register, in which the priority was to avoid shortages of timber for naval construction or the commercial costs of erosion and drought. As so often, enlightened reform failed to materialize in precisely the way its architects had imagined. Poivre's legacy, then, existed largely in the intellectual realm: in the Rousseau-inspired writings of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, who resided on Ile de France during Poivre's intendancy, and in the "utopian science" of Commerson, one of the authors of the forest survey.

In the subsequent career of Cossigny, the other author of the survey, another legacy becomes apparent. After providing the intellectual foundations for the forest ordinance, Cossigny went on to spearhead the construction of the gunpowder factory—a project that, like Poivre's conservationism, drew on bioprospecting, the objective of self-sufficiency, and the desire to conserve the natural endowments of Ile de France.

Cossigny inherited the gunpowder project from his father Jean-François Charpentier de Cossigny, the engineer responsible for La Bourdonnais's infrastructure development in the 1730s.³¹ In 1756 the Compagnie des Indes, faced with the outbreak of conflict with the British in Chandernagore and Pondicherry, commissioned an investigation into the possibility of repurposing cement mills for the production of gunpowder.³² Cossigny père, the island's chief engineer, soon took charge of the experimental mill, situated in the Baye aux Tortues on the island's north-eastern coast. Experiments were costly, and fatal. The mill had already exploded

³¹ Megan Vaughan, *Creating the Creole Island: Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Mauritius* (Durham, 2005), 33-55.

³² "Observations sur les propositions faites par M de la Roche du Rouzé pour la fabrique de la poudre de Guerre," March 1756, ANOM, Dépôt des fortifications des colonies, 1636-1913, 22 DFC 11 n. 84.

five times by 1760, including on one occasion, described in vivid detail by Cossigny in a report to the Académie des Sciences in Paris, in which the head of a worker had been propelled fifty meters from its dismembered body by the force of the blast.³³ Understandably, interest in the project cooled amongst the colonial administration, which in any case was soon in disarray after the transfer of governance from the Compagnie des Indes to the crown in 1764. In subsequent years the threat of war receded, and Poivre's administration emphasized agrarian virtue and commercial botany over military ventures. As a result, the prototype of the colonial gunpowder factory was left in rubble.

Cossigny, however, having returned to France, remained interested in the problem of gunpowder production, and participated in the post-1763 nationwide attempt to improve French performance in the industry. As president of the Académie des Sciences of his native Besançon in 1765, he promoted the rationalization of saltpeter collection throughout the Franche-Comté, measures that provided material for Lavoisier's later writings on the subject.³⁴ His concern for the military capabilities of Ile de France was reawakened in 1770 with the publication of Raynal's *Histoire des deux Indes*, in which the as-yet anonymous author alleged that, despite the increasing threat of English hegemony in the Indian Ocean after the conquest of Bengal, "no steps had been taken to ensure the defense of this precious island." For Cossigny this was a slander on his whole career. He dispatched objections to influential statesmen and ministers, including Bertin, the former finance minister and future minister of foreign affairs, Bourgeois de Boynes, minister of the navy and a compatriot from Besançon.³⁵ He also issued a public

³³ Jean-François Charpentier de Cossigny, "À Messieurs de l'Académie Royale des Sciences," June 1760, ANOM 22 DFC 11 n. 127.

³⁴ Gillispie, *Science and Polity*, 54-5; Lavoisier, "Observations impartiales sur la récolte du salpêtre," *Oeuvres*, 5, 680-92.

³⁵ Jean-François Charpentier de Cossigny to Bourgeois de Boynes, 11 April 1773, ANOM 22 DFC 12 n. 234. Joseph-François mentions his father's appeal to Bertin in a letter to an acquaintance on 3 March 1773, ANOM 22 DFC 12 n. 236.

refutation, listing the fortifications he had constructed over three decades on the island and placing final emphasis on the apparently successful production of gunpowder, which saved the French state enormous sums on transport costs, made Ile de France less reliant on external aid, and promised to undermine the threat of a British stranglehold over Indian Ocean conflicts thanks to their monopoly on the saltpeter of Bengal.³⁶ In one memoir he speculated that Ile de France might soon be able to provide gunpowder to all of France's establishments across the Indian Ocean, and perhaps to Dutch establishments there as well. The prospect caught the attention of de Boynes, whom Cossigny continued to lobby over the summer of 1774 in a bid to return to Ile de France; he even sent the minister a miniature wooden model of his experimental moulin à poudre, which could be put to work with the application of "two or three pints of water."³⁷ But his hopes of returning to the colony were dashed when de Boynes fell out of favor after the death of Louis XV. In October Cossigny received news that he was to remain in Besançon, the state having considered him too old, at the age of 74, to take on the responsibility of supervising the fortifications of Ile de France.

Regardless of his age, Cossigny would have been an awkward appointment. Poivre had left Ile de France by 1774, but many who were sympathetic to his agenda remained in positions of authority. Cossigny, a military engineer, had a track record of offending these botanist-administrators, frequently dismissing them as "*soi-disant apothecaires*" in both his private correspondence and public writings. His snubbing, however, did not indicate a lack of interest on the part of the state in the gunpowder factory. Crucially, de Boynes was replaced as minister of the navy by Turgot, a powerful advocate of the overhaul of the *régie des poudres* under

³⁶ Jean-François Charpentier de Cossigny, "Réfutation d'un faux exposé concernant l'Isle de France, inséré dans le II. Tome de l'Histoire Philosophique et Politique des Etablissements et du Commerce des Européens dans le dex Indes," (Besançon: Jean-Félix Charmet, 1773), ANOM 22 DFC 12 n. 235.

³⁷ Jean-François Charpentier de Cossigny to Bourgeois de Boynes, 2 August 1774, ANOM 22 DFC 12 n. 245.

Lavoisier's enlightened guidance, and a statesman sensitive to the arguments raised by the likes of Raynal in the public sphere about the need for colonial reform. It was during Turgot's brief tenure at Versailles, first in the ministry of the marine and then as controller-general of finances, that the moulin à poudre on Ile de France finally received royal backing. Yet the state needed to find a capable, diplomatic figure to supervise this expensive project without antagonizing the island's elites, who might otherwise object to the inevitable diversion of precious resources away from the cultivation of commercial spices and tree planting—someone who could synthesize military concerns with the agrarian, quasi-environmental ideals that were still in fashion on the island. It found such a figure in Poivre's former collaborator on the forest ordinance, Cossigny's son, Joseph-François.

Along with his father, the younger Cossigny had been lobbying to return to the Mascarenes in an official capacity practically since his return to France towards the end of the previous decade. In 1774 he claimed to have submitted twenty-two memoirs on Indian Ocean politics and commerce to various members of de Boynes's entourage over the previous two years, not mentioning the two memoirs he had already submitted to Sartine, the new minister of the navy, which were respectively on "the defense of Ile de France" and on that same colony considered "*comme agricole, comme commerçante, et comme militaire,*" and which, given their subject matter, probably secured him the position of ingénieur du roi.³⁸ Despite the timely submission of these latter memoirs, Joseph-François had until that point been far more interested in botanical than military affairs, as his role in the forest ordinance suggested. Like Poivre, he

³⁸ "Liste des mémoires du Sr de Cossigny," ANOM 22 DFC 13 n. 294. It is unclear whether he actually wrote these memoirs. When asked by Sartine to resubmit them before his departure in 1775, he made unconvincing excuses about not being able to find copies, and promised to try and get his associates in Besançon to try and find them within a month, "or more"—by which point he would be on route to Ile de France. Cossigny to Sartine, 4 April 1775, ANOM 22 DFC 13 n. 303.

had spent decades travelling around the Philippines, China and Bengal, observing land-management techniques and urging their emulation in France's Indian Ocean establishments.³⁹ In January 1775, on the eve of his departure to Ile de France, he submitted a proposal to Sartine requesting support (in the form of enslaved workers loaned from the crown) for an experiment in rice cultivation. The response was kind but curt. There were no resources for such speculative endeavors, regardless of their merit, and Cossigny was reminded to focus on the task at hand: to secure the defenses of Ile de France using, to the greatest extent possible, the island's own resources.⁴⁰

Perhaps this last-minute attempt to incorporate bioprospecting into his official duties was a sign of Cossigny's initial ambivalence about the gunpowder project. His father, noticeably bitter at being overlooked, warned Sartine about the possible contradictions between this enthusiasm for naturalism and military duty. "My son has taken the liberty of sending you," he wrote in March 1775, "a printed brochure on the subject of some spices that he deems capable of succeeding on Ile de France, like coffee, cinnamon, and sugarcane. His inclination is towards all things concerned with agriculture, and tends, as a consequence, to anything that contributes to the subsistence of the human race. In that sense his work and his cares seem much more worthy of your attention," the jilted Cossigny père continued, than his own work on munitions and gunpowder, "which tend only towards the destruction of men."⁴¹ But as Sartine and Turgot needed no reminding, political developments in the Indian Ocean were tending towards war; "love, duty, and honor" demanded that sufficient intelligence was devoted to questions of hard

³⁹ Observations that he later published in *Voyage au Bengale, suivie des notes critiques et politiques, d'observations, sur ce voyage, par Stavorinus* (Paris: Émery, 1799) and *Voyage à Canton, capitale de la province de ce nom, à la Chine* (Paris: André, 1799).

⁴⁰ Cossigny to Sartine, 27 January 1775, ANOM 22 DFC 13 n. 295.

⁴¹ Jean-François Charpentier de Cossigny to Sartine, 16 March 1775, ANOM 22 DFC 13 n. 300.

power. What the elder Cossigny might not have guessed, however, was that for ministers like Turgot someone sensitive to the economic potential of natural resources was an ideal candidate to tackle these questions. This was precisely the reason, after all, that Turgot had appointed Lavoisier to shake up the *régie des poudres* in France. Just as Poivre had turned to agronomy, botany and meteorology to try and make Ile de France a self-contained economic system that could feed itself through agriculture, pay for itself through spices, and control its environment through afforestation, so Cossigny fils could call on his own expertise to ensure that the island could defend itself through gunpowder.

Once he arrived on Ile de France, Cossigny had no trouble combining his enthusiasm for cultivation with his duty to realize the colony's defensive potential. Gunpowder production relied on natural resources and energy that Cossigny did his best to procure from within the island. Experiments in nitrification to produce artificial saltpeter led him to speculate, in a 1784 letter to Castries, then minister of the marine, that hot climates were best suited to the production of nitre, and that Mascarene vegetation contained greater quantities (in comparison to France) of fixed alkali—potash, or potassium carbonate, that could be applied to nitrates to form saltpeter. These experiments were of limited success; they would have required massive investment and widespread application to make any kind of dent in the saltpeter trade out of Bengal, on which the powder mill continued to rely.⁴² But they were suggestive of Cossigny's desire to champion the unique benefits that Ile de France offered to the French global economy, and to use the gunpowder factory as a pretext to conserve and cultivate, rather than simply to extract, the colony's natural resources. The affinities with Poivre's project were evident, and indeed

⁴² Joseph-François Charpentier de Cossigny to Castries, 10 March 1784, AN Col C 4 66 f 10. See also d'Espinassy's remarks on attempts to extract saltpeter from seawater in "Détail des fabrications des poudres à l'Isle de France, à commencer depuis le raffinage du salpêtre jusqu'aux épreuves des poudres inclusivement, comparée avec les méthodes suivies en Europe pour les mêmes objets," AN Col C 4 66 f 51.

Cossigny's major reforms to powder production in the 1780s revolved around the two resources that had been, over a decade before, the principal objects of that fleeting moment of environmental governance: trees and water.

The first task in 1775 was to find a more suitable site for the factory than the Baye aux Tortues, not an ideal location for storing gunpowder in a colony vulnerable to invasion from the sea.⁴³ In January of that year the crown purchased, for 227,000 l.t., the iron forge of MM. Hermans et Rostaing, situated in Pamplémousses next to the jardin du roi. The forge stood at the confluence of several small rivers that irrigated the garden and its spice nurseries, and that could also be used to power the factory's operations. Easy access to water-power was of paramount importance because Cossigny's method, which he developed based on the influence of his father as well as English and Prussian examples, and which differed from French practice, utilized three separate mills: a moulin à pulvériser, a moulin à cylindres, and a moulin à pilons. These mills allowed the combustible ingredients to be prepared separately, thus reducing the likelihood of explosion. But the method also entailed significant inputs of labor and energy. Theoretically, the latter would be provided from the rivers that descended from the mountains above Pamplémousses. In reality, and despite Poivre's best efforts, the island still suffered from frequent droughts. By 1780 the mutual existence alongside arid river beds of the gunpowder factory and the prestigious jardin du roi, two centerpiece institutions of the colonial government, provided new impetus to a lapsed environmentalism. "It is for the general good to attend with the most scrupulous attention to the conservation of rivers," the director of the artillery Antoine d'Espinassy later wrote in a report on the factory that he sent to Versailles, whilst acknowledging

⁴³ What follows is informed by Vijayalakshmi Teelock, "Un site unique à l'Isle de France, ancienne colonie Française: le complexe du moulin à poudre," *Entreprises et histoire*, 2017/2, no. 87, 76-87, to date the only scholarship on the gunpowder factory.

and giving military support the colonial government's longstanding commitment to conservationist policies. And so in 1780 d'Espinassy decreed that every three or four years the labor of around forty of the king's captives, for the duration of the dry season between July and October, would be dedicated to clearing the canals and rivers of Pamplemousses—a policy he advocated for the rest of the island as well.⁴⁴

Gunpowder required charcoal. Cossigny took the heightened demand for this resource as an opportunity to revive the forest ordinances passed by Poivre in 1769, and since then largely ignored. He “chemically analyzed” and compared the properties of the island's trees, and concluded that the *Albizia lebbek*, commonly known as “bois noir,” provided the best charcoal. This was a tree that he had imported from Bengal in 1767, prior to his role in the forest ordinance, which in turn he used as an opportunity to encourage the planting of “exotic” vegetation.⁴⁵ In 1777, just over a year after Cossigny arrived, a M. Latrigue was appointed the first “Inspecteur des forêts de l'Ile de France.” One of Latrigue's main duties was to encourage the planting of bois noirs around Port Louis.⁴⁶ Finally, in the early 1780s Cossigny secured approval and funding from the vicomte de Souillac and Étienne-Claude Chevreau, respectively the governor and intendant of Ile de France, and through them from Castries, for the planting of 500,000 bois noir trees, spread across three plantations in the area surrounding the gunpowder

⁴⁴ Antoine d'Espinassy, “Compte rendu sur le moulin à poudre transferé de la Baye aux Tortues aux Pamplemousses, depuis le 1er Janvier 1775 qu'on a commencé à travailler au dit établissement, jusqu'au 1er Mai 1784,” AN Col C 4 66 f 29.

