On 15 Messidor year V of the Revolutionary Calendar (3 July 1797), Citizen Talleyrand, known in his pre-revolutionary days as Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Perigord, addressed the Institut National des Sciences et Arts in Paris on the ‘advantages to be gained from new colonies in the current circumstances’.¹ To his listeners in the Institute, the intellectual powerhouse of the French Republic, ‘current circumstances’ was a recognisable shorthand for the cascade of events that had brought the Ancien Régime colonial empire to its knees. Metropolitan merchants’ protected trade with the colonies had eroded as soon as authority collapsed and a chain of slave rebellions in Martinique, Guadeloupe, Guiana, and Saint-Domingue had jeopardised France’s lucrative sugar and coffee industries. Then, in 1794, the combined forces of rebellion, warfare, and terror expedited the decree to abolish slavery throughout the French colonial empire, ushering in versions of republican rule in Saint-Domingue, Guiana, and Guadeloupe while pro-slavery planters on Martinique capitulated to British forces. By the time Talleyrand took to the podium, these cataclysmic events had nonetheless started to subside. Skilled at reading the winds, he therefore seized this opportune moment to advocate a new colonial doctrine for the French Republic.

Addressing the Institute as a member of its section on political economy, and as a recent returnee from the United States, Talleyrand opened with the claim that men endowed with political foresight had long warned that the colonies in America would inevitably seek independence from their mother countries. Yet, he continued, European vice and mercantilist policies – ‘[t]hese pusillanimous doctrines that see a loss wherever a gain is made’ – had accelerated the process and devastated

and estranged the colonies. The Republic should therefore reject the old colonial strategies and embrace a just and kind approach that guaranteed free exchange and ‘mutual enrichment’. He further promoted setting up new colonies with ‘more natural, useful, and durable’ ties to France, specifying that Egypt or ‘a few settlements along the coast of Africa or on adjacent islands would be easy and fitting’. Africa, he contended, had a similar climate to that of the Americas and would allow for the production of American commodities on its soil. Since the decreed abolition of slavery had raised the need for a new system of cultivation, why not ‘try such cultivation in the very region where the cultivators are born’? Regenerating the colonial system in such a manner, he emphasised, would beautifully complement the political achievements of revolutionary France. All would be new. Or would it?

Some thirty years earlier, on a plot of land near the village of Rufisque in Senegal, a ship captain named Le Large was running his fingers through the topsoil to determine its fertility. Was this the right place for the colony and the cotton, indigo, sugar, and coffee plantations that the governor of Gorée, Jean-Georges, chevalier de Mesnager, was hoping to found? Le Large looked up. Cotton and indigo already grew around the village, cattle grazed and chickens and ducks waddled around. The air was fresh, the local fishing industry thrived, the dried fish was tasty, and the palm wine delicious, particularly when enjoyed cool. His sight fell on the local population. They looked healthy, large, and robust. Many were skilled farmers and fishermen and they seemed warmly disposed towards the French. He decided to report back that the plot was ideal for the founding of a new French colony.

The terrain that Le Large reconnoitred belonged to the local ruler of Kayoor. The latter had offered it in tribute to de Mesnager after the governor had saved members of Kayoor’s royal family from British slave traders. De Mesnager was now hoping to bring European settlers to Africa to found a colony that would compensate for the recent territorial losses France had incurred in the Americas in the Seven Years War. The moment was favourable, de Mesnager thought. The government had just abrogated the trade monopoly of the Compagnie des Indes in Africa and opened trade to all French traders – a policy in line with the latest fashion in

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2 Ibid., 3, 4, and 13.
3 Report by Le Large, 14 September 1765, enclosed with a letter from de Mesnager to Choiseul, Gorée. Archives nationales d’outre-mer, Aix-en-Provence, France (hereafter ANOM), Sénégal et Côtes d’Afrique, Sous-série C⁶ (hereafter C⁶) 15, memo 56.
political economy. It was also in the throes of forming a new colony in Guiana and modifying trade policies with the Caribbean sugar islands as part of broad imperial reform. Le Large’s expert knowledge of Senegambia, the governor hoped, would help whet the crown’s interest in West African colonial expansion and inspire incoming settlers ‘arriving with dreams of great fortunes’.

Thirty-two years later, Talleyrand’s proposal before the Institute came at a crucial moment in the Revolution. After the first calamitous years of rebellion and warfare, success on the battlefield had boosted French nationalist pride and transformed defensive warfare into a self-proclaimed mission to liberate Europe from the shackles of despotism. In addition to the abolition of slavery, the revolutionary government of the Convention had integrated the French colonies into the Republic as overseas departments in the Constitution of the year III (22 August 1795) and France was one year from sanctioning the invasion and colonisation of Egypt. Talleyrand’s speech, therefore, seems to lend itself to a history in which French imperial innovation and resurrection took off during the later stages of the French Revolution. Yet his proposal, like so many others of the time, built on Ancien Régime experimentation, innovation, and reform.

