
NOTES

The State of French Colonial Commerce on the Eve of the Revolution

Robert Stein
University of Toronto

The French economy of the eighteenth century was dominated by agriculture, with the vast majority of Frenchmen either working on the land themselves or relying on the land for most of their income. Historians are almost unanimous in viewing the harvest as the key factor in the country's economic life, and they agree that even the industrial sphere could be affected by a series of bad harvests. Although there is a debate about the exact relationship between agriculture and industry in eighteenth century France, both sides seem satisfied that some relationship did exist and that a healthy industrial sector presupposed a prosperous agricultural one.¹ Yet there was one part of the French economy which was apparently unrelated to the rest, the trade in colonial commodities. Historians of the major French ports insist that colonial commerce operated independently of the domestic agrarian economy, as François Crouzet wrote of Bordeaux: "In sum, there is no strict nor even close correlation between the agricultural trend -- whether Aquitaine or national -- and Bordeaux' commercial trend... Bordeaux had become a sort of foreign body in France".² Colonial commerce responded to conditions in Amsterdam, Hamburg, Cap Français and Port au Prince, rather than in the hundreds of marketplaces in the French hinterland.

¹ D. LANDES, "The Statistical Study of French Crises," *Journal of Economic History*, X (1950), 195-211; A. DANIÈRE, "Feudal Incomes and Demand Elasticity for Bread in late Eighteenth Century France," *Journal of Economic History*, XVIII (1958), 317-331; and the ensuing Danière debate in *Journal of Economic History*, XVIII (1958), 331-344.

² In F.G. PARISET, ed., *Bordeaux au XVIIIe siècle* (Bordeaux, 1968), p. 305. See also J. TARRADE, *Le commerce colonial de la France à la fin de l'ancien régime* (Paris, 1972), p. 777.

At no time was the independence of the colonial trade more evident than in the 1780s when, in spite of a general recession in French agriculture and industry, imports and re-exports of tropical commodities reached record levels both in terms of quantity and value. This great activity has long been interpreted as a sure sign of prosperity, and most general accounts of the French Revolution refer to colonial commerce as the one bright light in the darkness of the pre-Revolutionary economy. Even such generally opposed authors as Pierre Gaxotte,³ Albert Soboul,⁴ Norman Hampson,⁵ and Ernest Labrousse⁶ could agree with François Furet and Denis Richet that "maritime trade flourished during the latter part of the century and gave merchants and trading companies extraordinary high profits..."⁷ But all are quick to add that this colonial trade had little to do with the domestic French economy. As Labrousse wrote, "... the enormous rise in the colonial figures... signifies that the Saint Domingue magnate was accumulating a legendary fortune and buying hordes of Negroes, not that French profits were growing or that unemployment was diminishing".⁸ "Prosperity" and "autonomy" are the watchwords in generalists' treatments of the subject.

Historians specializing in the ports, the colonies, or in French colonial trade, however, tell a somewhat different story. For them, the 1780s were difficult years, with colonial trade slowing down or even undergoing a crisis.⁹ According to Jean Tarrade, colonial trade after 1783 was in reality in "a state of latent crisis underneath the apparent prosperity".¹⁰ Jean Meyer believed that Nantes shippers found it increasingly difficult to make money late in the old regime, while Christian Schnakenbourg found that Guadeloupe sugar planters were operating at a loss in 1789.¹¹ From both sides of the Atlantic the conclusion was the same: colonial commerce was in deep trouble after the American Revolution, although not because of problems in the domestic French economy. Specialists, too, stressed the autonomy of the colonial trade. As Tarrade put it, "Colonial commerce displayed an extreme sensitivity to the international trade... On the contrary, it did not suffer because of internal French crises".¹²

³ *The French Revolution* (London, 1932), p. 23.

⁴ *Précis d'histoire de la Révolution française* (Paris, 1962), p. 35.

⁵ *A Social History of the French Revolution* (London, 1963), p. 18.

⁶ *La crise de l'économie française à la fin de l'ancien régime et au début de la Révolution* (Paris, 1944), pp. xxxvi-xxxvii.

⁷ *The French Revolution* (London, 1970), p. 11.

⁸ *Crise*, pp. xxxvi-xxxvii.

⁹ *Commerce colonial*, p. 776.

¹⁰ *L'armement nautais dans la deuxième moitié du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1969), chapter 6 and conclusion.

¹¹ C. SCHNAKENBOURG, *Les sucreries de la Guadeloupe dans la seconde moitié du XVIIIe siècle* (thesis, Paris, 1972).