⁴⁵ The analysis of trees summarized in Cossigny, “Nouvelles réflexions sur les mémoires qui m'ont été remis à l'Ile de France par MM les Administrateurs en chef, et qui traitent de la fabrication de la poudre de guerre,” ANOM 22 DFC 14 n. 354. Cossigny returns to the subject in his *Recherches physiques et chimiques sur la fabrication de la poudre à canon* (Paris: Ant. Bailleul, 1807), 236-9. His experiments are also mentioned briefly in d'Espinassy, “Détail des fabrications des poudres,” AN Col C 4 66 f 51. Article 5 of the 1769 ordinance required habitants to plant denuded land “with plantation trees of all species, either exotic or native to the island.” See Brouard, *Woods and Forests*, 19. *Albizia lebbek* is now listed as an invasive species on Mauritius (<https://www.cabi.org/isc/datasheet/4008#tosummaryOfInvasiveness>).

⁴⁶ Brouard, *Woods and Forests*, 20.

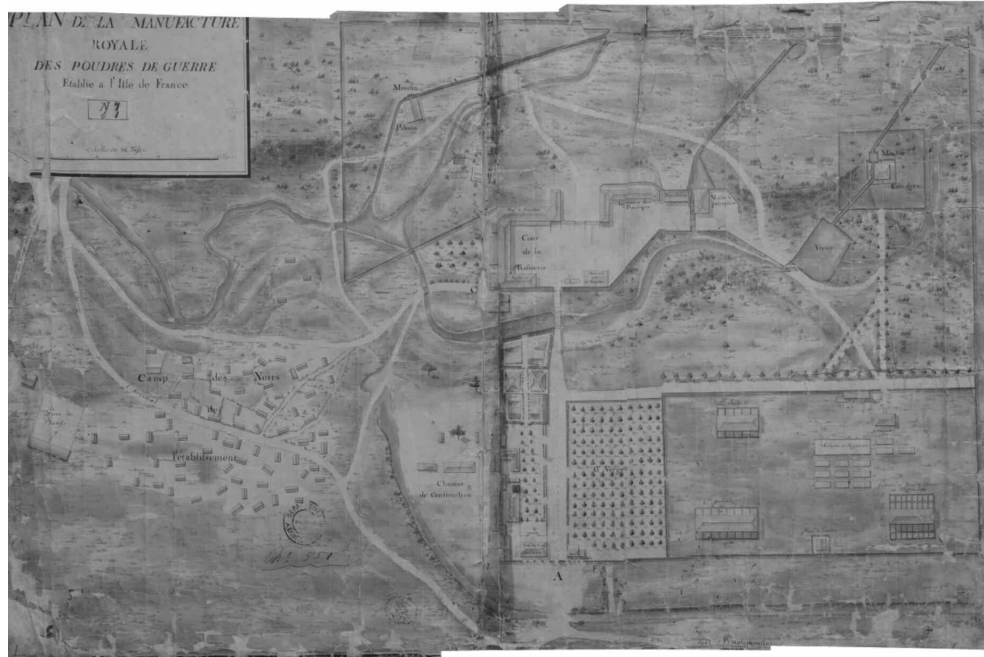


Fig. 5.1. A 1785 plan of the gunpowder factory at Pamplemousses (Mauritius National Archives), from Teelock, “Un site unique à l’Isle de France,” 80.

factory.⁴⁷ War provided the immediate context to such indulgence; d’Espinassy, in his 1784 report on the gunpowder factory, remarked that Chevreau and Souillac were too preoccupied with finding resources to send to the Bussy and Suffren’s fleets in India to turn the request down, for fear of preventing the production of more gunpowder.⁴⁸ But in the longer term, the conditions for this synthesis of forest cultivation and military-industrial urgency were established by Poivre’s earlier reforms. Cossigny’s accomplice in the bois noir venture was Jean-Nicolas Ceré, Poivre’s protégé and successor at the jardin du roi in Monplaisir, which served as a site for one of the plantations. Although now dedicated to the sustainable provision of charcoal for gunpowder, the use of bioprospecting and forest conservation in the service of a self-reliant empire in the Indian Ocean had endured into the 1780s.

⁴⁷ “Relevé fait par M Latrigue, Inspecteur des forêts du roi...” AN Col C 4 66 f 74; “Plantation des Bois noirs,” 1784, AN Col C 4 66 f 260.

⁴⁸ D’Espinassy, “Détail des fabrications des poudres,” AN Col C 4 66 f 51.

By 1784 the gunpowder factory was a sizeable operation. It contained the three mills, a warehouse, buildings for drying and packaging the powder, and a saltpeter refinery. It employed 358 captives, many of whom were skilled industrial workers involved in every stage of the delicate and dangerous production process (pulverizing, burning, refining, mixing), or masons and carpenters. In other words they were “elite slaves,” and their deployment at the factory indicated the government’s commitment to the project. It was also, by any metropolitan measure, a successful operation. The factory was now capable of producing 1,000 lbs of powder a day, over 300,000 lbs a year, during a period in which France’s 40 gunpowder mills combined strained to produce 4 million lbs. D’Espinassy guessed that Ile de France would soon be generating enough of a surplus to sell 100,000 lbs of powder to buyers around the Indian Ocean. In its first eight years of operation, starting in 1776, the factory had refined saltpeter worth over 100,000 l.t., and produced 1,321,555 l.t. of powder. Most of it had been deposited in the king’s warehouses and distributed to French fleets in India, but some 262,188 l.t. had been sold in the Mascarene islands and at the Cape of Good Hope.⁴⁹ This was, in short, a promising start, and evidence of what a territorially limited but resourceful empire could achieve, given the application of science and the backing of the state. But in the broader scheme of trade and war in the Indian Ocean, it was nowhere near enough.

Saltpeter and the Spatial Fix (i)

The first eight years of the gunpowder factory at Pamplémousses had cost the state 3.6 million l.t.. Around two thirds of that had been spent on buying saltpeter from Bengal.⁵⁰ There was a 2.3

⁴⁹ These figures are all contained in D’Espinassy, “Compte rendu sur le moulin à poudre,” AN Col C 4 66 f 29. See also Teelock, “Un site unique à l’Isle de France.”

⁵⁰ “Compte rendu sur le moulin à poudre,” AN Col C 4 66 f 29.

million l.t. gap, then, between the revenues and the expenses of the powder mill, and one way or another the colonial government of Ile de France was paying that money to the British empire. Such were the relative capabilities of French and British power in the Indian Ocean towards the end of the eighteenth century. Whether or not it was ultimately achievable, a self-sufficient, conservationist commercial empire in the region was an ongoing project of France's enlightened administrators, not a *fait accompli*. While Poivre cultivated his garden and Cossigny refined his powder, Ile de France needed external markets to acquire food, luxuries, enslaved labor, and, of course, its saltpeter. Increasingly, these markets were controlled by the British. They were nevertheless fundamental to the health of a French global economy that elsewhere was confronting limits.

Although the Antillean plantation complex underwent spectacular growth in the final decades of the old regime, the intensification of the Atlantic slave trade and increases in sugar and coffee production might have masked underlying deficiencies. In contrast to the “golden age” of the 1730s and 40s, when merchants and colonists regularly amassed rapid and impressive fortunes, French overseas trade in general had become more competitive and, thanks in large part to the ubiquity of war, hazardous.⁵¹ Problems in the Antilles were especially acute. Plantations were productive but indebted, and highly exposed to fluctuations in global markets due to French reliance on colonial reexports.⁵² Suitable territory for new plantations was scarce; administrators

⁵¹ Jean Tarrade, *Le Commerce colonial de la France à la fin de l'Ancien Régime: l'évolution du régime de l'exclusif de 1763 à 1789*, 2 vols (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1972), I: 143; Louis Dermigny, *Cargaisons indiennes: Solier et Cie, 1781-1793*, 2 vols (Paris: SEVPEN, 1960), I: 76. For “golden age” see, among others, Herbert Lüthy, *La banque protestante en France de la révocation de l'édit de Nantes à la Révolution*, 2 vols (Paris: S.E.V.P.E.N., 1961), II: 23-41.

⁵² Paul Cheney, *Cul de Sac: Patrimony, Capitalism, and Slavery in French Saint-Domingue* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), esp. 105-29; Michel Morineau, ‘La vraie nature des choses et leur enchaînement entre la France, les Antilles, et l'Europe (XVII^e-XIX^e siècle),’ *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer*, 84, 314 (1997), 3–24.

were conscious that they could not assume future prosperity.⁵³ Taking these factors into account, historians have questioned whether the speculative frenzy of the 1780s “should not be interpreted as a headlong rush, in order to avoid ruin, instead of as a sign of a healthy growth process.”⁵⁴

Faced with potential crisis in the Antilles, political, financial, and commercial elites turned to the Indian Ocean in the decades after the Seven Years War. France’s colonies there were already entangled in the Atlantic economy: high prices for slaves in west Africa had pushed traders beyond the Cape of Good Hope, and Ile de France was becoming a hub for American merchants and a relay for contraband and capital flight from British India to Europe. For private merchants, voyages to India and China took longer than Atlantic trades, but they were becoming vastly more profitable.⁵⁵ Castries, as secretary of the navy in the first half of the 1780s, reoriented French colonial policy towards India, while Calonne as controller general did likewise with finance, reviving the Compagnie des Indes in 1785.⁵⁶ These structural realignments within French commercial imperialism, when coupled with the intensification of war in the Indian Ocean, made the colonial provision of gunpowder all the more essential. Yet they also made the ideal of a self-contained, value-conserving system in the Indian Ocean all the more difficult to realize.

The French turn to the Indian Ocean in response to difficulties in the Atlantic economy was an example of what David Harvey has called a “spatial fix.” Typically, spatial fixes have two stages, which in turn give the concept its double meaning. When capital is faced with falling

⁵³ Louis Meignen, “Le commerce extérieur de la France à la fin de l’Ancien Régime: déficit apparent, prospérité réelle mais fragile,” *Revue historique de droit français et étranger*, vol 56, no. 4 (1978), 603.

⁵⁴ Silvia Marzagalli, “Was Warfare Necessary for the Functioning of Eighteenth-Century Colonial Systems? Some Reflections on the Necessity of Cross-Imperial and Foreign Trade in the French Case,” in Cátia Antunes and Amelia Polónia (eds.), *Beyond Empires. Global, Self-Organizing, Cross-Imperial Networks, 1500-1800* (Leyde: Brill 2016), 253-77.

⁵⁵ Dermigny, *Cargaisons indiennes*, I: 142-3.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 76-107; Tarrade, *Le Commerce colonial de la France*, II: 480-485; II: 504-6 & 675-85.

productivity or profits in a particular sector, it first seeks a “solution” through geographical expansion, turning to relatively undeveloped, less competitive areas. This is the “extensive” phase of the spatial fix. The reorientation of capital is then consolidated through an “intensive” phase, when investments in infrastructure “fix” capital in place and create a new landscape conducive to accumulation.⁵⁷

In the 1770s and 80s, the spatial fix of French merchant capital in the Indian Ocean was in its extensive phase. By turning to the east, France followed Britain; but it pursued a completely different strategy. British imperialism in India took the form of territorial conquest and the acquisition of land revenues in Bengal.⁵⁸ France, by contrast, adopted a “no territory” policy towards the Indian Ocean.⁵⁹ Its influence in the region rested on an array of small but strategically important colonies and trading posts: Ile Bourbon, Mahé, Pondicherry, Chandernagore, and, at the administrative hub of this constellation, Ile de France. As a purely logistical feat, the success of the gunpowder factory, coupled with the demographic and commercial growth of Ile de France, demonstrated what French merchant capital could achieve during the extensive phase of its spatial fix. But within the territorially restrained configuration of French power, these achievements came at a cost—such as, for instance, a 2 million l.t. outlay on saltpeter from Bengal. Cossigny’s factory was designed to operate within a self-contained, sustainable system; but lacking an internal supply of saltpeter, it could only be constructed within an empire that leaked power and capital. Following the saltpeter back from the powder

⁵⁷ David Harvey, “Globalization and the Spatial Fix,” *Geographische Revue*, 2 (2001), 23-30; idem., *The Limits to Capital* (London: Verso, 2006 [1982]), 414-6 & 431-4. See also Giovanni Arrighi, “Spatial and Other ‘Fixes’ of Historical Capitalism,” *Journal of World-Systems Research*, X, 2 (2004), 527-39.

⁵⁸ P.J. Marshall, *The Making and Unmaking of Empires: Britain, India, and America c.1750-1783* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁵⁹ Sudipta Das, *Myths and Realities of French Imperialism in India, 1763-1783* (New York: P. Lang, 1992); François-Joseph Ruggiu. “India and the Reshaping of the French Colonial Policy (1759-1789),” *Itinerario*, vol. XXXV, issue 2 (2011), 25-43.

mill to its Indian Ocean origins reveals the two principal beneficiaries of these leaks: on the one hand, the nearly hegemonic British in Bengal, and on the other, as was so often the case in French commercial imperialism, privileged merchant groups on which the state had no choice but to depend.