Economistes and the Reinvention of Empire brings these connections between the First Republic’s imperial agenda and Ancien Régime colonial innovation and reform into view. Tracing change in French colonial ideas, policy and practice, it explores multiple and often interlinked efforts to regenerate French imperial interests in the Americas and in Africa in the second half of the eighteenth century. As imperial warfare imperilled the crown’s grip on colonial possessions in the Caribbean and on the North American continent, political economists, policy makers, stakeholders of colonial commerce, administrators, and local entrepreneurs on the ground participated in a wider struggle to reorganise and enhance French colonial commerce. Attention to their myriad efforts to shape the recalibration of empire during the last decades of the Ancien Régime allows us to contextualise the articulation of a republican imperial policy during the French Revolution in ways that get beyond the stale generalizations integral to the division between pre- and post-revolutionary France. It also allows us to broaden our understanding of the dynamics that drove colonial reform.

At the radical end of the Ancien Régime reformist spectrum were a group of political economists, known as the Economistes or the Physiocrats. From

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4 De Mesnager to Choiseul, undated, Gorée. ANOM C 15, memo 24.
the 1750s, this group elaborated a theoretical framework for a new mode of colonial empire in opposition to the body of commercial laws and attitudes that structured much of the existing French colonial system. Celebrating agriculture as the sole source of riches, they championed economic development over colonial exploitation, free international trade over monopoly trade, and free labour over slave labour. Later appropriated by revolutionaries during the Directory, their ideas were shaped not only by European intellectual circuits but also by policy makers and officials enmeshed in fractious and diverse colonial settings: an empire that was continually responding to, and occasionally even driving, efforts at top-down reform.

A core ambition of this book is to study how these attempts to reconstitute French empire in the Americas and in Africa developed in tandem with the better-studied push to strengthen the plantation complex in the Caribbean between the Seven Years War and the French Revolution. Within this story, the ambitions and perceptions of colonial entrepreneurs like Le Large and de Mesnager – as they sought to turn local land and labour into commodities and profit – proved decisive in shaping the colonial visions of political economists and metropolitan policy makers. In part for this reason, there is no single narrative arc of French imperial design, but rather multiple strands following distinct rhythms of change. With this polyphony in view, another core goal of this book is to examine how and why Talleyrand and his peers later adopted these elements of Ancien Régime colonial innovation for themselves as they set about fashioning a supposedly new imperial agenda for the First Republic.

**Imperial Trajectories in the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century**

The second half of the eighteenth century was an age of mammoth upheaval not only within the French imperial domains but across Europe’s major colonial empires. In these decades, Britain rose as the prominent global power, yet warfare and competition crippled victor and losers alike. France lost its holdings up the Senegal River as well as its claims to colonial empire in India and on the North American mainland in the Seven Years War (1756–63) and was only able to secure the restoration of its sugar colonies in the Caribbean, a few trade stations in West Africa and India, and preservation of its Newfoundland fishery. Spain fared little better. Having joined the war on the side of the French in 1762, it was forced to cede Florida to Britain with the arrival of peace, prompting France to offer Louisiana to its ally in compensation. Britain could pride itself of territorial gains, yet the
costs of war quickened its looming conflict with its thirteen colonies in North America and, once war broke out, saw it lose some of its earlier conquests. Over the years, the strains of rivalry and warfare among Europe’s colonial empires generated a ‘crisis of the ancien régime’ and a series of revolutions and independence movements in the Atlantic World, but also pan-European imperial reform as implicated powers strove to preserve their claims to colonies and markets.\(^5\)

A key intellectual driver of reform was the growing attention paid to political economy. Whether one looks at Britain, France, Portugal, or Spain, this budding field ‘galvanised a generation of reformers’ looking to overhaul imperial relations and boost domestic prosperity. Proponents of often competing strands of political economy participated in attempts to recalibrate the characteristic features of what most scholars still refer to as Europe’s mercantilist colonial systems.\(^6\) Government officials with connections to the sprawling networks of merchants, traders, and economists readjusted tariff barriers and monopoly trade and scrutinised the obsession with a balance of commerce. During the 1760s, 1770s, and 1780s, first the Iberian and French colonial empires, and soon also the British, reorganised or abrogated the trade monopolies of chartered colonial companies and opened up sectors of colonial commerce to their merchants, while still looking to circumscribe colonies’ access to international markets. In turn, the smaller maritime powers of the Dutch, Danes, and Swedes set out to enhance or develop their Caribbean free port systems in conjunction with a policy of neutrality to survive and profit from great power rivalry.\(^7\)

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For France, this broader moment of European imperial crisis and reform, pushed it to intensify its production of sugar and coffee for foreign markets. Boosting the French sugar and coffee business catered to French economic needs, but perpetuated endogenous problems particular to France and its colonies. In the eighteenth century, French colonial interests converged on the Caribbean plantation complex whose capital-intensive cash crop cultivation and forced labour system generated high profits for the metropole. Trailing British sugar production in the early 1700s, France became the world’s greatest sugar producer in 1740 due to the rise of Saint-Domingue and soon also the biggest producer of coffee. Yet the preservation of colonies in the Americas was inherently challenging in a region haunted by intermittent warfare, environmental disasters, epidemics, fraudulent colonial administrators, and often-distraught colonial populations. The quest to satisfy European consumers’ appetites for sugar and coffee and French metropolitan merchants’ ambitions to remain competitive on the world market further aggravated inherent instabilities. Seeking to drive up production, planters invested in technology, land, and ever-larger numbers of bonded labourers from Africa but fell into debt to colonial and metropolitan merchants along the way. Moreover, Saint-Domingue’s privileged position within the French colonial system engendered intra-imperial frustrations because metropolitan merchants with an exclusive privilege to colonial markets – a system known as the Exclusif – preferred taking their manufactured goods, agricultural foodstuff, and African slaves to Saint-Domingue at the expense of other colonies.