¹² *Commerce colonial*, p. 777.

How strong was French colonial trade before the Revolution? Was it, as the general historians claim, participating in an unprecedented boom, or was it, as specialists assert, in difficulty? Why do the generalists and specialists disagree so radically in their assessments: Did colonial commerce have nothing to do with the rest of the national economy? These are the questions which I will examine in this paper. I will attempt to show that although the volume of exports from the French West Indies to France increased in the 1780s, it did not increase as rapidly as the volume and value of French exports to the colonies. This meant that planters were increasingly in debt to French port merchants. These latter, however, could ill-afford to extend credit to the planters because of the general recession: deteriorating economic conditions in France placed the port merchants in a financial straitjacket. Only a lengthy period of general prosperity could have solved the problems, but the outbreak of civil warfare in Haiti and then war with Britain ended all hopes for success.

Any discussion of the health of French colonial commerce in the 1780s must begin with a quantitative study: what was the size of the commerce both in the 1780s and in preceding decades? Unfortunately, there are two serious problems which must be resolved before this question can be answered. The first problem concerns the documents: they are numerous but not necessarily reliable. Although French port officials duly recorded all incoming merchandise, they did so with a singular disregard for accuracy, particularly when it came to making compilations of annual statistics. Further, figures from different sources tend to differ and not just in detail. Fortunately, a thorough study of the extant documentation has been undertaken by Jean Tarrade, and his published conclusions and data can be accepted as the best possible.¹³ It is nevertheless crucial not to place too much weight on any particular figure; all are subject to error.

The second problem concerns sales of colonial commodities by the colonists directly to foreigners. There are no reliable figures at all on this usually illegal trade. According to the letters patent of April, 1717 — which reiterated Colbertian legislation on the subject — all trade between the French West Indies and foreign merchants was illegal, a prohibition maintained with few exceptions until following the American Revolution when, in response to demands from planters in the Lesser Antilles and the south of Saint Domingue, the government relented somewhat and allowed planters to sell to foreigners under certain conditions.¹⁴ Exactly what percentage of the islands' production went to foreigners — either legally or illegally — is unknown, but there are indications

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 713-78.

¹⁴ For the history of trade regulations in the French West Indies, see *ibid.*, *passim*.

that it was high. Christian Schnakenbourg, for example, has estimated that from 17 to 60 percent of the annual Guadeloupe sugar crop went to foreigners between 1767 and 1789, with the average approaching 40 percent.¹⁵ This was probably higher than the rest of the French islands; planters on Guadeloupe had long been notorious for their close relations with the British and for their distaste for Martinique merchants who managed to dominate Guadeloupe's trade with France.

What is vital to the present argument is the relative size of the foreign commerce, and there is good reason to believe that it was relatively smaller after the American Revolution than before. According to Schnakenbourg, Guadeloupe planters sold an average of 41 percent of their sugar crop in 1767, 1773, and 1775 to foreigners, but only 35 percent from 1786 to 1789.¹⁶ More significantly, French West Indian planters purchased fewer slaves from foreigners after the American Revolution than before; ¹⁷ they therefore had to offer less of their harvest in payment. While there can never be anything approaching statistical certainty it seems highly probable that the percentage of the French West Indian production going to foreigners declined in the 1780s. In this paper, sales to foreigners are considered to have remained constant; thus, the relative growth rate presented here for the 1780s is a maximum figure and cannot be increased by adding on further sales to foreigners.

Assuming a constant rate of foreign deliveries, French West Indian production — as measured by generally reliable and comprehensive statistics on French imports — increased throughout the century, reaching a peak only after the beginning of the French Revolution. Growth, however, was not uniform on all fronts: early growth was due to sugar, later to coffee. Until the Seven Years' War, the French Colonies produced almost exclusively sugar. In 1730, for example, the ports of Nantes, Bordeaux, and Le Havre received a total of 46m pounds of colonial commodities, of which 44m were sugar.¹⁸ By the time of the Revolution, the situation had changed, with coffee claiming nearly 33 percent of the total volume: sugar remained the leader with 63 percent.¹⁹

Arrivals of French West Indian sugar in the French ports went from about 20m pounds in 1670 to an annual average of nearly 180m pounds in the late

¹⁵ SCHNAKENBOURG, *Suceries*, pp. 118.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ R.L. STEIN, "Measuring the French Slave Trade," *Journal of African History*, XIX (1978), pp. 519-20.