As Poivre and Cossigny pursued enlightened reform on Ile de France, French commercial affairs in the broader Indian Ocean centered around the likes of the Monneron brothers. The absence of the organizational structure of the Compagnie des Indes—abolished in 1769 and hollowed out long before—in combination with the state’s restrained, “no territory” policy left French interests reliant on another fundamental element of imperial bricolage: merchant relationships held together above all by kinship and patronage. The reputations of the Monnerons were well established amongst the personnel of the former Compagnie des Indes; they were Huguenots, freemasons, and protégés and kinsman of Dupleix de Bacquencourt—brother of Joseph-François, the notorious architect of French colonial ambitions in India. At the start of the 1780s, four brothers were dispersed throughout the region: Charles in Pondicherry, Louis in Chandernagore, Janvier in Ile de France, and Pierre everywhere in between. (Augustin was involved in the tobacco monopoly in Paris.)⁶⁰ As a result, the brothers had access to a range of commercial and imperial partners: they dealt frequently with associates from the Ottoman empire, Gujarat, Bengal and Mysore, as well as an assortment of European powers in the region. As Francesca Trivellato has argued, familial and religious ties offered merchants protection from the risks of trade, but they could also serve as the basis for the expansion of markets. Stitching together the points of French influence while also dealing liberally in markets throughout the Indian Ocean, the Monnerons embodied what Trivellato has called a “communitarian

⁶⁰ Jacob M. Price, *France and the Chesapeake: A History of the French Tobacco Monopoly and of its Relationship to the British and American Tobacco Trades*, 2 vols (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1973), II: 799.

cosmopolitanism” that was essential to early-modern globalization in general, and that served as the ideal vehicle for the spatial fix of French merchant capital in the 1780s.⁶¹

Much of the Monnerons’ activity took place at the profitable margins of the colonial state.⁶² Each of the brothers occupied or had influence over quasi-public institutions within the French empire and beyond. Charles was a member of the *conseil supérieur* of Pondicherry, Augustin a director of the tobacco monopoly, Janvier ran a large trading establishment on Ile de France, Pierre was a Portuguese subject thanks to the extent of his trade in Mozambique, and Louis enjoyed close relations with Dutch and British merchants. This network was precious to a French state whose establishments in the Indian Ocean depended, in spite of the ambitions of reformers like Poivre and Cossigny, almost entirely upon external resources. In 1780 Louis Monneron was appointed agent in the Cape of Good Hope, where he tapped into Dutch networks that spanned Ceylon, Goa, and Batavia to send provisions (mainly wheat, flour and livestock) to the Mascarene islands.⁶³ This was an arrangement that was expensive for the state—and, one suspects, lucrative for the Monnerons. Over the course of eighteen months Louis racked up a bill of 2.5 million l.t., payable on short-term credit (within six months) on Dutch banks, which he submitted to Castries, the minister of the navy, upon leaving his post in the Cape in 1781.⁶⁴ Monneron cited the dire need of the colonies, the poor state of French credit, and ramifications of war between the England and the Netherlands as justification for his “considerable *tirage*.” His

⁶¹ Francesca Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 70-101. See also C.A. Bayly, “‘Archaic’ and ‘Modern’ Globalization in the Eurasian and African Arena, c. 1750–1850,” in A.G. Hopkins (ed.), *Globalization in World History* (London: Pimlico, 2002); Pierre Gervais, “Neither Imperial, Nor Atlantic: A Merchant Perspective on International Trade in the Eighteenth Century,” *History of European Ideas*, 34 (2008), 465–73.

⁶² As Braudel argues, the most lucrative business was to be found at the edges of states and trading companies. Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th–18th Century, vol. 2: The Wheels of Commerce* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 148.

⁶³ Souillac to Louis Monneron between 1780 and 1782: ABM, Fonds Monneron, 122 S 1 ff 1-19.

⁶⁴ Louis Monneron to Castries, 20 May 1781, ABM, 122 S 30 ff 76-79.

protector Chevreau, the intendant of Ile de France, declined to pass judgement on the affair, but did warn that Castries and Necker “will surely be very surprised and perhaps concerned by such a considerable withdrawal.”⁶⁵ Regardless, the configuration of French power in the region demanded that they overlook Louis’s indulgence.

By no means did the Monnerons limit their services to French institutions. Operating at the “margins” also involved trading with other powers. André Lespagnol and Sylvia Marzagalli have convincingly argued that eighteenth-century Atlantic economies worked because they “leaked”; people, goods, and capital regularly evaded claims to loyalty, sovereignty, and exclusivity, especially during war, supplying distended empires with necessary but scarce resources.⁶⁶ The same mechanisms were at work between European powers in the Indian Ocean. After merchants in Ile de France were granted the right to conduct private trade in 1769, the island became a clearing house for Europeans who wanted to circumvent monopoly restrictions and surreptitiously expatriate capital made in the country trade.⁶⁷ The Monnerons’ correspondence abounds with references to the commodities that fueled the country trade—“rice and silver, that’s my cry!” Janvier wrote to Louis in 1784—because they offered the perfect conduit between periphery and metropole: with agents in India, Ile de France, and Paris, the brothers closed a loop connecting European finance with colonial commerce.⁶⁸ Typically the Monnerons would sell to Ile de France commodities that had been purchased by a partner in India; the brothers and their associate would make a profit, and the colony got what it needed.

⁶⁵ Chevreau to Louis Monneron, 29 May 1781, ABM, 122 S 2.

⁶⁶ André Lespagnol, “Mondialisation des trafics inter-océaniques et structures commerciales nationales au XVIIIe siècle : contradictions et compromis,” *Le Bulletin de la Société d’Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine*, 1-2 (1997), 80-91; Marzagalli, “Was Warfare Necessary.”

⁶⁷ Vaughan, *Creating the Creole Island*, 75-9. The country trade, or *le commerce d’Inde en Inde*, consisted of European merchants exchanging locally produced commodities (as opposed to metropolitan-manufactured commodities) between markets around the Indian Ocean. For an analysis of French involvement in the country trade, see Catherine Manning, *Fortunes à Faire: The French in Asian Trade, 1719-48* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1966).

⁶⁸ Janvier to Louis, 16th October 1784, ABM, 122 S 34 f 5.

But the operation also served as a way, apparently widely adopted, of getting private British capital out of India, since the commodities were purchased on British credit payable in London.⁶⁹ *Sub rosa* collaboration between French and British merchants was borne out of a realization that the latter's superior position in India was irreversible: they had the best access to commodities and their credit was the cheapest. This was especially the case with saltpeter, where French demand forced the likes of the Monnerons into collaboration with British finance and commerce, with long-term consequences for French empire in the Indian Ocean.⁷⁰

"Leaks" between French and British merchants were not, then, simply ephemeral moments of release from the more permanent infrastructures of empire; rather, they helped create enduring financial, commercial and political relationships. Customary partners for the Monnerons and their associates in India were Robert Herries & Company and Bourdieu & Chollet—two London banks that in the 1780s competed for influence over the revived Compagnie des Indes.⁷¹ Ultimately Bourdieu secured political consent and financing from London for Calonne's company, which was so dominated by foreign and in particular British interests that it has been described by one historian as an "international cartel."⁷² Clearly this was not just a symptom of the Calonne ministry's notorious speculative excess: the links between London finance and French trade had already been made in the Indian Ocean. Louis Monneron had conducted business with Bourdieu from Chandernagore since the late 1770s, organizing

⁶⁹ For a contemporary explanation, see Pierre Blancard, *Manuel de commerce des Indes orientales et de la Chine* (Paris: Bernard, 1806), 40-1, analyzed in Braudel, *Wheels of Commerce*, 148.

⁷⁰ On the necessity of working under conditions of British hegemony in Indian Ocean trade in the 1780s, see John Shovlin, *Commerce Not Conquest: Political Economy, Capitalism, and the Franco-British Global Rivalry, 1688-1788*, forthcoming, and Elizabeth Cross, "The French East India Company and the Politics of Commerce," (PhD Dissertation, Harvard University, 2017).

⁷¹ For Herries, see Lagrenée to Charles Monneron, 25th January 1777, ANOM 8 AQ 384 f 25; for Bourdieu, Lagrenée to Charles Monneron, 7th January 1778, ANOM 8 AQ 384 f 46.

⁷² Frederick L. Nussbaum, "The Formation of the New East India Company of Calonne," *The American Historical Review*, vol. 38, no. 3 (Apr., 1933), 490.

trade from Bengal to Europe through the Red Sea with partners in Jeddah and Cairo—a transaction that established further networks that became hardwired into the geography of French commerce. Upon the success of the trade, the Cairo partner, Magallon, Noëlle Ollive et Cie, suggested to Louis that Suez could become a thoroughfare for European commerce with India, especially during times of war, when insurance on ships rounding the Cape became more expensive. Louis became preoccupied with the idea; in the late 1790s both he and Magallon, in his capacity as consul general to Cairo, lobbied Talleyrand and Napoleon on the commercial importance of Suez.⁷³

Cosmopolitan connections of the sort forged by the Monnerons in the 1770s and 80s allowed merchants to explore alternatives when access to potential markets was blocked—to try out small-scale and short-term spatial fixes. In a broader perspective, they were typical of the intercultural exchanges that had long woven together markets and societies around the Indian Ocean.⁷⁴ But by the late eighteenth century there were signs that things were tending in the other direction. Certainly Cossigny’s pursuit of self-sufficiency hinted at a desire to decouple French and British power and the Indian Ocean. And regardless of the ambitions of enlightened reform on Ile de France, Britain’s encroaching sovereignty in the subcontinent was changing the terms of international trade.

Throughout his correspondence Louis Monneron remarked with astonishment upon the “revolutions” taking place throughout the region, and in particular the way in which the English thought of “Bengal, where they have established a legislation and where they exercise all the

⁷³ Magallon, Noëlle Ollive et Cie to Louis Monneron, 14th August 1780, ABM, 122 S 34 f 2. On Magallon providing the basis for Talleyrand’s Egypt proposal, see Ian Coller, “Egypt in the French Revolution,” in Suzanne Desan, Lynn Hunt and William Max Nelson (eds.), *The French Revolution in Global Perspective* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 125. For Monneron’s advocacy, see Louis Monneron to Sieyès and the Executive Directory, 29th June 1799, ABM, 122 S 33.

⁷⁴ Enseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility Across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

rights of sovereignty, as an absolute property.”⁷⁵ He witnessed the consequences firsthand when in 1780 the East India Company’s Philip Francis kicked him out of Chandernagore.⁷⁶ Francis, who favored agrarian improvement over commercial profiteering, was famously hostile to a country trade that constituted a “drain of wealth” from Bengal, with “British” capital fleeing the region under the guise of textiles and saltpeter sold to French merchants. (He especially targeted the trade with French merchants through Suez.)⁷⁷ Francis’s expulsion of Louis was just a small indication of larger changes wrought by British presence in Bengal and beyond. More demanding claims of sovereignty over land and trade encouraged a “frontier patriotism” that led to sharper distinctions between English settlers, local populations and competing European merchants.⁷⁸

In theory, this assertion of law, order, and loyalty ought to have made it harder for merchants to operate in the profitable margins between companies, colonies, and empires. Louis certainly seemed aware that these developments put someone like him, so indiscriminate in his affairs, in an awkward position. While still awaiting Francis’s orders he wrote to an associate, “I owe nothing to my nation; the English are my only creditors”—and he was quick to add that neither “the persecutions of your government, [nor] my attachment to my *patrie*, will extinguish my heartfelt desire to satisfy them.”⁷⁹ Yet it would be a mistake to assume that the emergence of the European fiscal-military state in the Indian Ocean necessarily crowded out more anarchic or cosmopolitan forms of commerce. In reality, the rise of the state and the efflorescence of more or

⁷⁵ Louis Monneron, “Mémoire sur l’Inde,” March 1782, ABM, 122 S 34 f1.

⁷⁶ Francis to Louis Monneron, 12th February 1780, ABM, 122 S 34 f2.

⁷⁷ Ranajit Guha, *A Rule of Property for Bengal: An Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996 [1963]), 136-7. Guha bases his analysis of the “drain of wealth” on Francis’s note, “Trade to Suez.”

⁷⁸ Robert Travers, *Ideology and Empire in Eighteenth-Century India: The British in Bengal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁷⁹ Louis Monneron to Collings, 19th January 1780, ABM, 122 S 34 f2.

less illicit kinds of profiteering went hand in hand—in the colonies and in the metropole.⁸⁰ In the Indian Ocean in the 1780s, the Monnerons were well placed to profit from the shifting dynamics of hegemonic British credit, encroaching French capital, and the growing prevalence of war, which left resource-stretched states ever more reliant on merchants with the right connections. As long as this conjuncture lasted, the Monnerons' "marginal" activities could only be lucrative.

Louis had been ordered by the East India Company to return to Europe, but as we know he only made it as far as the Cape. By the end of 1781 he had taken up a position as agent for the crown in Ceylon, thanks in part to the recommendation of his protectors in Ile de France, Chevreau and the vicomte de Souillac.⁸¹ His chief responsibility was to supply Suffren's fleet, as France sought to reinforce the struggle waged by Hyder Ali, the Sultan of Mysore, against the English. Louis worked closely with the Dutch authorities in Ceylon, and at great expense to the French state: in July 1782 Souillac sent him one million livres in bills, and the arrival of Suffren in Colombo brought a further installment of silver.⁸² Once again the arrangement proved mutually beneficial. The Monnerons and their partners made a fortune, while Suffren—bolstered by wheat, salt, gunpowder and sepoy's garnered from Ceylon, Goa, Bassorah and Batavia—racked up a series of famous victories: at Providien in April, Nagapattinam in July, and Trincomalee in September. French commercial encroachment in the Indian Ocean was therefore accompanied by hard military power—indeed, Jean Tarrade has ventured the observation that the Treaty of Paris in 1783 came too soon for France, at least beyond the Cape of Good Hope.⁸³

⁸⁰ This is a central argument of Michael Kwass, *Contraband: Louis Mandrin and the Making of a Global Underground* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014).