Tensions over provision, production, and debt in the French Caribbean colonies were compounded by anxieties produced by the use of African


slave labour. Colonial slavery was a brutal form of human exploitation, in which plantation owners and slave traders categorised African men, women, and children as commodities or cattle whose sole value stemmed from the labour that could be extracted from them. The demands for ever-higher numbers of slaves to maximise production generated a demographic imbalance in the colonies in which the enslaved population vastly outnumbered free whites. The latter constantly feared a violent reaction from African slaves, whose strategies of resistance took expression in both passive and aggressive forms. They also worried in ever-more racist tones about the rising population of free people of colour whose economic aspirations they found threatening to the colonies’ social and racial hierarchies. Adding to these demographic concerns, slave owners increasingly faced moral headwinds as ‘enlightened’ sectors across the Atlantic World started portraying plantation slavery as incompatible with the moral fibre of civilised society.¹⁰

The French government was well aware of these mounting problems, yet the fiscal and financial benefits that it stood to make from its sugar colonies determined its response to them. It was not only merchants in French port cities or artisans producing goods for the plantations who chased the economic opportunities that the plantation complex fostered. Direct and indirect duties on colonial imports and exports bolstered state revenues and lined the pockets of receivers general and tax farmers, while state financiers and ministers reaped the benefits of private investments in colonial companies, sugar plantations, and sugar refineries. The quest for profits that drove the intensification of the plantation complex, however, was not confined to France. Several European states were willing to go to war to secure the colonial economies on which their domestic prosperity and consumer culture had come to rely. Excepting the 1720s, France was at war in every decade of the eighteenth century – often on numerous

continents at once. Because it never found a sustainable way to finance these wars, the crown’s ambitions to remain a leading power pushed it to teeter on the edge of bankruptcy as the eighteenth century unfolded. The expanded scene of conflict in the Spanish and then the Austrian Wars of Succession depleted state coffers while the costs of the Seven Years War and the American Revolution pushed the crown towards deluge. With these latter wars, domestic, colonial, and trans-imperial tensions began to reinforce each other with alarming speed, threatening to render France’s colonial empire in the Americas untenable within the existing French political and economic structures.

**Economistes and the Rethinking of Colonial Empire**

In an age of expanding public debate, none of this tumult went unnoticed. Since the seventeenth century, commentators had warned that France’s political and social structures failed to respond adequately to the economic opportunities colonial and global commerce offered but also required to flourish. In the following century, an array of political economists of lesser or greater theoretical persuasion had turned their attention to the puzzle of how best to equip France to reap the benefits of colonial and global commerce. Among these were also the group of political economists with whom this book engages, a group co-founded by Victor Riqueti, marquis de Mirabeau and Doctor François Quesnay in the late 1750s and who later became known as the Physiocrats.

The Physiocrats’ critique of prevailing French colonial policies and practices, I argue in this book, embodied a radical rethinking of the underpinnings of French relations with the Americas and Africa. Building on an


earlier generation of agrarian political economists, their economic doctrine rested on the notion that France was an agricultural monarchy whose failure to tend to the cultivation of land hindered its prosperity. In their view, agriculture was the sole source of riches. If allowed to thrive unfettered and in accordance with what they referred to as ‘the natural order’, a single land tax on the net product of agricultural production would be enough to alleviate the crown’s financial problems and place the monarchy on a path to success. To the Physiocrats, the problem was that France’s existing commercial laws impeded agricultural development. Labelling these laws the *système mercantile* years before Adam Smith baptised it the ‘mercantile system’, they castigated exclusive trade privileges, tariffs, and guilds as harmful to the general interests of the state.  

In the context of French colonial empire, the Physiocrats’ critique of the mercantile system translated into damning attacks on the Exclusif and chartered colonial companies such as the French Compagnie des Indes. It also led to critiques of the institution of slavery and a reconceptualisation of colonies as ‘overseas provinces’. Most in eighteenth-century France, including the Crown, viewed colonies as entities created to serve the economic development of the metropole. In contrast, the Physiocrats argued that the economic development of the metropole was best achieved if colonies enjoyed the same right to economic prosperity as French domestic provinces. According to Quesnay, colonies should be integrated into the metropole as overseas provinces and subjected to the same set of economic laws that he advocated for metropolitan France. This was a radical proposal at the time, not because colonies had never previously been depicted as provinces – Sicily, Sardinia, and Corsica were designated as *provinciae* of the Roman Empire – or because colonial integration was a new phenomenon. The novelty of his proposition hinged on its


assumption that the mutual prosperity of colonies and domestic provinces was best attained through the universal application of the same single and simple set of economic laws across the French colonial empire. This physiocratic reconceptualisation of colonies as overseas provinces, I argue in this book, served as an intellectual precursor to the recasting of colonies as ‘overseas departments’ in the Constitution of the year III.