¹⁸ P. JEULIN, *L'évolution du port de Nantes, organisation et trafic depuis ses origines* (Paris, 1929), pp. 23, 272; T. MALVEZIN, *Histoire du commerce de Bordeaux* (Bordeaux, 1892), vol. 3, pp. 302-3; P. DARDEL, *Commerce, industrie et navigation à Rouen et au Havre au XVIIIe siècle* (Rouen, 1966), p. 222.

¹⁹ TARRADE, *Commerce colonial*, pp. 747-9; these figures are for 1790.

1780s.²⁰ After 1730 — that is, when the data become relatively comprehensive — growth was uneven, coming in spurts every few years rather than annually (see Table 1). With the exception of the 1736-43 period, each new period was preceded by a major colonial war, and these wars gave the French sugar trade its distinctive growth pattern. War had two main effects on the sugar trade, one immediate, the other delayed. To begin with, war sharply depressed the trade, and the more difficult the war at sea, the more severe the decline in trade. The War of the Austrian Succession reduced French colonial commerce by more than 50 percent, while the especially disastrous Seven Years' War cut it by more than 90 percent. Even the relatively benign American Revolution entailed a decline of at least 33 percent. Then, following each of the wars, the sugar business registered record volumes as merchants rushed to satisfy the demands of sugar-starved markets in France and Europe. The rate of post-war

TABLE 1
FRENCH SUGAR ARRIVALS, 1730-1790 (in millions of pounds)

Dates	Average	Maximum	Minimum	Increase over previous period
1730-35	59	64	53	
1736-43	86	100	71	+ 46%
1749-55	114	135	90	+ 33%
1764-76	136	164	111	+ 21%
1784-90	178	200	149	+ 29%

Source: ROBERT STEIN, "The French Sugar Business in the Eighteenth Century," *Business History*, XXII (1980).

growth tended to decline, however, in the second half of the century, and most particularly after the Seven Years' War. The growth of the sugar trade reflected the growth of the colony of Saint Domingue. The last of the major French colonies to be cultivated extensively, Saint Domingue became the leading supplier of sugar to France by the middle of the century, and by the end of the old regime it supplied an estimated 70 percent of sugar shipped to France.²¹

When growth in sugar production began to slow after the Seven Years'

²⁰ On the growth of the sugar trade, see R.L. STEIN, "The French Sugar Business in the Eighteenth Century, a Quantitative Study," *Business History*, XXII (1980).

²¹ M. AVALLE, "Tableau comparatif des productions des colonies françaises. Antilles avec celles des colonies anglaises, espagnoles et hollandaises de l'année 1787 à 1788" (Paris, year VII), tables 2-5.

War, coffee picked up the slack, at least for a while. Long a minor crop in the French colonies, coffee suddenly became important in the 1770s. In Le Havre and Nantes together, for example, an average of 4m pounds of coffee arrived annually from 1764 to 1771; this increased to 9m pounds per year from 1772 to 1776.²² In Bordeaux, growth was just as sudden and even more spectacular: from an annual average of 4m pounds in 1764-68, coffee arrivals soared to 37m pounds in 1769-77.²³ Following the American Revolution, growth was considerably slower, as French ports imported an annual average of 80m pounds of coffee from 1785 to 1790, up only 13 percent from the mid-1770s.²⁴ As with sugar, the increase in the quantity of coffee reflected the growth of Saint Domingue. According to Paul Butel, Saint Domingue produced 14 times as much coffee in 1790 as in 1750; ²⁵ and the 1790 figure represented an estimated 70-75 percent of the French West Indian total.²⁶

The secondary crops of cotton, cocoa, and indigo generally experienced growth during the eighteenth century, but on a modest scale. Cotton production, for example, went from less than 2m pounds annually in the 1730s to nearly 8m in the 1780s, with most of the growth coming after the American Revolution.²⁷ Neither cocoa nor indigo ever reached 2m pounds per year, and indigo production actually declined slightly in the 1780s.²⁸ The total production of these three commodities never exceeded 5 percent of total French West Indian output.

Thus, French West Indian production increased throughout the century, but not regularly. Growth was rapid until the Seven Years' War because of sugar. It slowed down somewhat in the 1760s but picked up again in the 1770s, this time because of coffee. After the American Revolution, growth was negligible at first, but it became rapid from 1787 to 1790. Overall, however, the pace of growth in the 1780s was slower than in the 1770s: the average annual growth rate for 1784-90 was slightly less than 3 percent as apposed to the nearly 6 percent registered in 1770-76 (see Table 2). Still, the French West Indies were much more productive after the American Revolution, producing an average of 25-30 percent more goods in the 1780s than in the 1770s.²⁹ Since almost all of this growth occurred after 1787, it means that, in terms of volume,

²² DARDEL, *Commerce, industrie et navigation*, pp. 222-3; JEULIN, *L'évolution*, 239.