⁸¹ Souillac and Chevreau to Louis Monneron, 17th September 1781, ABM, 122 S 1 f10.

⁸² Souillac to Louis Monneron, 19-24th July 1782, ABM, 122 S 1 ff 19-20; Souillac to Suffren, 24th July 1782, ABM, 122 S 1 f 21. See ABM, 122 S 11 and ABM, 122 S 14 respectively for Louis's correspondence with Iman Willem Falck, the Dutch governor, and Suffren. For an overview see Butel, "Réorientations du négoce Français à la fin du XVIIIe siècle," 69-71.

⁸³ Tarrade, *Le Commerce colonial de la France*, 494-6.

Such considerations are often as a sideshow in the theater of the American War of Independence, but in the broader scheme of things we might see them as evidence of the early success of French capital's turn to the east, even before further revolutions in the Atlantic world forced it in that direction.

War was therefore a vehicle for the reorientation of French merchant capital, a driver of the spatial fix in its "extensive phase."⁸⁴ This was, by necessity, a chaotic process, relying on the irregular and illicit operations provided by the likes of the Monnerons and prompting an outburst of contraband and speculation by colonial officials. The state, which before the war had evinced a desire to conserve value in the Indian Ocean system, condemned this profiteering as soon as peace was declared. Castries saw the Monnerons' network as especially culpable. Denis-Nicolas Foucault, the Intendant of Ile de France and a veteran of colonial intrigue (having been *embastillé* for his conduct in Louisiana during the Seven Years' War), was rebuked for abuse of royal funds; thanks to the protection of Sartine, he escaped with enforced retirement and a 10,000-livres pension. Chevreau was not so lucky. Dogged by Castries' accusations, he threw himself into the Seine in 1786.⁸⁵ For his part, Louis was recalled to France in 1785 on a charge of embezzlement—but he deemed the ignominy a price worth paying. To Augustin in 1787 he conceded that all parties were unanimous in believing that he committed "a thousand and one mistakes in that administration." But since they were mistakes "that made you, Pierre and Janvier so rich, you will agree that they can be excused."⁸⁶ In any case, Louis was exonerated thanks to Suffren's intervention.⁸⁷ Considering the less auspicious fates of his co-conspirators (who were

⁸⁴ Marzagalli, "Was Warfare Necessary?"

⁸⁵ Ibid., 481-3.

⁸⁶ Louis to Augustin, 8th July 1787, ABM, 122 S 34 f 5. Quoted in Butel, "Réorientations du négoce Français à la fin du XVIIIe siècle," 69.

⁸⁷ Klein, "Un chaînon manquant impérial?"

equally well connected, but administrators, not merchants) we might conclude that old regime authorities still, just about, deemed Louis's services a necessary evil.

They were tolerated above all because they provided near unparalleled access to international goods and capital. Ironically, the charges against the brothers revealed exactly why they had to be exonerated—why they were so necessary to the state's colonial needs. Louis was accused of pocketing the ransom of a captured English ship and diverting the proceeds to his Dutch collaborators. In turn, Pierre offered his services to all European buyers, allied or hostile. In 1780 he had disappeared in a storm in the Mozambique Channel while trading slaves; two years later he returned ("resurrected," as one letter to Louis put it) as a naturalized Portuguese subject. This status allowed him to captain a "neutral" Portuguese ship, the *Pierre d'Alcantara*, from Batavia to the Malabar coast, transporting goods in bulk for the Dutch, selling merchandise to the English (including a large quantity of arrack to Admiral Hughes's fleet on the eve of the battle of Trincomalee), and offering the silver proceeds to the French. As Charles wrote in defense of his accused brothers in 1784, it was understandable that both Pierre and Louis would be judged as "bad patriots" for their wartime deals. But who benefited? The Dutch, "our allies," got their merchandise traded, and the French got their saltpeter and silver—and where else would they have been able to get them, Charles asked, if not from the English?⁸⁸ Although bald in its defense of his brothers' opportunism, Charles's statement abided by the logics of merchant capital in the old regime. He took it for granted that the economic functioning of the empire relied on the "leaks," the exceptional deals, facilitated in this instance by Louis and Pierre. And judging by the fact that he and his brothers went unpunished, he was not exactly wrong.

⁸⁸ Charles Monneron, letter from Pondicherry (recipient not named), Pondicherry, 12 September 1784, ABM 122 S 34, fo. 5.

Cossigny's gunpowder factory was designed to overcome French reliance on these extortionate deals with quasi-private merchants and foreign powers at the colonial periphery. But near ubiquitous war in the Indian Ocean placed significant demands on gunpowder production. In 1782 alone Bussy had demanded 400,000 lbs of powder, which was at the time way beyond the factory's capacity.⁸⁹ Ile de France simply could not by itself provide the requisite saltpeter, artificial or otherwise. Nor was the spatial configuration of French empire beyond the Cape of Good Hope of much help in this regard. Self-sufficiency and the conservation of value was the objective, but the functionaries of French power, pulled by the centrifugal force of merchant capital in the absence of institutional guidance and the needs of war, were being drawn further into circuits of trade and finance that were controlled by other empires—and especially by the British. These were the two paths for French commercial imperialism in the Indian Ocean in the 1780s, on the eve of the French Revolution: a closed system in which colonial establishments generated their own revenues, produced their own resources, controlled their own destinies, and conserved their value, or an empire that leaked, in which wealth drained to private and foreign interests, and in which colonial affairs were ultimately dictated by the hegemonic British.

The Disavowal of Colonial Knowledge

War in southern India had placed great strain on Ile de France, and Cossigny's gunpowder factory required an extravagant commitment of resources from the state—including over 350 of the king's "elite slaves" and 500,000 bois noir trees. People in the colony soon voiced opposition to what they deemed a useless project that only existed because of favoritism. One colonist sent a scathing complaint to Versailles at the end of 1784, comparing the costs of the plantations with

⁸⁹ List of provisions for Bussy's fleet, 1782, ANOM 22 DFC 13 n. 325.

their scant utility. In 1781 Cossigny and Ceré had secured 70,000 l.t. from the colonial government, which covered the costs of transplanting 100,000 trees at 10 sols for each sapling, as well as the subsistence and lodging of slaves, who in turn would be exempt from the *corvée*. They were to be paid 35,000 l.t. up front, with the rest arriving along with the successful progress of the plantations. Three years later, the letter alleged that only 70,718 trees had arrived, that they had been bought for the inflated cost of 25 sols each, and that just under a quarter of them were dead or had no hope of succeeding. Evidently this was a scheme “to make money for Cossigny,” and it had only been approved because of his “friendship” with Chevreau, whose conduct was being questioned on all fronts. Most damning of all was the letter’s dismissal of the environmental and conservationist premises of the plantations, which were intended to plant charcoal-providing trees from abroad rather than further exploit the island’s diminishing forests. To the claim that “the trees were good for nature,” the anonymous writer countered that they had no economic value. Everyone in the colony, apparently, laughed at this “small, sad, tortured tree” that was about as useful to shipbuilding as the locally grown asparagus. It produced good charcoal, the letter conceded, but there was already a local market for charcoal, so why should the colony go to the expense of importing it at great cost?⁹⁰ To the extent that broad support had existed for the Poivre agenda on the island over the previous decade, it had now waned, in no small part due to the intensification of war and commerce in the Indian Ocean in the early 1780s.

Priorities had changed in the metropole as well. With Calonne and Castries in power, the French state was far more comfortable with an Indian Ocean empire that got what it could under conditions of British hegemony. Calonne’s revived *Compagnie des Indes*, and indeed the state’s indulgence of the Monnerons’ exceptional deals, were evidence of this policy of accommodation.

⁹⁰ “Plantation des Bois noirs,” 1784, AN Col C 4 66 f 260.

Any hope that enlightened governance might transform France's existing Indian Ocean infrastructure into a substitute for Bengal was now treated with suspicion or dismissed entirely.

Ministerial skepticism with the powder factory and its animating ideals became apparent in 1787, when Castries commissioned an enquiry on the soundness of Cossigny's methods and the quality of the gunpowder they produced. Attempting to avoid costly explosions and to speed up production to meet the demands of the navy during the war, Cossigny had developed a technique that differed from metropolitan orthodoxy. The Régie des poudres used the classical "stamping method": pilons, driven by water, pounded the assorted ingredients over a period of around 21 hours; the compacted powder was then left to harden for three days into "galettes," which were then crumbled up, granulated, and sifted for dust. The process took up to a week, and the rapid pulverization (up to 55 strokes per minute) of combustible ingredients often led to explosions. Cossigny, returning to his father's observations and perhaps inspired by recent developments British powder production, abandoned the stamping method and instead mixed separately pulverized saltpeter, charcoal, and sulfur in a centrifuge. Cossigny's method produced a uniform mixture of loose powder with no dust, was less risky, and lasted only a couple of days.⁹¹ By the most basic measures—producing gunpowder, and avoiding explosions—his "innovations" were successful.

Perhaps out of institutional loyalty, the inspector appointed by Castries was not inclined to agree. The report was conducted Vauchelle, the inspector général des poudres, who, based on samples and detailed descriptions sent by d'Espinassy, conducted his analysis in France, replicating Ile de France methods but using French ingredients. Cossigny, demonstrating his enduring faith in conservation through science, insisted via d'Espinassy on the inherent qualities

⁹¹ Charles Coulston Gillispie, *Science and Polity in France: The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Years* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 416-8; Bret, *L'état, l'armée, la science*, 244.

of the natural resources of the colony—the fixed alkali in its vegetation, the superior charcoal produced by his bois noirs—but these considerations were ignored in Vauchelle’s experiments. The results were disappointing. Vauchelle conceded the virtues of colonial self-sufficiency (“it seems difficult to be able to reasonably doubt the utility of a powder factory situated on Ile de France”), but overall the powder mill in its present form fell short of its potential. Powder sent from Europe to the Indian Ocean “conserved its force,” but the same was not true of powder coming the other way, and Vauchelle seemed to attribute the discrepancy to Cossigny’s method of preparing the saltpeter, charcoal, and sulfur separately. His most substantive criticisms, however, were not about technical procedures or even about gunpowder; instead, they were directed at the factory’s reliance on slave labor. Vauchelle finished his report condemning “the deplorable state of the *noirs*,” and urged the state to find ways “to soften (*d’adoucir*)” their treatment, “without increasing the expenses of the king.”⁹² From Vauchelle’s metropolitan perspective, which was perhaps informed by the ascendance of anti-slavery sentiment in the public sphere, the colonial provision of gunpowder was not worth the price of inhumanity.

Responding to the report point by point, d’Espinassy took particular exception to the accusations of maltreatment, wherein, the engineer suggested, Vauchelle’s “somewhat bitter zeal and his tender humanity are taken too far.” Contrary to what “ignorant or wicked” people might have told the esteemed inspecteur général des poudres, the “noirs du roi” were well dressed and were fed according to their status and function, but always received what d’Espinassy considered sufficient rations, from “Commandeurs à médailles” who got 60 lbs of corn, 45 lbs of rice, 15 lbs of salted meat, and 4 pots of arrak each month, to “poudriers” who got 90 lbs of corn and “some salt and some arrak.” All were treated with “douceur,” d’Espinassy protested, with the exception

⁹² Vauchelle, “Moulins à poudres de l’Isle de France,” 1788, ANOM 22 DFC 13 n. 333.

of “bad subjects” or the lazy. In a swipe at Vauchelle’s hypocritical piety, he concluded by asserting that since they were assured of food, clothing, lodging, and medical aid, the slaves of the powder mill enjoyed a standard of living that was “infinitely superior to that of the *paysans journaliers* of France.”⁹³ Cossigny also dismissed Vauchelle’s moral objections, reprising a defense of slavery that he had published in a 1784 pamphlet in response to the botanist Pierre Sonnerat’s claim that “the slave trade debased nature.” “We’re familiar with the idea that there can be a kind of trade that civilizes the soul,” wrote Cossigny, the agronomist-engineer who purchased slaves to plant trees; “but a trade that debases nature, we have no idea what that could mean.”⁹⁴ And he expressed frustration at Vauchelle’s conservatism, at least when it came to gunpowder production: “Why, in an era that is otherwise so enlightened,” he asked with not a little sarcasm, “must we always support old methods without wanting to try new techniques?”⁹⁵ But the tide was against the colonial engineers. In April of 1789 Vauchelle circulated around Versailles his “*tableau affreux...* on the state of misery and oppression in which the *noirs du Roi* are held, and particularly those engaged to work at the Moulin à Poudre.”⁹⁶ In short order Cossigny was rushing back to France to try to get a fair hearing for his research on gunpowder, and, as the colonial politics of the Revolution unfolded, to defend the slave economy of Ile de France. On both counts, he was roundly ignored.

The Vauchelle dispute was a sign of disaccord in the relationship between the old regime state and its functionaries in the Indian Ocean. For the previous two decades, in spite of the

⁹³ D’Espinassy, “Observations Générales sur la 2e partie intitulée Recherches sur les causes de la diminution de force des poudres des guerres faites à l’Ile de France à postérieure de leur fabrication,” 15 January 1789, ANOM 22 DFC 13 n. 346

⁹⁴ Cossigny, “Lettre à M Sonnerat,” (1784). Sonnerat had published his condemnation of slavery on the Mascarene islands in *Voyage aux Indes orientales et à la Chine* (1782).

⁹⁵ Cossigny, “Observations sur le mémoire contenant le détail de la fabrication des poudres à l’Isle de France, et les réponses de M. de Vauchelles [sic],” 10 February 1789, ANOM 22 DFC 13 n. 345.