Contemporaries of Quesnay usually depicted the doctor as the Physiocrats’ principal leader and genius. While this may have been the case in terms of Physiocracy’s domestic focus, the marquis de Mirabeau was the intellectual engine behind the doctrine’s colonial stance. Mirabeau had developed a clear argument against the Exclusif before he started collaborating with Quesnay and had articulated a poignant critique of the use of African slave labour in his European best-seller, *L’Ami des hommes* (1756). Mirabeau’s interest in colonies and slavery, as Michèle Duchet has noted, originated in the correspondence he maintained with his younger brother, Jean-Antoine Riqueti, chevalier de Mirabeau, during the latter’s governorship of Guadeloupe in the 1750s. In the book, I analyse the ways in which *L’Ami des hommes* was a response to the chevalier de Mirabeau’s abysmal portrayal of colonial life. I further consider how the marquis’ ideas would subsequently influence Quesnay and the principal recruits to the physiocratic doctrine. Although Mirabeau and Quesnay’s earliest collaborator, Pierre-Paul Le Mercier de la Rivière, refrained from publicly attacking colonial slavery during his years as intendant of Martinique, key recruits such as the journalists Pierre Samuel Du Pont de Nemours, Abbé Nicolas Baudeau, and Abbé Pierre-Joseph-André Roubaud used the marquis de Mirabeau’s initial critique to develop what they believed to be a more legitimate and rational form of colonial expansion. Mining a budding literature on the natural history of West Africa for commercial opportunities closer to home, they proposed relocating the production of sugar, coffee and other colonial cash crops to Africa where free local labourers could cultivate it with European encouragement. They coupled such suggestions with ideas of progress and ‘civilisation’, a concept coined by the marquis de Mirabeau and which would become integral to French imperialist discourse in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Despite a recent increase in scholarly attention, the Physiocrats’ ideas on colonial empire are not well known. There is even a tendency to portray

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the Physiocrats as early anti-colonialists. But like most men of letters in this period – including Denis Diderot who has been celebrated as an ‘anti-imperialist’ – the Physiocrats were not against colonial empire per se. The body of physiocratic writings that discuss colonies, slavery, and empire contained an arsenal of suggestions on how to reconstitute the French relationship with its colonies. An amalgamation of their interventions – with their preference for free labour over slave labour, free trade over monopoly trade, and ideas of progress and ‘civilisation’ in Africa – could even sound like an early version of the vision promoted by liberals who ‘turned to empire’ in the nineteenth century. Such similarities between liberal imperialism and physiocratic colonial ideas should not be taken too far, of course. The Physiocrats were not ‘liberals’ in a political sense, but advocates of ‘legal despotism’, a term that contemporaries from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Catherine the Great of Russia (mis)understood to offer an endorsement of despotic rule and top down reform, but which in actuality meant that if European despots agreed to rule in accordance


with Physiocracy (the term they used to describe their ideas and which means ‘the rule of nature’), their regimes would constitute a legal form of despotism.\(^\text{19}\)

The Physiocrats’ rethinking of colonisation in the Americas and in Africa was profoundly at odds with the prevailing policies and practices that undergirded the French plantation complex. Though Ann Thomson and Madeleine Dobie have traced their ideas into Denis Diderot and Abbé Raynal’s international bestseller, *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* and eighteenth-century fiction, most statesmen, political economists, and commercial communities across France’s maritime and urban regions of growth whose economies relied on the Exclusif and slave labour went out of their way to highlight the alleged flaws and misconceptions of the Physiocrats’ colonial proposals as part of their wider attack on Physiocracy.\(^\text{20}\) Despite such resistance, I argue in this book that aspects of the Physiocrats’ colonial doctrine and vocabulary did come to resonate with some policy makers, officials, and colonial agents. In French colonies in the Americas and in West Africa, people on the ground who participated in reformist processes mapped new ideas and concepts, including physiocratic ones, onto colonial realities, though rarely in a manner that their original authors had intended, and always in combination with competing strands of political economy and in dialogue with the French crown’s own attempts to ameliorate its colonial system from within its existing political and economic structures. In the book, I illuminate these resonances with particular attention to the Îles du Vent (Martinique, Guadeloupe, and their dependencies and also known as the Lesser Antilles) and French holdings in Senegambia to shed light on the sometimes tenuous and at other times observable relationship between intellectual innovation, colonial policy, and practices on the ground.