²³ MALVEZIN, *Histoire*, vol. 3, pp. 304-5.

²⁴ TARRADE, *Commerce colonial*, p. 747.

²⁵ P. BUTEL, *Les négociants bordelais, l'Europe et les îles au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1974), p. 33.

²⁶ AVALLE, *Tableau comparatif*, tables 2-5 (74 percent in 1787).

²⁷ DARDEL, *Commerce*, 222-3; JEULIN, *L'évolution*, 272; MALVEZIN, *Histoire*, vol. 3, pp. 303, 305; TARRADE, *Commerce colonial*, pp. 748-9.

²⁸ TARRADE, *Commerce colonial*, pp. 747.

²⁹ Based on figures in *ibid.*, p. 746.

TABLE 2

ANNUAL MOVEMENTS OF PRICES, VOLUMES, AND VALUES OF IMPORTS OF THE FIVE MAJOR COLONIAL COMMODITIES, 1765-1790

	1765-70	1770-76	1784-87	1787-90	1765-76	1784-90
Weighted prices	—	— 1%	+ 4%	+ 1%	— .5%	+ 2.5%
Volume	+ 2.5%	+ 6%	— .5%	+ 5-6%	+ 4%	+ 3%
Value	+ 2.5%	+ 5%	+ 3%	+ 7%	+ 3%	+ 5-6%

Source: Tarrade, 746-9, 771-2.

French colonial trade had just emerged from a slump and was beginning to grow again when the Revolution began.

The value of French West Indian shipments to France in the 1780s grew even more rapidly than their volume because of rising prices.³⁰ Throughout the century, prices for most colonial commodities had been generally rising although the increases were irregular and not always universal. At first glance, however, price rises seem fairly constant. Using 1750 prices as base 100, the combined index for the five major commodities stood at 118 following the Seven Years' War, 126 on the eve of French participation in the American Revolution, 128 following the American Revolution, and 145 a year into the French Revolution (see Table 3). But, closer inspection reveals different patterns of price movement, and when the index is weighted to reflect the relative values of each of the commodities imported, the increases become more erratic. Thus prices which had begun at 100 in 1750 rose to 123 in 1765 but fell to 117 to 1776; after the American Revolution, they stood at 122 and then jumped to 141 in 1790. As might be expected, the weighted price index tended to move contrary to the volume of trade (see Graph 1).

Reflecting the increase in volume, the weighted price index fell an average of .5 percent annually from 1765 to 1776. The real fall, however, did not come until after 1770: from 1765 to 1770, combined prices remained constant, with a sharp rise in coffee prices offsetting a 10 percent fall in sugar prices. Between 1770 and 1776, coffee prices plunged, reflecting the sudden, vast increase in French West Indian coffee production. Although sugar prices managed to regain their 1765 levels, and although indigo prices rose by fully one-third, coffee's collapse pushed the index down by an average of nearly 1 percent per year between 1770 and 1776. In spite of lower prices, the value of colonial shipments in France did not fall after 1770; indeed, it actually rose by nearly

³⁰ For published tables of prices, see *ibid.*, pp. 771-2.

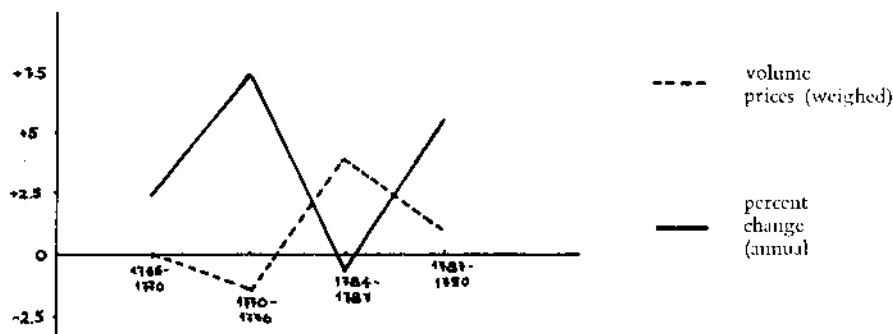
TABLE 3

WHOLESALE COMMODITY PRICES IN FRENCH PORTS, 1750-90

	1750	1754	1765	1770	1776	1784	1787	1790
Cocoa	100	84	133	133	117	120	107	103
Coffee	100	92	77	115	48	80	97	108
Cotton	100	79	105	75	126	98	159	112
Indigo	100	150	138	150	203	200	217	233
Sugar	100	88	135	122	135	141	149	169
Unweighted index	100	99	118	119	126	128	146	145
Weighted index	100		123	123	117	122	136	141

Source: Tarrade, 747-9, 771-2.