⁹⁶ Claude Wanquet, *La France et la première abolition de l’esclavage, 1794-1802: Le cas des colonies orientales Ile de France (Maurice) et La Réunion* (Paris: Karthala, 1998), 20.

vagaries of faction at Versailles, a succession of ministerial regimes had more or less endorsed the ambitions and expertise of colonial administrators and reformers. Turgot had appointed the creole Cossigny as the representative on Ile de France of his nationwide reform of gunpowder production because of the latter's intimate knowledge of the region and its resources. Now, on the eve of Revolution, whatever had once bound Cossigny and the likes of Turgot and Lavoisier within a single scientific community seemed increasingly tenuous. Colonial knowledge and colonial resources were being called into question, along with the regimes of labor and property on which they both relied. Revolutionary politics in Paris only further widened this epistemic breach between center and periphery in French commercial imperialism.

Cossigny arrived in Paris in late 1790 as a “*député extraordinaire*” of Ile de France, an unelected position and a self-assigned title. On the question of slavery he spent much of the next three years lobbying the legitimate representatives of the Mascarenes about the perils of the abolition of slavery.⁹⁷ His compatriots, who did not need much convincing on this issue, were nevertheless antagonized by Cossigny's unfounded claims to political authority, and the resultant disputes that took place in the public sphere revealed the erstwhile naturalist to be a poor judge of prevailing revolutionary opinion. In March 1790 a number of colonial representatives were alarmed to discover that Cossigny had delivered a speech in the National Assembly about the Mascarene islands without having consulted them first. They issued a public letter accusing him of pretensions to celebrity and aristocracy, and questioning his right to pontificate on either Ile de France or Bourbon, since he was not a property owner. Provoked, Cossigny responded, also in public, by agreeing that he did indeed believe in aristocracy—of talents, intelligence, and virtues, among other qualities, which implicitly he held in good measure. As for the question of his

⁹⁷ Ibid., 29-37, 594 for “*député extraordinaire*.”

property, his interlocutors could not be more wrong. In fact, Cossigny was happy to point out, he owned the largest property in Port-Louis, as well as a majority stake in a plantation at Palma, which he “cultivated with 270 slaves,” and on which he owned a working *sucrière*, a “*cafétérie immense*,” and an “*indigoterie nouvelle*.”⁹⁸ Cossigny reasoned that these credentials, along with the fact that his brother, David, was now governor of Ile de Dance and Ile Bourbon, gave him as much of a right as anyone to speak publicly about colonial affairs. But this was an old regime logic, and Cossigny was slow to realize that patrimony, property, slave-wealth, and aristocracy (enlightened or otherwise) did not have quite the same leverage in revolutionary Paris as they did on Ile de France.

Cossigny therefore remained a bystander to debates about colonial affairs during the early years of the Revolution, sending anxious reports back to Ile de France about the imminent abolition of slavery. He fared no better when it came to the politics of gunpowder. Historians have typically regarded the gunpowder industry as one of the success stories of revolutionary government. French gunpowder production in the 1790s built on the improvements carried out under Lavoisier in the final decades of the old regime to satisfy demand generated by war on all fronts, a British blockade of maritime commerce, and the need to provision an army of unprecedented size after the *levée en masse*. Gunpowder became a symbol for patriotic endeavor and resourcefulness, a totem of national virtue. In early 1794 the Régie des poudres offered classes at the Arsenal to local artisans on the extraction of saltpeter, the production of gunpowder and the fabrication of arms and munitions. To mark the end of the courses in March the Commune of Paris declared a procession, in which, according to Gillispie’s rich description, trumpeters, drummers, mounted gendarmes, and horse-drawn cannoneers marched alongside

⁹⁸ “Correspondence entre M. de Cossigny et MM. d’Hillaire et de la Rochette, Bouvier du Molard, Delourme, P. et L. Drouet,” (Paris: Didot le Jeune, 1790).

delegations from the city's saltpeter workshops and munitions factories, who paraded aesthetic representations of the fruits of their labors, including a "centrifuge for revolutionary gunpowder... inscribed with the legend 'Mort aux Tyrans,'" a Phrygian liberty bonnet made of saltpeter, and a "saltpeter model mountain topped by a saltpeter bust of Marat."⁹⁹ Lavoisier had recently been arrested because of his associations with the Ferme Générale, and was soon to be guillotined. But the infrastructure of his Régie des poudres had been opened up for public participation and public instruction. Jean-Antoine Chaptal, Lavoisier's successor as overseer of gunpowder production, later reflected upon the revolutionary state's efficient mobilization of talents and resources at a time of national need: "The government appealed to savants, and in an instant the land was covered with workshops: everywhere old methods were replaced by the most perfect and expeditious; saltpeter, powder, guns, canons, leathers, etc. were prepared or made by new processes; and France once more astonished Europe with what this great enlightened nation can do, when its independence is attacked."¹⁰⁰

Chaptal might have captured the revolutionary government's orientation towards the innovations and improvements offered by a metropolitan public, especially concerning the gunpowder industry. The government was less receptive towards colonial knowledge. As Emma Spary has argued, the Revolution disrupted the institutional and epistemic fabric of science in France. In the old regime, science worked through patronage: an individual hoping to have their knowledge recognized as legitimate cultivated powerful allies who could promote their cause and in royal academies. In the Revolution, scientific institutions succeeded through association and skillful collective representation: private societies and provincial academies petitioned

⁹⁹ Gillispie, *Science and Polity in France: The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Years*, 395-7.

¹⁰⁰ Jean-Antoine Chaptal, *De l'industrie française* (Paris: Antoine-Augustin Renouard, 1819), quoted in Bret, *L'état, l'armée, la science*, 241.

government using patriotic rhetoric, like a saltpeter model mountain.¹⁰¹ This was how the Jardin du Roi became the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, and it was how the Régie des poudres became the Administration révolutionnaire des poudres et salpêtres, which was dominated by a close-knit group of chemists and engineers—Chaptal, Monge, Hassenfratz, Carny and Berthollet—with political acumen and good connections. Cossigny, however, had been on Ile de France for the past two decades. His patron, Chevreau, had thrown himself into the Seine before the Revolution, and Lavoisier, a potential ally, had been sent to the scaffold. In the transition from patronage to the collective representation of savants, an important component of imperial bricolage was lost. Colonial science now struggled to gain metropolitan recognition.

It is possible to imagine other colonial actors participating in the elite sociability on which revolutionary science relied, but Cossigny, at least, was not equipped, as his public interventions on the Mascarenes demonstrated. And in any case, Vauchelle's pre-revolutionary report indicated the low estimation of the Parisian scientific community for his colonial knowledge. Cossigny pestered Berthollet with claims about the efficacy of the methods he had honed at the factory in Pamplémousses. He was only given serious consideration after the devastating explosion on 31 August 1794 of the Grenelle gunpowder factory, which left over a thousand dead or wounded.¹⁰² By then, production goals had been met, military demands had diminished, and the state had moved on to other concerns.¹⁰³ All Cossigny could do to rescue what he considered to be his rightful legacy to science was publish, on the eve of his death in 1809, long treatises that documented in minute detail—including unanswered memoirs and

¹⁰¹ E. C. Spary, *Utopia's Garden: French Natural History from Old Regime to Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 158-73. See also Roger Hahn, *The Anatomy of a Scientific Institution: The Paris Academy of Sciences, 1660-1803* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 159-94 and 252-85.

¹⁰² Patrice Bret, *L'état, l'armée, la science*, 241-6; Thomas Le Roux, "Accidents industriels et régulation des risques: l'explosion de la poudrerie de Grenelle en 1794," *Revue d'histoire moderne & contemporaine*, 2011/3 (no 58-3), 34-62.

¹⁰³ Multhauf, "The French Crash Program for Saltpeter Production," 175.

correspondence to ministers—the improvements he had made on Ile de France, the revolutionary government’s neglect of his talents, and the general ignorance of Bethollet and the “charlatan” Chaptal, who had both gone on to enjoy prestigious careers as bureaucrat-scientists, the Napoleonic heirs to Lavoisier.¹⁰⁴

Chaptal later championed the ability of chemistry to create value out of waste—to generate something like a conservationist economy. The extraction of saltpeter from excrement and rotting food served as a model for the scientific improvement of modern industry. As some historians have begun to point out, it is no small irony that French savants like Chaptal would condemn the wastefulness of previous societies while promoting industries that exacerbated what Marx called “metabolic rift”: the process by which capitalist societies exhaust their ecological conditions of existence by not returning to the land what they consume.¹⁰⁵ There is also some irony in the fact that Chaptal would promote the idea of the “circular economy” after decades of ignoring Cossigny’s arguments about gunpowder production. Although botanist-statesmen like Poivre and Cossigny did not have the concept, transforming Ile de France and, by extension, France’s Indian Ocean empire, into a circular, sustainable, autonomous system was the ultimate objective of the former’s forest conservation policies and the latter’s gunpowder project. Cossigny’s experience with trying to generate military power out of Ile de France’s limited resources might have been of some help in the revolutionary years, when France was cut off from maritime commerce and desperately in need of gunpowder. But in that context the colonial perspective was of minor importance. If anything, it was treated with suspicion. Vauchelle’s pre-revolutionary disparagement of Cossigny’s gunpowder and the coercive, inhuman processes by

¹⁰⁴ Cossigny, *Recherches physiques et chimiques sur la fabrication de la poudre à canon*; idem., *Supplément aux recherches physiques et chimiques sur la fabrication de la poudre à canon* (Paris: Gagnard, 1808), which contained a lengthy and sardonic response to Chaptal’s own dismissive review of Cossigny’s *Recherches*.

¹⁰⁵ Thomas Le Roux, *Le Laboratoire des pollutions industrielles: Paris, 1770-1830* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2011).

which it was produced had been a sign of things to come. French elites had little time for the ideas, interests, and commodities coming out of Ile de France.

With the Revolution, it seems, the basic dynamic of commercial imperialism, by which colonial capital returned to the center in the form of ideas that had a receptive audience, was falling apart. Even merchants like the Monnerons, who had always managed to make themselves useful to the old regime state, were becoming obsolete.

The Disavowal of Colonial Commerce

Although the Monnerons had avoided sanction for their affairs with rival powers during the Indian wars of the early 1780s, the scrutiny to which they were subjected was an indication that, at least in the French Indian Ocean, the politics of merchant capital were already changing before the Revolution. For France, the signing of peace at Versailles in 1783 came with a recognition that a return to the *status quo ante bellum* was impossible. A colonial economy that had been contained by the *Exclusif* had to adapt to new realities. Macrofinancial and geopolitical developments over the previous decades had shaken up the old system and, as Jean Tarrade put it, “linked more closely than in the past the activities of colonial commerce in the different theaters of European expansion.”¹⁰⁶ On the one hand this required greater coordination: it was no longer tenable to rely on the quasi-autonomous and expensive services of the Monnerons. On the other hand it required a relaxing of the strict demands of the *Exclusif*: colonial policy had to emulate merchant capital and embrace the necessity of inter-imperial exchange and collaboration—especially with the British. One could be forgiven for seeing these twin requirements of reform and the policies that ensued as contradictory. The Eden Treaty of 1786

¹⁰⁶ Tarrade, *Le Commerce colonial de la France*, 491.

reduced tariffs on trade between France and Britain, and yet the previous year Calonne had revived the monopolistic Compagnie des Indes. But the tension between liberalization and coordination was more apparent than real. Both were deployed in the service of adapting colonial commerce to the changing realities of overseas competition. Calonne's company had just as much in common with the Eden treaty as it did with the protectionist measures of the *Exclusif*; it was above all a product of international finance and Anglo-French collaboration.

The Monnerons had, of course, anticipated these formal developments. Indeed, they had been the quintessential facilitators of the spatial fix that had made them possible, overseeing the transfer of capital, resources, and aspirations away from a crisis-prone Atlantic and towards the Indian Ocean. This could only have been achieved by operating within the confines of ascendant British hegemony. As Augustin had so brazenly articulated: Where else could the French get their silver and saltpeter? They relied on British credit, traded on London banks, and heeded the authority of the East India Company. Louis, remember, had gone so far as to confess that he owed nothing to his nation—that the English were his only creditors. Calonne soon acknowledged as much for all French merchants in the Indian Ocean, when he revived the Compagnie des Indes with financial backing from London.

And yet the Monnerons were synonymous with indiscriminate, quasi-legal and sometimes scandalous operations that, as early as 1783, were already vulnerable to the spirit of reform that had taken hold of colonial administrations. The extensive phase of the spatial fix, with its necessary leaks, inefficiencies, and uncomfortable collaborations, was unsustainable, from the perspective of the state. Whereas after the Seven Years War administrators inspired by Enlightenment science had sought to eliminate waste entirely, to construct a new Indian Ocean system that conserved value, now the state, acknowledging the realities of commerce and power

in the region, simply sought to make the business practices of the Monnerons official policy. But to formalize such operations—to make them routine, reliable, transparent—was in many respects to threaten the basic functions of merchant capital in the global economy of the old regime. The Monnerons were oriented towards Profit 2. They worked at the margins of colonial systems, happily stepping in where the organizational capacities of old regime states met their limitations. Now those colonial systems were being reorganized, and soon those old regime states would be overthrown.

The predicament in which the Monnerons found themselves on the eve of the French Revolution was consistent with broader developments in European imperialism. This was a period of transition from “archaic” to “modern” globalization, when heterogeneous markets with distinct relations of production, often held together by kinship or personal connection or religion, were being transformed by the demands of European nation-states and capitalist institutions spreading out from the Atlantic world. From the 1780s, previously ambiguous and multi-centric imperial regimes sought to assert internal hierarchical organization.¹⁰⁷ In Britain, the scandalous practices of the East India Company in Bengal were used as pretext for more systematic and effective methods of imperial domination, as evidenced by the impeachment trial of Warren Hastings and Pitt’s Commutation Act of 1784, which drastically reduced the tax on tea in order to prevent smuggling and the illicit profits of the country trade.¹⁰⁸ This did not entail the simple replacement of what had come before; the Monnerons’ anticipation of French reforms in the Indian Ocean serves as an example of how, as Christopher Bayly put it, modern political and economic forms spread through the infrastructure and value chains laid down by archaic

¹⁰⁷ Lauren Benton, “Constitutions and Empires,” *Law & Social Inquiry*, vol. 31, no. 1 (2006), 177-98.