French Colonies in the Americas and Africa

Possessions in the Caribbean and in West Africa were the main pivots around which concerns about the future of colonial empire turned in the second half of the eighteenth century. Along with Saint-Domingue, the Îles du Vent constituted France’s most valuable theatres of sugar and coffee production while the French holdings in Senegambia were strategic locations for the protection of the French slave trade that supplied the sugar colonies with labour. Linking these areas to the development and circulation of alternative ideas and approaches to colonies, commerce, land, and labour, I examine in the book the ways in which colonial officials, independent entrepreneurs, and planters in the Îles du Vent and in Senegal partook in the rethinking of empire in this period. For Guadeloupe and Martinique, such an approach enables us to restore their critical role in the evolution of imperial reform between the Seven Years War and the French Revolution. In turn, a focus on Senegal reveals the ways in which French holdings in West Africa were not only sites for the transatlantic slave trade but also of colonial experimentation.

Guadeloupe and Martinique were some of France’s oldest sugar colonies, whose relations to the metropole exacerbated in conjunction with the rise of Saint-Domingue. Tensions between them and domestic France rose exponentially when Guadeloupe capitulated to Britain in 1759 and Martinique did so in 1762. In the aftermath of Guadeloupe’s surrender, the Crown scrambled to grant disgruntled white planters on Martinique and on Saint-Domingue metropolitan representation in the royal Council of Commerce on terms equal to French domestic provinces. The Council, as David Kammerling Smith has shown, was the central node within the ‘communicative circuit’ of metropolitan commercial lobbyists and policy makers that ‘debated and negotiated economic affairs’. A seat within the Council, enabled planters to immediately respond to policy proposals, challenge commercial agendas of metropolitan ports, and shape colonial policy. Integral to that, the crown also established three Chambres mi-parties d’agriculture et de commerce in 1759 (two on Saint-Domingue and one on Martinique), in which colonial elites could deliberate on how best to attain local and colonial prosperity. Resonant with elements of the physiocratic view to eliminate colonial-metropolitan inequality and to encourage the development of agriculture throughout the colonial empire, the 1759 reform represented a shift in the crown’s perspective on colonies towards an accommodation of planter interests and their right to prosperity.21

21 This shift in attitude is more commonly dated to the transition from the Exclusif to the Exclusif mitiqué in 1767. See, for instance, Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, Choiseul – naissance de la gauche (Paris:
An analysis of the founding and activities of Martinique’s *Chambre mi-partie d’agriculture et de commerce* discloses the ways in which Martinique’s plantocracy used their position within what was now an intra-imperial communicative circuit to modify colonial policies and practices. Introduced to their commission by the intendant and Physiocrat-in-the-making, Le Mercier de la Rivière, members of the chamber dexterously appropriated some of the core tenets of Physiocracy when it served their interests, while unashamedly ignoring others. In the book, I show how the *Chambre mi-partie d’agriculture et de commerce* on Martinique – which transformed into the *Chambre d’agriculture* in 1763 and then the *Assemblée coloniale* in 1787 – came to serve as a midwife for a creole political economic discourse that sought reform in its own right – one that would eventually become a powerful and flexible tool with which to protect planter interests during the early stages of the French Revolution.

Scholars have paid relatively little attention to the contributions of the Îles du Vent to French imperial reform in the decades leading up to the Revolution. We are well aware of the importance of Martinique’s first representative to Paris, Jean Dubuc, whom Étienne-François duc de Choiseul, Minister of the Marine from 1761 to 1766, appointed to the position of *premier commis* (a powerful position which usually entailed drafting a minister’s policy proposals, instructions, and letters, filtering incoming correspondence, and keeping their assigned bureau in order) within the Ministry of the Marine of which French colonies were an administrative branch. Yet the Martinican side of this history – the extensive power not just of Jean Dubuc but also of the local Tribu des Dubucs, and the broader contributions of the island’s white planter elite to the history of Ancien Régime centralisation, colonial integration, and innovation – is little known. One consequence of this is that we currently have an exaggerated picture of the political relevance of elite planters from the better-studied colony of Saint-Domingue in the same period. Focusing on the harder-pressed planters in the Îles du Vent helps balance this picture.

and nuance our understanding of the multipolarity of voices that propelled and challenged reform in the final decades of the Ancien Régime.\textsuperscript{22}

Innovation, experimentation, and debates also animated French colonial activities in West Africa. Based on an assumed availability of cheap local labour and undeveloped fertile lands – and amidst their active participation in slave trading – colonial agents expanded French interests in the region in the aftermath of the Seven Years War, often in anticipation of a doomed French colonial future in the Americas. Local representatives of the Crown prepared to found colonies and develop cash crop cultivation on land opposite the island of Gorée and in negotiation with African rulers. Few generated more than ephemeral success and the French Ministry of the Marine deliberately sought to scale back experimentation. Only with the outbreak of the American Revolution did it become more amenable to these initiatives. At that juncture, commercial companies also began promoting French colonial expansion in West Africa, sometimes presenting their plans in a language of ‘civilisation’ and development. On the eve of the French Revolution, Stanislas de Boufflers, governor of Senegal, came closer than his predecessors in offering proof of a viable expansionist colonial project in West Africa, shipping cotton to France from his African plantations cultivated by labourers of unclear social status. While recent studies highlight how British, Danish, and Swedish colonial powers experimented with cash crop cultivation in West Africa alongside the transatlantic slave trade in the late-eighteenth century, French efforts in Senegambia and the context within which they took place remain largely unknown. This book reflects how the French participated in these experimental processes and in competition with other European powers, particularly the British.\textsuperscript{23}


The myriad efforts to expand French colonial interests in West Africa between the Seven Years War and the French Revolution disclose the diverse ways in which colonial innovation and experimentation intersected with the French Crown’s ambition to strengthen its plantation complex in the Caribbean. Such multiplex and co-existing agendas are rarely captured in current interpretations of French colonial policy in these years. Recent studies underscore either a French ‘no-territory policy’ according to which the crown systematically refrained from investing in colonial expansion beyond the current cluster of islands and their contributory trade stations in India, West Africa, and South America or see in the same moment an embrace of ‘Enlightenment colonialism’. Pushing the former, François-Joseph Ruggiu argues that in peace negotiations during the Seven Years War, the Crown – spearheaded by Choiseul – proved willing to sacrifice New France, Louisiana, trade up the Senegal River, and all but five trade stations in India (Pondicherry, Yanaon, Karikal, Mahé, and Chandernagor) to salvage its fishery off the coast of Canada and its Caribbean sugar colonies. Choiseul’s rationale was that a small but extremely profitable colonial empire would stimulate the French economy, boost state coffers, and finance a strong navy to keep British pretentions to ‘universal monarchy’ in check.24

Another body of scholarship highlights the period after the Seven Years War as one in which growing interest in botany, agronomy, and scientific improvement stimulated French attempts to expand overseas. Scholars who focus on colonial experimentation on the ground – on Mauritius (formerly Ile de France) and Madagascar in the Indian Ocean and on French Guiana in South America – have portrayed the last three decades of the Ancien Régime as years of ‘Enlightenment colonialism’ and experimentation. Though most of these experiments enjoyed only minimal success – including the attempt to launch a slave-free colony at Kourou in French Guiana, Pierre Poivre’s endeavours to advocate agricultural development on Ile de France by means of what he deemed a morally


sound labour system, or the comte de Maudave’s initiative to establish a slave-free colony on Madagascar – they do not easily align with the ‘no-territory’ thesis.  

As my book shows, any opposition between ‘Enlightenment colonialism’ and a ‘no-territory policy’ is nonetheless illusory. Several and sometimes opposing policies and practices were deployed to maintain French colonial dominance on a global scale between the Seven Years War and the French Revolution (and surely also in other periods). The sheer number of ministers, governors, and intendants who cycled through the Ministry of the Marine as they fell in and out of favour at court ensured the co-existence of various approaches to colonial management and reform. Most officials ruled the colonies in accordance with prevailing norms and formal policies, of course, but they could also deviate from more conventional paths depending on their personal economic interests, interpretation of local opportunities, relationships to the Crown, and commitment to new intellectual trends. The same could be said for the many semi-private colonial agents whose business activities received government protection in exchange for their willingness to shoulder parts of the financial costs of empire. In tandem with a ‘no-territory policy’ that catered to the Caribbean plantation complex in the last four decades of the Ancien Régime, multiple colonial actors forged ahead with alternative paths to empire in pursuit of new markets and profits.

The French Revolution and the Tale of Two Colonial Empires

The numerous possible approaches to French colonial empire debated and explored during the last four decades of the Bourbon monarchy enabled a comprehensive recalibration of imperial ambitions once the French Revolution threw the plantation complex in the Americas into jeopardy.

I trace these continuities with respect to the ways in which revolutionaries set out to transform metropolitan relations with the Americas and Africa. As I show, members of France’s first abolitionist society, the Société des amis des noirs (founded in 1788), were the first to initiate thoroughgoing reform. Like the Physiocrats, the amis des noirs promoted free labour over slave labour, a liberalisation of colonial commerce, and the spread of civilisation in Africa through the creation of new agricultural colonies. As the escalation of widespread slave revolt in the French Caribbean and revolutionary warfare in Europe and in the Americas endangered the preservation of the plantation complex, numerous policy makers followed in the amis des noirs’s footsteps. They hastened to integrate colonies into the metropole as ‘overseas departments’ equal to the newly reorganized metropolitan departments. In so doing, they injected political content into what had been a physiocratic suggestion to integrate domestic and overseas provinces under one law predicated primarily on an economic rationale. They also began promoting the creation of new slave-free colonies in Africa. Rather than breaking with Ancien Régime trends, they thus appropriated and expanded existing strands of imperial thought and experimentation as they set about articulating a French republican imperial agenda.