¹⁰⁸ Nicolas B. Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

globalization.¹⁰⁹ But in general this was a period in which the norms of European imperialism were being contested—when the politics of merchant capital were subject to change.

Overseas commerce suffered similar upheavals to colonial science during the Revolution. In both, an important aspect of imperial bricolage was dismantled: patronage in the latter, profit in the former. The Monnerons were descendants of Castanier. Their marginal operations were instances of what Foucault described as the “necessary” and “tolerated illegalities” that enabled the old regime economy to function. In the 1780s the colonial administration was growing impatient with these illegalities, but it still recognized their necessity. Revolutionary statesmen, however, had zero tolerance for the Monnerons’ deficient patriotism, the lack of transparency around their affairs, and the way they benefited from court protection. The “defeudalization” of the mercantile system demanded by the physiocrats—“the new economy of power,” in Foucault’s terms, “distributed in homogeneous circuits capable of operating everywhere”—now seemed possible.¹¹⁰ This was devastating to the Monnerons, who relied entirely on the unequal distribution of power, information and state support. How they tried to respond says much about both the flexibility of capital and the extent to which the rules of the game had changed—how some merchants adapted to survive the overhaul of the political system, and how some failed to do so.

One survival tactic that the brothers adopted was to seek direct influence over the course of events. Unlike Cossigny, they managed to occupy key political and financial positions in revolutionary institutions. Charles, Louis, and Pierre had been elected to the Estates General in 1789, the latter two remaining as deputies in the National Assembly for the East Indies and Ile de

¹⁰⁹ Bayly, “‘Archaic’ and ‘Modern’ Globalization,” 48.

¹¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 80-4.

France respectively.¹¹¹ This was a unique arrangement: no other merchant family was so prominent in revolutionary politics. In any case, the Monnerons also pursued more conventional



Fig. 5.2. An engraving of “Les Frères Monneron” by Pierre-Guillaume-Alexandre Beljambe, to publicize the opening of their bank.

ways of consolidating their fortunes in the 1790s, during which overseas trade had ground to a halt. In 1790, Charles profited from the sale of biens nationaux (properties confiscated from the clergy, émigrés, and suspected counter-revolutionaries and sold for the public purse) by

¹¹¹ Timothy Tackett, *Becoming A Revolutionary: The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture (1789-1790)* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014 [1996]), 43.

purchasing the Château des Célestins in Colombier-le-Cardinal, in his native Ardèche.¹¹²

Augustin joined the flock of *négociants* migrating to Paris, where in 1791 he set up the Frères Monneron bank, which issued low denominational copper coins to make up for the shortfall in specie after the introduction of *assignats*.¹¹³ (The coins bore revolutionary inscriptions and imagery, including portraits of Rousseau and Lafayette, but were struck at Matthew Boulton's Soho Mint; however much they espoused patriotism, the Monnerons could never shake off an air of anglophilia.) By 1796 Louis had settled in Bordeaux, where he had bought a 126-arpent vineyard, "La Baranquine," valued in 1790 at 392,000 lt and judged capable of producing 150 barrels a year.¹¹⁴

Charles's château, Augustin's banks, Louis's vineyard: each new venture undertaken by a Monneron in the revolutionary decade was typical of how French merchant capital had long assumed a defensive position in times of trouble, taking cover in the safety of land, offices, and status.¹¹⁵ This occasional conservative tendency has led some Marxist commentators to characterize merchant capital in general as "reactionary," capable only of relying upon and perhaps even strengthening pre-capitalist social relations.¹¹⁶ And if we took the Monnerons' activities in the 1790s in isolation there would be much to support this argument. Even as the old regime was collapsing, the brothers pursued tried and tested means of diversifying their wealth in traditional forms of value. Janvier, for instance, had travelled back from the Mascarenes to marry Elisabeth Lançon de Lostière, a child of Versailles—her parents being the *écuyer de main* and

¹¹² Klein, "Un chaînon manquant impérial?"

¹¹³ Richard Margolis, "Matthew Boulton's French Ventures of 1791 and 1792; Tokens for the Monneron Frères of Paris and Isle de France," *The British Numismatic Journal*, vol. 58 (1988), 102-9.

¹¹⁴ "Propriétés à hypothéquer..." 30th November 1801, ABM, 122 S 32.

¹¹⁵ Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau, *L'argent de la traite: milieu négrier, capitalisme et développement: un modèle* (Paris: Aubier, 1996), 165-72. See also Jean-Pierre Hirsch, "Les milieux du commerce," 1358-63.

¹¹⁶ For instance, Marx, *Capital: Volume III* (London: Penguin Classics, 1991), 444-5; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 3-27.

dame d'honneur of the Mesdames de France, the daughters of Louis XV. The marriage was sweetened by a dowry of 20,000 livres. Elisabeth and Janvier returned to Ile de France, where they hosted a lavish salon in Port Louis and luxurious receptions at Minissy—tropical monuments to a culture that was disintegrating in France.

Land, finance, and marriage helped shelter merchant capital from the effects of Revolutionary politics and war—but they didn't provide guarantees. Despite occupying a range of positions of authority in 1789, and despite protecting their wealth in all the right ways, the Monnerons endured a tumultuous Revolution. Their fortunes dwindled rapidly as the decade progressed. Charles, the oldest, made it back from Paris to Annonay, where he died in 1799.¹¹⁷ His siblings ended up more or less destitute and disgraced, exiled to the fraying colonial edges of the old regime. Pierre spent a good part of the 1790s either incarcerated somewhere in the Ottoman empire or unsuccessfully attempting to establish alliances with Tipu Sultan in Mysore; he died in 1801 at Janvier's establishment in Port Louis.¹¹⁸ Not long after, Louis, having exhausted all avenues of potential influence, disappeared in Senegal, seeking passage back to the Indian Ocean. Augustin lived until 1824, but spent the last two decades of his life in New Orleans, dodging his creditors. What went wrong?

Revolutionary politics made the Monnerons' ambiguous relationship with the colonial state increasingly untenable. Among *négociants*, the Monnerons were unusually conspicuous in the public sphere, counting three brothers in the Estates General and then two in the National Assembly. One would have thought such an arrangement would offer sufficient protection for

¹¹⁷ Emmanuel Nicod, "*Monneron aîné, député de la sénéchaussée d'Annonay*," *Revue du Vivarais*, 4 (1896), 479-86.

¹¹⁸ For Pierre's travels in the Red Sea see his personal account, "*Journal du voyage fait sur le vaisseau le Saint-Jean-Baptiste*," Bibliothèque Nationale, Ms Nouv. Acq. Fr. 9436-9437. In the early twentieth century the journal was found in the French ambassadorial archives in Constantinople, and subsequently a transcript appeared in *Le Revue de Paris* (1907) under the histrionic title, "*Mon Odyssée*." For his flirtations with Tipu Sultan's court, see Wanquet, *La France et la première abolition de l'esclavage*, 480 & 490-1.

their private interests. Yet as Cossigny's struggles during the Revolution also demonstrated, political culture had changed after 1789. Unlike the patronage systems of Souillac and the old networks of the Compagnie des Indes, the National Assembly proved less susceptible to personal influence. Affairs of state were more public and more contested. As a result, the "illegality" of the Monnerons' trading activities was seen as less necessary, and less tolerated.

The first hint that the Monnerons' prominence rendered them vulnerable came in October 1790, during a debate between Louis and the inhabitants of the Mascarene islands who were then in Paris. Louis, as deputy for the "East Indies," delivered a speech in the Assembly in which he called for the revolutionary government to persevere with the imperial restraint of the 1780s. Appealing to his experience, Monneron argued that Ile de France could not even feed itself, and that it had cost the state 300 million l.t. since its retrocession to the crown from the Compagnie des Indes in 1767. The idea that the island could be a prosperous cornerstone of French power should be abandoned, he argued, along with all ideas of colonial "conquest and aggrandizement." Instead, France should simply fortify Pondicherry, and focus on the protection of its existing colonial property. Unsurprisingly, the Mascarenes' representatives in Paris were hostile to Louis's speech, but one riposte was particularly coy in its implications. On the apparent threat of British conquest, the inhabitants expressed mock disbelief that the "Monsieur le Deputé could be any more initiated than others in the secrets of the Court of London."¹¹⁹

Doubts over the "patriotic" origins and inclinations of their capital would continue to haunt the Monnerons. In 1791 Louis and Pierre took a public stance in favor of the granting of citizenship to the *gens de couleur*, inviting the hostility of other members of the Colonial

¹¹⁹ Louis Monneron, "Mémoire lu à l'Assemblée Nationale en faveur des colonies françaises aux indes," 15th October 1790; "Mémoire présenté à l'Assemblée Nationale, par les habitans des Iles de France et Bourbon, actuellement à Paris," 1st November 1790; "Réponse de M. Louis Monneron, député de Pondichery, à l'adresse de quelques habitans des Iles de France et de Bourbon à l'Assemblée Nationale," 18th November 1790.

Committee—notably from the deputies of Martinique, including Arthur Dillon and Moreau de Saint-Méry, who dismissed the Monnerons as corrupt and their opinions unworthy. The motives of the Martinique faction, vehemently opposed to the citizenship of *gens de couleur*, were obvious. But the accusations against the Monnerons revealed the extent to which their “marginal” affairs were an open and, to the family, damaging secret. Among the charges included claims that the brothers owed Ile de France 1.5 million l.t.; that Janvier had “illegally” bought his Port Louis establishment at a third of its value, thanks to the underhand assistance of administrators, “your friends and protectors”; and that if 300 million l.t. had indeed been poured into Ile de France, as Louis had claimed, then a good portion of that sum (15 million, to be precise) had ended up in the pockets of the Monnerons. Their fortune, in other words, was based on having friends in high places, and on fleecing the colonial state.¹²⁰

In the atmosphere created by revolutionary public opinion, these charges were toxic. The brothers stank of the crony capitalism of Versailles. Like the members of the General Farm who had grown wealthy on the monopolies, indirect taxes and the arbitrage opportunities presented by the old regime’s fragmented internal markets—its uneven distribution of power—the Monnerons were also seen as creatures of a corrupt system that had fattened them on favoritism, indulging their “illegalities” with exceptional justice. The Revolution continued the work of Enlightenment critique by taking aim at the structures that made such indulgence possible, even necessary. Just as the fiscal reforms of 1791 sought to abolish the internal divisions of the French economy in favor of “equity, equality, uniformity,” so the dominant faction in colonial politics aimed to reverse the spatial fragmentation of and intensification of privilege in the overseas economy that

¹²⁰ “Réponse de M. Pierre-Antoine Monneron, député de la colonie de l’Ile de France à l’Assemblée Nationale, à M. Berthelot et autres, et, par occasion, M. Arthur Dillon,” (Paris : P. Didot l’ainé, 9th September 1791).

had allowed the Monnerons to flourish.¹²¹ From the Monnerons' perspective, the Revolution completed, in a radical fashion, what the postwar reforms of the 1780s had threatened to do by reframing the politics of merchant capital.

To make matters worse, their incompatibility with the new regime was made all the more obvious by their conspicuous political presence. Taking stances on controversial issues made the Monnerons vulnerable. Merchant capital worked best when its operations were inscrutable and its beneficiaries anonymous—especially during a period of revolutionary upheaval.¹²² By being politically visible the brothers made a target of themselves; they gave adversaries an opportunity to dredge up old accusations. As Pierre pointed out in his response to the Martinique faction, “M. Dillon thought I was honest before I made my opinion on the *gens de couleur* public.”¹²³

Perhaps in recognition of their over-exposure, the brothers gradually retreated to the margins of political institutions. But the margins were neither as generous nor as profitable as before. The private-issue bank, Les Frères Monneron, was a short-lived affair, shutting down in September 1792 when the National Assembly declared the manufacture of money the sovereign's prerogative. Louis continued to offer his services to the state: in 1795 the Committee of Public Safety sent him to England, ostensibly to negotiate an exchange of prisoners of war but “secretly,” as Louis put it in his report to Boissy d'Anglas (an acquaintance from the Ardèche), to conduct “a thorough examination of the state of the country” and to survey opinion regarding colonial war with France.¹²⁴ Here and in a series of memoirs submitted to the Directory, Louis suggested projects for the Indian Ocean that bordered on the quixotic: in 1797 he advocated the

¹²¹ On colonial politics in the Revolution, see Cheney, *Revolutionary Commerce*, 195-230. On the General Farm, see Kwass, *Contraband*, 340-53. See also Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 85-9.

¹²² Something recognized by the twentieth-century advocates of neoliberalism. See Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

¹²³ “Réponse de M. Pierre-Antoine Monneron...,” 14.

¹²⁴ “Mémoire adressé au Citoyen Boissy d'Anglas pour être remis au Comité de Salut Public...,” 1st November 1795, ABM, 122 S 34 f3.

annexation of Ceylon, and in 1799 he wrote to Bonaparte about gaining access to India via Suez.¹²⁵ The proposals amounted to nothing, but maintained Louis's reputation as an authority on the region. Augustin stayed in finance, establishing with Jean Godard in 1796 a public bank, the *Caisse de comptes courants*, in the Hotel Massiac, next to the old offices of the Compagnie des Indes.¹²⁶ But they continued to operate according to the old regime rules of merchant capital, prioritizing kinship, seeking protection from acquaintances, embezzling public money, and paying scant heed to force of public opinion. All of these qualities came to the fore in 1798, thanks to a scandal that reopened old wounds in the brothers' collective reputation.