By casting the revolutionary decade as a crescendo of longer-term efforts to reinvent the French colonial empire, Economistes and the Reinvention of Empire complicates narratives that see this period as a cradle for France’s ‘imperial renaissance’ in the nineteenth century.26 In such literature, the Revolution stands as the birthplace of a liberal and republican imperial ideology that recast French imperial orientations, particularly with respect to Africa and the Americas. In their study of France’s first and second abolitionist societies – the Société des amis des noirs and the Société des amis des noirs et des colonies – Marcel Dorigny and Bernard Gainot, for instance, note the ambitions of these two societies to create ‘new colonies’ and bring ‘civilisation’ to Africa through commercial exchange and agricultural development. And though they insist on particularly the Société des amis des noirs’s emphasis on colonisation without territorial conquest, they identify within the second society an evolving imperialist agenda directed towards Africa that included ‘the premises of the future colonial empire of the nineteenth century’. Gainot has also depicted the Constitution of the year III that declared Martinique, Guadeloupe, Réunion, and French Guiana overseas departments of the French Republic as the point of

departure for the long process of integration and departmentalisation of these vieilles colonies (old colonies) that culminated in the establishment of the Départements et territoires d’outre-mer (DOM-TOM) in 1946 and which still characterises France’s relationship with these territories. In a similar manner, Jennifer E. Sessions and Alice L. Conklin highlight the importance of the legacies of the revolutionary and Napoleonic decades – and particularly the Egyptian expedition – to France’s subsequent conquest of Algeria and civilising mission in West Africa. These scholars are right to argue that the Revolution and Napoleonic period helped pave the way for later imperial developments. But as I show, when successive French regimes tapped into the French Revolution for ideas and approaches of empire to justify their colonial relationship with the Caribbean and expansionist activities in Africa, they simultaneously connected with Ancien Régime innovation, experimentation, and reform.27

By showing how the French Revolution consolidated earlier processes of imperial innovation, this book also softens the emphasis on a rupture between the pre- and post-revolutionary period and between France’s so-called first and second colonial empires. In histories of French colonialism, France’s ‘first’ colonial empire appears as an early modern empire anchored in the Americas, worked by predominantly African slave labour, and undergirded by metropolitan exclusive trade privileges, while the ‘second’ colonial empire is cast as an empire that slowly integrated its older colonies into the metropole while embracing an expansionist policy towards the continents of Africa and Asia underpinned by a mission civilisatrice and military conquest. This tale of two empires is further corroborated with a narrative of decline, rupture, and rebirth associated with domestic regime changes. In this vein, the decline of the ‘first’ colonial empire began with the Seven Years War, when France lost Canada and India to Britain and gave Louisiana to Spain, and culminated in the revolutionary and Napoleonic periods with the temporary collapse of the

slave-driven plantation complex and the independence of Saint-Domingue in 1804 (Haiti). The rise of the ‘second’ colonial empire, in turn, is tentatively dated to the French Revolution, after which the second empire was consolidated in a series of steps, spanning the invasion of Algeria in 1830, the second abolition of slavery in 1848, the gradual integration and assimilation of Martinique, Guadeloupe, French Guiana, and La Réunion into the metropole, and the Third Republic’s espousal of the mission civilisatrice in the 1880s, which carried France deep into Africa.  

Decline, rupture, and rebirth form a part of the history of French colonialism, yet they only reveal one side of the story. The other side is that of continuity. In his *Old Regime and the Haitian Revolution*, Malick Ghachem teases out how a set of ‘strategic ethics’ to safeguard and control the colony of Saint-Domingue during the French Revolution was rooted in the decrees of the seventeenth-century Code Noir that structured religious and racial relations in the colonies. Ghachem thereby detects a continuation of the old within the new. Similarly, David Todd has identified a return of the Exclusif in the first half of the nineteenth century. In their separate ways, both scholars explore the lingering impacts of well-established Ancien Régime policies and practices in the revolutionary and post-revolutionary periods. Additional continuities come into view, I argue, when we focus on processes to reinvent French colonial relations with the Americas and Africa during the last decades of the Ancien Régime and their influences on republican imperialism in the revolutionary period and beyond.

Identifying continuities and reappearances of colonial ideas, policies, and practices across the longue durée enables us to suspend the linearity

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28 Committed to such a narrative, comprehensive histories of French colonialism see the years between 1789 and 1830 as the crucial dates for closure and departure. The first two volumes of the six-volume *L'aventure coloniale de la France* reveal precisely this logic. Volume 1 is Philippe Haudrère, *L'empire des rois* (1500–1789) (Paris: Persée, 1997), which ends with the Revolution. Volume 2 is Martin, *L'empire renaisissant*, which ascribes the rise of the second empire to this period. Similarly, the multi-authored study *Histoire de la France coloniale: des origines à 1914* (followed by *Histoire de la France coloniale, 1914–1990*) divides the period around the dates ‘origins to 1763’ and ‘1763–1830’, stressing the period 1789–1830 as the collapse of the first colonial empire and 1830 as the departure for the second. Jean Meyer, Jean Tarrade, Annie Rey-Goldzeiguer, and Jacques Thobie, *Histoire de la France coloniale*. Pierre Pluchon and Denise Bouche’s *Histoire de la colonisation française* repeats this division, providing 1815 as the key date for the end of the first colonial empire. Pierre Pluchon, *L'histoire de la colonisation française, I: Le premier empire colonial: des origines à la restauration* (Paris: Fayard, 1991). For a condensed version of this narrative of two empires and their rise and fall see Gérard Gabriel Marion, ‘L’outre-mer français: de la domination à la reconnaissance’, *Pouvoirs*, 113 (2005), 233–40.