In October of that year the Directory nominated Louis as its agent in the Mascarenes. His persistent lobbying seemed to have finally paid off.¹²⁷ But Louis never made it back to Ile de France. Just three weeks after his appointment, Augustin fled Paris, in debt to the *Caisse* to the tune of 2.5 million francs. Louis was summoned to Paris from Bordeaux, effectively arrested on the suspicion of laundering Augustin's arrears in private trades.¹²⁸ He was found innocent, but the *Caisse* held him and his brothers responsible for paying off Augustin's debts in five annual installments, and reserved the right to the proceeds of the "commodities produced on their habitations" on Ile de France.¹²⁹ Financial disaster was compounded by commercial and political discredit. Louis felt the need to issue a public announcement of his innocence, insisting on the reliability of the Monneron name.¹³⁰ He also turned down his "mission" in the Indian Ocean,

¹²⁵ See "Mémoires" in ABM, 122 S 33.

¹²⁶ Louis Bergeron, *Banquiers, négociants et manufacturiers parisiens du Directoire à l'Empire* (Paris: École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 1978), 88.

¹²⁷ Wanquet, *La France et la première abolition de l'esclavage*, 490-7.

¹²⁸ Louis Monneron to Citizen Bruix, Minister of the Marine and Colonies, 13th December 1798, ABM, 122 S 33.

¹²⁹ Bergeron, *Banquiers, négociants et manufacturiers parisiens*, 93 & 338.

¹³⁰ "Louis Monneron à ses concitoyens," 4 Ventôse an 7, ABM, 122 S 33.

since its “success depended on a general confidence that has been completely destroyed by my arrest: the slander directed at me in Bordeaux,” he feared, “would follow me to Ile de France.”¹³¹

Louis spent the next eight years trying raise capital to cover Augustin’s debts, before eventually giving up hope of finding redemption in France. Elisabeth Marie, his wife, reported in 1806 that “I have just lost my husband in Senegal, a loss that puts me and my family in the greatest distress.”¹³² She had already sold La Baranquine to the Bordeaux *négociant* Charles-Jacques Fieffé.¹³³ Janvier died five years later on Ile de France, one year after the British had captured the island, but a decade or so before the first signs of real prosperity for the sugar industry. Under the old regime the Monneron brothers had gone overseas and made fame and fortune; after the Revolution, they ended up hiding from their debts in the hinterlands of France’s disintegrating commercial empire.

To a certain extent, the rise and fall of the house of Monneron can be seen to represent the course of French imperialism: flourishing at the end of the old regime, non-existent by the turn of the century. That argument is appealing, because it’s partially true. Both colonies and overseas trade were sacrificed under the Revolution and Napoleon, as French capital abandoned the maritime cities of the eighteenth century and turned north and east to the “Rhenish axis” of the domestic economy.¹³⁴ Over the course of the 1790s the Monnerons became less useful to the French state, because the markets in which they had traditionally operated became less useful to it as well. And so Ile de France was abandoned to an autonomous existence after all. And in a peculiar way this autonomy ensured that at least some of the projects and careers of both the

¹³¹ Louis Monneron, “Lorsque le Directoire aura reconnu mon innocence...,” Frimaire an 7, ABM, 122 S 33.

¹³² Elisabeth Marie Guignace to M. le Prefet..., 1806, ABM 122, S 32.

¹³³ Sale of La Barranquine to Charles-Jacques Fieffé, 22nd December 1805, ABM, 122 S 32.

¹³⁴ François Crouzet, “Wars, Blockade, and Economic Change in Europe, 1792-1815,” *The Journal of Modern History*, vol 24, no. 4 (1964), 567-88.

Monnerons and Cossigny, which looked all but dead and buried in France in the 1790s, lived on at the abandoned colonial periphery in the nineteenth century.

Sugar and the Spatial Fix (ii)

Cossigny finally made a political breakthrough in 1800, when he was dispatched back to Ile de France by a consular regime seeking to extend French military presence in the east beyond Egypt and into the Indian Ocean.¹³⁵ His official title was “director of the moulin à poudre.” Yet this was far more than a reprisal of his old functions. In his capacity at the powder mill, Cossigny was also, according to his orders, “the governor general for the senior management of operations and the authorizing officer for matters relating to accounting expenditure.” In other words, Cossigny had complete independence from the local colonial assembly. More worrying still for the colonial authorities was that Cossigny had been instructed to provide wages to the enslaved workers and their families who were attached to the gunpowder factory, “in order to reconcile necessary economy with the need to encourage talents and good services.” A *commandeur en chef d’atelier* would receive 75 centimes a day, the *travailleurs noirs* would receive 50 centimes, and their working wives 30 centimes. Most striking of all to the plantocracy was the fact that captives working at the powder mill would also receive, “as encouragement and gratification,” a plot of land nearby on which they could grow crops and tend to livestock.¹³⁶ Where once in Vauchelle’s pre-revolutionary report the moulin à poudre had been held up as a symbol for the worst excesses of slavery, now it would be the site of the Revolution’s belated reform of that despotic institution on Ile de France.

¹³⁵ On the Napoleonic attempt to revive an Indian Ocean empire, see Yves Bénot, *La démence coloniale sous Napoléon* (Paris: Editions La Découverte, 1992), esp. 128-32 & 302.

¹³⁶ Wanquet, *La France et la première abolition de l’esclavage*, 595.

Cossigny's orders were interpreted by the colonists as yet another attempt by the French to impose abolition upon them—something they had staunchly resisted over the course of the Revolution, most famously in 1796, when they had simply expelled the emissaries sent by the Directory, Baco and Burnel, to implement the decree of 16 Pluviôse. As both Yves Bénot and Chris Bayly have argued, if there was a Revolution in the Mascarenes, it was a revolution of slaveholders against the French republic.¹³⁷ Having been neglected for a decade, the inhabitants of Ile de France were unlikely to accept the inclination towards abolition, however subtle, implicit in Cossigny's appointment. And nor was anti-slavery a cause to which Cossigny had ever been that sympathetic. Almost as soon as he arrived in Port Louis in October 1800, he renounced his mission—including his involvement with the moulin à poudre—and quickly began sending reports back to France that justified the colonists' attachment to slavery. Their precarious economic situation, he argued, coupled with the perennially fragile climate ("the production of crops, which is hindered as much by drought as by heavy rains, and which is sometimes destroyed by high winds") did not permit them to start paying salaries to slaves; to force them to do so would be to "remove from them their primary means of subsistence." Despite these apparent difficulties, he found that the colony had developed during the years he had been absent. Trade with foreign merchants, particularly the Americans, had carried on, and cash crops were still being produced. Over the past decade, and no thanks to the French state, the condition of slaves had improved: they were treated with more humanity, and many had been enfranchised. Within months of arriving, Cossigny had happily abandoned what had been perhaps the defining project of his career—the moulin à poudre at Pamplémousses—to give his

¹³⁷ Yves Bénot, *La Révolution Française et la fin des colonies, 1789-1794* (Paris: Editions La Découverte, 1988); C. A. Bayly, "The Revolutionary Age in the Wider World," in Richard Bessel, Nicholas Guyatte, Jane Rendall (eds.), *War, Empire and Slavery, 1770-1830* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 21-43.

support to a slave regime that had pushed Ile de France “towards a higher degree of amelioration.”¹³⁸

In the final years of his life Cossigny published incessantly. Much of this material was dredged up from his past: letters and memoirs on gunpower couched in polemics aimed at Chaptal. But he also wrote new treatises extolling Ile de France as the colonial success story of the Revolution. Whereas Saint Domingue and France’s other Caribbean possessions had been economically destroyed by the abolition of slavery, the Mascarene islands were flourishing. Statesmen, financiers, and merchants alike were urged by Cossigny to see Ile de France as a substitute for the Antillean plantation complex—as a colony around which they could construct imperial projects, and towards which they could reorient their capital.¹³⁹

The central agent in this *remplacement colonial* was sugar. The possibility of the large-scale cultivation of sugar on Ile de France had been a side interest of Cossigny’s since at least 1782, when he had published a long and technical pamphlet on the subject.¹⁴⁰ And as we know, in 1790 he had publicly boasted about owning a large plantation with a working *sucrierie*. In the intervening decade this niche pastime of a few local agronomists had turned into a major industry on the island. After renouncing his duties at the gunpowder factory at the end of 1800, Cossigny conducted a tour of the colony, during which he witnessed firsthand the widespread embrace of sugar cane. He quickly wrote to Paris requesting materials for the construction of *moulins à sucre*, which he wanted to see established across the length of the island.¹⁴¹ Swapping

¹³⁸ Wanquet, *La France et la première abolition de l’esclavage*, 597-604.

¹³⁹ See in particular Cossigny, *Moyens d’amélioration et de restauration, proposes au gouvernement et aux habitants des colonies, ou Mélanges... relaiés aux colonies* (Paris: Marchant, 1802); idem., *Observations sur Le manuel de commerce des Indes orientales et de la Chine* (Paris: Gagnard, 1808), a lengthy review of Pierre Blancard’s treatise of that name, published in 1806.

¹⁴⁰ Cossigny, *Mémoire sur la fabrication des eaux-de-vie de sucre, et particulièrement sur celle de la guildive et du tafia; avec une appendice sur le vin de cannes et des observations sur la fabrication du sucre* (Ile de France: Imprimerie Royale, 1781).

¹⁴¹ Wanquet, *La France et la première abolition de l’esclavage*, 603-4.

the powder mill for the sugar mill, Cossigny became a cheerleader for economic developments that had already gained momentum in the French Indian Ocean, while the rest of the empire was preoccupied with revolution.

Cossigny's embrace of slavery and cash crops represented the ultimate death of that older ideal of a sustainable French empire in the Indian Ocean. Poivre, in many respects his mentor, had railed against the ravenous practices of speculators and absentee planters—men like Hégerty, who turned the land into moveable value and destroyed it in the process. During the prerevolutionary decades Cossigny had tried to elaborate on Poivre's agenda, using the military prestige of the gunpowder mill and the urgency of war as pretexts for afforestation and the sustainable production of charcoal. Sugar wiped out any lingering attachment to conservationism or environmental governance. As cane spread the island's forests disappeared, including the *bois noirs* Cossigny had once fought so hard to import from Bengal.¹⁴² The idea of a circular, self-sufficient economy that had no need to rely on overseas trade and external resources was no longer viable in the French Indian Ocean. To the extent that it remained viable anywhere in the French global economy, it was in the metropole—in a France that had turned inwards, away from the exotic riches of empire and towards Chaptal's scientifically aided domestic industries.

Taking a broader perspective than that provided by Cossigny's singular career, the switch from conservationism back to cash-crop production on Ile de France did not constitute so much of a rupture. The policies of Poivre and his successors had received state backing because of the increasing importance of the Indian Ocean to French commercial imperialism at the end of the old regime, as crises were developing elsewhere. And as much as those policies might have had the objective of conservation, they necessarily took place in the broader context of French

¹⁴² Cheke and Hume, *Lost Land of Dodo*, 116-8.

interests—political, military, commercial—trying to establish themselves in the region. The Monnerons’ activities typified the chaotic processes of this extensive phase of the spatial fix—which by any measure had succeeded. By 1789, the Mascarene islands were integrated into the circuits of global trade. Of the 33 French ships that rounded the Cape of Good Hope in 1784, 9 went to the Mascarene islands, 18 to India, and 6 to China. In 1789 by contrast, 61 ships rounded the Cape: 1 went to China, 6 to India, and 54 to the Mascarenes. Over the course of the 1780s, Ile de France in particular became a commercial destination, a place to buy and sell commodities, rather than simply a staging post.¹⁴³

Over the next decade, and despite enduring political setbacks during the Revolution, the Monnerons helped ensure that the integration of the Mascarene islands into the circuits of global trade continued apace. In France, the brothers seemingly did everything right in order to survive. They diversified their investments, threw themselves into Parisian finance, married into more wealth, and bought land. Such tactics allowed most *négociants* to make it through and even thrive in the 1790s (indeed, they worked especially well for Charles Fieffé, to whom Louis sold his Bordeaux vineyard).¹⁴⁴ These protective measures adopted by merchants in the 1790s were not simply a case of French capital “turning its back on the sea.”¹⁴⁵ They diversified in order to trade in the future, and by the turn of the century many had returned to their old circuits of commerce.¹⁴⁶ The Monnerons too betrayed a stubborn commitment to the residual value chains of the old regime’s empire. Before Augustin’s scandal, Louis was determined to rejoin his brothers in Ile de France in some official capacity. The brothers also helped keep the Mascarene

¹⁴³ Philippe Haudrère, “Quelques aspects du commerce entre la France et l’Asie à la fin du XVIII^e siècle, 1765-1793,” in Claude Wanquet et Benoît Jullien, *Révolution Française et Océan Indien: Prémices, paroxysmes, héritages et déviances* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1996), 37.

¹⁴⁴ Paul Butel, *Charles Fieffé, commissionnaire et armateur. Contribution à l’étude du négoce bordelais sous la Révolution et l’Empire* (Paris: Hachette, 1973).

¹⁴⁵ Bergeron, *Banquiers, négociants et manufacturiers parisiens*, 141.

¹⁴⁶ Pétré-Grenouilleau, *L’argent de la traite* 165-72.

islands supplied with trade from “neutral” merchants. Janvier, for instance, invested in an American expedition to China in 1793, and between 1792 and 1794 he worked with the Danish firm Duntzfelt, Meyer and Company through the mediation of Louis, then based in Paris.¹⁴⁷ Such arrangements kept the infrastructure of France’s overseas economy intact, even as it was neglected by a preoccupied metropolitan state.¹⁴⁸

Commercial development on Ile de France therefore went uninterrupted by the Revolution, because the Revolution never arrived. As a result, the spatial fix could continue its progress. Returning to David Harvey’s definition, if the first phase consisted of finding new space for capital in the Indian Ocean as a solution to a crisis of productivity elsewhere, then the second phase consisted of fixing that reoriented capital in place, embedding it in the land. In the Mascarene islands, this “intensive” phase of the spatial fix was indexed by demographic expansion. Ile de France’s population rose from 18,777 in 1767 to 40,439 in 1787 and 77,768 in 1807.¹⁴⁹ More precisely, the best evidence that “an entirely new landscape... for capital accumulation” had been created can be seen in the uninterrupted expansion of slavery across the Revolutionary period.¹⁵⁰ In 1767 there were 15,027 slaves on Ile de France; by 1806 that figure had risen to 60,646.¹⁵¹ Likewise on Ile Bourbon the slave population tripled from 21,150 in 1765 to 65,140 in 1808.¹⁵² The islands were therefore not just trading more; they were also producing more. And in particular, as Cossigny had witnessed, they were producing sugar. By 1810 on Ile

¹⁴⁷ “Ile de France ou Maurice: Reglement des affaires de la Cie 1791-1834,” ANOM 8 AQ 343 f1; Duntzfelt to Louis Monneron, 4th March 1794; idem., 4th August 1794, ABM, 122 S 32 ff2&3.

¹⁴⁸ Auguste Toussaint, *Early American Trade with Mauritius* (Port Louis, Mauritius: Esclapon, 1954); Holden Furber, “The Beginnings of American Trade with India, 1784-1812,” *New England Quarterly* (1938), 235-65.

¹⁴⁹ Vaughan, *Creating the Creole Island*, 76

¹⁵⁰ Harvey, “Globalization and the Spatial Fix,” 28.

¹⁵¹ Richard B. Allen, *Slaves, Freedmen, Indentured Laborers in Colonial Mauritius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 13.

¹⁵² Richard B. Allen, *European Slave Trading in the Indian Ocean, 1500-1850* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2014), 100.

de France there were 10,000 arpents planted in cane, representing a tenfold increase from 1789.¹⁵³ The same process was happening on Ile Bourbon. Together the islands would help satisfy growing European demand during the nineteenth century. Sugar, like French capital before it, had found a spatial fix in the Indian Ocean.

The Monneron who had the least eventful Revolution participated directly in this world-historical development. Janvier had been involved in privateering and the slave trade in the 1780s, and ran a commercial warehouse in Port Louis.¹⁵⁴ Over the next two decades, he sank capital earned through these ventures in land across Ile de France. By 1791 he owned two sugar plantations: Minissy (on which he inherited a distillery and *sucrerie*) and L'Espérance, both in the Moka district, near Port Louis. Upon his death in 1811 his family also inherited (along with 1,279,608 francs in active loans) the Mon Rêve plantation in Plaines Wilhelms and another, Surinam, in the southern district of Savanne, on which in all likelihood Janvier had financed the construction of the *sucrerie* himself.¹⁵⁵ The way in which Janvier switched from trade to sugar was testament to the flexibility of merchant capital, not just in protecting itself but in being able to create new landscapes for accumulation. As we have seen throughout the foregoing analysis of commercial imperialism, merchant capital was not always a conservative force, and nor did exist solely in the “unproductive” sphere of exchange. Especially in empires that combined heterogeneous environments, social relations, and “patterns of accumulation,” merchants often proved capable of dominating and even changing the nature of production. At the margins of

¹⁵³ Allen, *Slaves, Freedmen, Indentured Laborers*, 12; Daniel North-Coombes, “Slavery, Emancipation, and the Labor Crisis in the Sugar Industry of Mauritius, 1790-1842,” *Tanzania Zamani*, vol. 3, issue 1 (Jan. 1997), 17

¹⁵⁴ Allen, *European Slave Trading in the Indian Ocean*, 88-90.

¹⁵⁵ Guy Rouillard, *Histoire des domaines sucriers de l'Ile Maurice* (Port-Louis: Les Pailles, 1964), 228-30, 327 & 391. Inventaire après décès de Jean-Chrysostome-Janvier Monneron, négociant, rue Saint-Honoré, n° 383, 17 janvier 1812, AN MC ET LIII 789.

France's global economy, as the metropole was engulfed in Revolution, this is precisely what Janvier Monneron and his contemporaries carried out at the turn of the nineteenth century.

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Neither Cossigny nor Janvier lived to reap the benefits of the nineteenth-century sugar boom on Mauritius. Cossigny died in France in 1809, Janvier two years later on Ile de France, and in between the colony had fallen to the British. The boom did, however, line the pockets of the French elite, allowed by the British to rule the island through French custom and law, and even to ignore abolitionist legislation that was applied to the rest of the British empire.¹⁵⁶ French informal power existed alongside British hegemony, with the two great powers exercising "tacit and unequal condominium" over a distant colony. These were the central features of what David Todd has labelled France's "imperial meridian": a period between Napoleon and the Third Republic in which France, despite the revolutions that had brought down the "first" Bourbon empire, managed to recover its status as a global power.¹⁵⁷

That these features were evident on Mauritius immediately after the French had abandoned it as a formal colony is testament to the fact that the imperial meridian's conditions of existence were already well established. The desire for colonial autarky, the embrace of informal empire in the Indian Ocean, the acceptance that British superiority was something to be worked with, not against, and even the cultivation of sugar somewhere other than the Antilles: all of these developments had taken place in the final decades of the old regime or during the Revolution. They were spurred on by operations of merchant capital that had originated within the institutions of the global old regime, and that now proliferated in the absence of that

¹⁵⁶ Vijaya Teelock, *Bitter Sugar: Sugar and Slavery in 19th Century Mauritius* (Moka, Mauritius: Mahatma Gandhi Institute, 1998), 82-5; Vaughan, *Creating the Creole Island*, 256-62.

¹⁵⁷ David Todd, "A French Imperial Meridian, 1814-1870," *Past & Present*, No. 210 (February, 2011), 155-86.

organizing structure, unmoored from a post-revolutionary metropole. Because of merchant capital, the old regime persisted at the colonial periphery.

If capital endured, what happened to critique? The travails of both Cossigny and the Monnerons in the Revolution—and even before, in their interactions with the reformist late-old regime state—revealed that the metropolitan public sphere had, for the time being, lost interest in the self-justifications of colonial capital or in scientific expertise gained at the periphery. Critique no longer spurred interest and investment in commercial imperialism; if anything, it generated apathy or hostility towards its basic infrastructure, including profit and slavery. But there was no lack of interest during the nineteenth century—during the French imperial meridian—in ideas and concepts associated with old regime commercial imperialism. Critique therefore lived on in the abstractions of “the Enlightenment”: in progress, self-interest, the entrepreneur, civilization, the conservation of value, seemingly universal categories that, like merchant capital, existed independently from the now defunct global economy of the old regime.

Conclusion

To historians of early-modern economic development, empire, or the Enlightenment, the commercial imperialism of old regime France might appear an impossibly chaotic affair. It was an economy that lacked the features of Braudel's "politico-socio-economic" maturity—a national bank, a responsible fiscal regime, an integrated home market, uniform customs and excise taxes, credible joint-stock companies, and representative public institutions—and that relied overwhelmingly on the artful management and constant redirection of circulating capital, not the steady accumulation of fixed capital that some have associated with the origins of industrialization.¹ It was an empire that both resisted and proved incapable of consolidating territorial sovereignty on the scale achieved by other early-modern powers; an empire whose spatial dimensions did not fit easily into the standard categories of historians, whether Atlantic, Indian Ocean, or core and periphery. And the ideas it generated scarcely amounted to a coherent agenda, with common aims and enemies, or a consistent stance on the moral dimensions of global commerce.

As this dissertation has demonstrated, commercial imperialism was nevertheless a system that had its own logics. However much this system might confound the dominant paradigms of the economic and intellectual history of early modern Europe, it was remarkably successful in generating profit out of the global bricolage of old regime France, and it was implicated in the emergence of some of the fundamental categories of Enlightenment political economy. Rather than recapitulating the arguments of the preceding chapters, these concluding remarks will

¹ For "maturity," see Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th–18th Century*, vol. 2: *The Wheels of Commerce* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 135–6. Throughout *Civilization and Capitalism*, Braudel nevertheless made the most sustained and convincing case for the importance of circulating capital in the early modern period. For a contrasting interpretation that traces the agricultural roots of British industrialization, see Robert Brenner, "Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe," *Past & Present*, No. 70 (Feb. 1976), 30–75

explore, very briefly, the significance of commercial imperialism for the contemporary scholarship of its basic categories, capital and critique.

Throughout the eighteenth century, merchant capital exhibited a combination of adaptability and persistence. Bricolage required institutions and social relations that had evolved to coordinate domestic markets to take root in radically foreign environments, thousands of miles from France. Castanier's patrimonial networks extended out from the Languedoc and the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean and the Philippines; the long-open fields of northern France were exported to the Mascarene islands; kinship and patronage lubricated the spatial fix carried out by the Monnerons. Although Tocqueville saw in these extroverted features of the old regime the symptoms of a voraciously centralizing state (which "preponderates, acts, regulates, controls, undertakes everything"—even in Canada), in fact they were testament to the flexibility of merchant capital.² If profits were to be made in Ile Bourbon, then that's where the old regime had to be taken. At the same time, and despite the institutional upheaval involved in empire-building, the agents of merchant capital maintained the basic market features on which they had long relied. The global expansion of French commerce did not lead to market integration and the dissolution of the corporate, residually feudal structure of the economy. Instead, the tendency of commercial imperialism was towards more privilege and more fragmentation.

The historical form of capitalism made visible by commercial imperialism, then, is not one that involved increasing standardization, but instead one that relied on and produced diversity. Commercial imperialism was, almost by design, an unevenly assembled project. Its constituent circuits of trade encompassed differentiated territories, landscapes, ecologies, and regimes of production. This heterogeneity should not be noted simply as an empirical curiosity,

² Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution*, trans. Gerald Bevan (London: Penguin Classics, 12008 [1856]), 248-9.

and nor should it be considered an obstacle to accumulation. It was systematically produced by bricolage. That capitalism thrives on difference and on distended relations of production, exchange, and coercion is not exactly news to observers of contemporary supply chains, the oil industry, or the ecological ramifications of twenty-first century urbanization.³ But it does pose a challenge to orthodox accounts of early-modern economic development, which remain oriented around the emergence of wage labor, the home market, and the factory. Global histories of the old regime do not need to pass through the nation-state and industrialization for contemporary relevance—especially when the enclaved, noncontiguous, oligopolistic world of early-modern merchant capital is now more familiar than ever.

This recurrence—or perhaps continuity—of the economic structures of commercial imperialism might provide encouragement to intellectual historians who believe that Enlightenment political economy promises solutions to contemporary problems of capitalism and globalization. Certainly the concepts generated by and associated with commercial imperialism, such as society, self-interest, conservation, and the entrepreneur, have enjoyed a long afterlife in modernity. Yet the foregoing history of critique and its indeterminate, dialectical relationship to capital ought to give us pause before applying the conceptual insights of eighteenth-century thinkers to twenty-first century problems. Reforms inspired by ideals had unintended or adverse consequences. And the abstract discourse of political economy told only partial truths about the world it addressed. These partial truths were influential: they shaped imperial projects and attitudes about commerce and the state. They need to be reckoned with and explained. But as this

³ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, “Supply Chains and the Human Condition,” *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture and Society*, 21:2 (2009); James Ferguson, “Seeing Like an Oil Company: Space, Security, and Global Capital in Neoliberal Africa,” *American Anthropologist*, vol 107, issue 3 (2005), 377-82; Neil Brenner, “The Hinterland, Urbanized?” *AD / Architectural Design*, July/August (2016), 118-27; Neil Brenner and Nikos Katsikis, “Operational Landscapes: Hinterlands of the Capitalocene,” *AD / Architectural Design*, 90, no. 1 (2020), 22-31.

dissertation has shown, the categories of Enlightenment social science alone are insufficient to understand, still less find solutions to, the pathologies of capitalism, whether in the present day or in the world of old regime France.

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ADA, Archives Départementales de l'Aude
Série E, Familles, Notaires, Commune, Etat civil
2E, Fonds Castanier-Poulpry
Sous-Série 3J, Documents entrés par voie extraordinaires
3J 616-21, Famille Castanier et alliés

ABM, Archives Bordeaux Métropole
Fonds Monneron

ADR, Archives Départementales de la Réunion
Série C, Fonds de la Compagnie des Indes (1665-1767)

AN, Archives Nationales
AE B1, Affaires étrangers, correspondance consulaire
Col B, Correspondance au départ
Col C 2, Correspondance à l'arrivée, Compagnie des Indes et Inde Française
Col C 3, Correspondance à l'arrivée, Bourbon
Col C 4, Correspondance à l'arrivée, Ile de France
Col C 6, Correspondance à l'arrivée, Sénégal et côtes d'Afrique
Col C 8, Correspondance à l'arrivée Martinique et Iles du Vent
Col C 14, Correspondance à l'arrivée, Guyane Française
Col F 3, Collection Moreau de Saint Méry
Marine 4 JJ, Journaux de bord
Marine B7, Pays étrangers, commerce, consulats
MC, Notariat
K, Monuments historiques

ANOM, Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence
E Personnel
DFC, Dépôt des Fortifications et Colonies
Archives privées
AQ, Archives d'entreprises

Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal
Anciens fonds, manuscrits françaises

Bibliothèque municipale de Nancy
Fonds Lorraine

Bibliothèque municipale de Saint-Brieuc
Fonds Gournay

BNF, Bibliothèque Nationale de France
Nouvelles Acquisitions Françaises
Département des Cartes et plans

CCIMP, Chambre de commerce et d'industrie, Marseille Provence
Fonds Roux

Cornell University Library
Maurepas Collection
Lavoisier Manuscripts and Graphics Collection

Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation, Pittsburgh
Adanson collection

JCB, John Carter Brown Library, Providence

Newberry Library, Chicago
Edward E. Ayer Collection

MAE, Archives diplomatiques du Ministère des affaires étrangères, La Corneuve
Correspondance politique, Angleterre

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