ingrained in the narrative of a ‘first’ colonial empire’s rise and decline, a revolutionary rupture, and the rise of a ‘second’ colonial empire in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In its place, a focus on innovation and continuity alongside moments of rupture allows for a polyrhythmic history that exposes ways in which prevailing modes of colonial empire overlapped and interlocked with experimentation and change. Dominant colonial policies and practices always co-existed with, and responded to, novel and competing ideas and approaches on the ground that followed different logics and that might appear only momentarily or perhaps grow in force right at the moment when previously dominant policies were falling out of favour. My book seeks to accommodate these intertwined processes in all their complexity.

Connecting Ideas, Policies, and Practices

Embracing a polyrhythmic narrative brings questions in its trail: What gave birth to innovative processes when they occurred? How were they received? Why did some triumph at a given time and others not? Why did some resurface years later with reinvigorated force? I explore these questions through the lens of political economy in the period between the Seven Years War and the rise of Napoleon. Their answers, I show, lie neither within a single archive nor in a narrow European intellectual history of colonial ideas but through a combination of miscellaneous sources and historical methodological approaches associated with intellectual history and with the history of French colonial policy and practice. I am guided by David N. Livingstone’s insistence that for ideas to gain force, they ‘must resonate with their environments or they [cannot] find expression, secure agreement, or mobilize followers’. Moreover, as Shruti Kapila observes, sometimes there were ‘significant ruptures in the meaning, content, and use’ of ideas as they circulated through different locales.30

While paying attention to these spatial factors, I try to remain sensitive to the broader historical transformations that characterise the period under investigation. The world looked very different in 1756 than it did in 1802. The Seven Years War, the American Revolution, and the French and

Haitian Revolutions subverted traditional political, economic, social, and cultural norms and geopolitical configurations. In the process, they shifted the parameters of innovation and historical possibility.

My interest in the connections between ideas, policy, and practice in the context of innovation and reform leads to sources that were generated through the fragile networks of communication between private and official colonial agents. These authors were not primarily focused on arguments about political economy, let alone theory, even when they sometimes echoed strands of contemporary thought. Instead, they were typically concerned with how to survive and profit from the French colonial empire. In addition, moving from the pages of published treatises to archival sources uncovers a reality that never adhered to an ideal type enclosed French colonial empire, but reflects the diversity of competing interest groups pertaining to it. French colonies were part of an empire but simultaneously rubbed up against, or were fully integrated into, other regional networks and communities. Respecting these local realities means exploring ideas as they appeared, transformed, disappeared, and reappeared within the broader transatlantic framework of colonial and regional life.

Keeping this in sight, the foundation of Economistes and the Reinvention of Empire’s reinterpretation rests on a close scrutiny of miscellaneous sources. Alongside published treatises of political economy, I use archival depositories of past colonial and commercial policies and practices to gain insights about eighteenth-century political economic ideas in action. I draw heavily on the Fonds des colonies, Sous-série C6 on Africa, Sous-série C7 on Guadeloupe, and Sous-série C8 on Martinique, and the Collection Moreau de Saint-Méry Sous-série F3 located in Aix-en-Provence; letters of correspondence between the Mirabeau brothers, held at Musée Arbaud in Aix-en-Provence; papers from Bordeaux’s Chambre de commerce in the Archives départementales de la Gironde; the Archives du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères in Paris, and papers on the British occupation of Martinique at the National Archives in Kew. I combine these archival materials with eighteenth-century journals, legal documents, and printed administrative directives and reports.

The structure of the book is largely chronological. It begins on the eve of the Seven Years War and ends with the rise of Napoleon, layering the argument with attention to developments in France, the Îles du Vent, and Senegal in between. Chapter 1 provides a historical context for the intellectual and reformist processes that the Seven Years War set in motion. It uses the governorship of chevalier de Mirabeau on Guadeloupe as
a window onto the growing crisis of the Ancien Régime colonial empire and then shifts to the war itself to analyse how the Crown and stakeholders of empire struggled to negotiate the future of the French colonies. Chapter 2 explores the Physiocrats’ articulation of a new theoretic framework for colonial empire. Chapter 3 studies the founding of the Chambre mi-partie d’agriculture et de commerce on Martinique and the unintended consequences that this reform produced. Chapter 4 explores how French government officials, semi-private commercial companies, and independent colonial agents discussed opportunities for colonial empire in Senegal and strove to test the feasibility of territorial expansion and cash crop cultivation in this region. Chapter 5 connects the processes of innovation and reform explored in the book’s first four chapters with the formulation of a republican imperial agenda during the French Revolution. The conclusion surveys how some of the innovative processes detailed in the five main chapters filtered through to the post-Napoleonic period and conditioned subsequent French imperial expansion in uneven and surprising ways.