Graph. 1: Prices and Volumes of the Five Major Commodities, 1765-90



5 percent per year because of the much increased volume of traffic. This was double the rate of the 1765-70 period, when stable prices and most increases in volume had meant that the value of colonial imports rose by an average of only 2.5 percent per year. Between the American and French Revolutions, the value of colonial exports to France increased more rapidly. Prices for the five major commodities rose by an average of 2.5 percent annually, pushed along by steep increases in sugar and coffee: in six years, sugar prices rose a total of 13 percent and coffee 35 percent. At the same time, volume was up by an average of 2.5 to 3 percent per year. Although this was only half the rate of the

1770-76 period, it was still enough when combined with the price increase to send the values of colonial shipments up by an annual average of 5-6 percent, certainly the highest rate for a six-year period since 1750 and probably the most since 1717. Most of this was due to very rapid expansion during the 1787-90 period. In spite of only a modest price-rise, these three years had record increases in import values because volume had finally begun to grow again at pre-American Revolution levels. Thus, in terms of value, French colonial commerce was growing at unprecedented rates when the French Revolution began.

If colonial trade was apparently doing so brilliantly in the 1780 and particularly the late 1780s, why were there so many complaints from planters and merchants, and so many suspicions voiced by modern historians? Contemporary complaints revolved around profits, or more precisely the lack of profits. Plantation owners claimed that they were finding it difficult to run profitable estates in the 1780s, while French port merchants believed that it was nearly impossible to make money from the West Indies trade. Typical were the comments of the Chaurand brothers, large wholesale merchants in Nantes: "Never have we seen such misery".³¹ As we have seen, specialist historians have recently reiterated these complaints. Basing their conclusions on detailed analyses of account-books from the West Indies and the French ports, they have concluded that the complaints were largely justified. But, these historians explain the complaints by reference to an earlier era of higher profits. They say that the planters and merchants were upset because they could no longer make the large profits they were used to making. For example, Jean Meyer declared that "the average profit tended to decline in the course of the second half of the eighteenth century".³² This interpretation is without foundation. There is simply no concrete evidence for an earlier golden age, at least not after the earliest days of settlement when the first adventurous colonists may have realized tremendous profits for a few brief seasons. Once full-scale cultivation began on the islands, profits fell to more modest levels.

The problem was that the cost of growth in the 1780s was high, placing planters and merchants alike in a bind which should have been temporary. Following the American Revolution, planters were investing far more money in the colonies — and especially Saint Domingue — than ever before. Although it is impossible to measure total capital investment in the Antilles, there are indications that it was growing quickly after the American War. For example, the value of exports from France directly to the French West Indies increased in the 1780s by an estimated 112 percent over 1771-77 levels, about double the increase of colonial sales to France during the same period.³³ More importantly,

³¹ Archives Départementales de la Loire Atlantique, 1JJ4, 13-5-1783.

³² *Armement nautais*, p. 248. See also, BUTEL, *Négociants*, pp. 265-77.

³³ TARRADE, *Commerce colonial*, p. 740.

the French West Indian planters were purchasing far more slaves in the 1780s than ever before. According to calculations made by Philip Curtin, the French West Indies imported 358,000 slaves from 1781 to 1810.³⁴ But, because of the American Revolution, there were few imports in 1780-82, and because of the French and Haitian Revolutions, there were virtually no imports of slaves after 1792. Hence, average imports in the 1783-92 period approached 35,000 slaves per year.³⁵ This was nearly double the rate for the 1760s and 1770s and was reflected in the growth of the servile population in the colonies. Charles Frostin has estimated that the number of slaves on Guadeloupe went from 84,000 in 1777 to 90,000 in 1789, while it grew from 71,000 in 1776 to 83,000 in 1789 on Martinique.³⁶ Even these figures pale beside those of Saint Domingue, where the slave population rose from 252,000 in 1780 to 465,000 in 1789, an increase of more than 80 percent in a decade.³⁷ Since such increases were achieved in spite of a negative natural demography on the islands, only a massive slave trade could have made them possible.³⁸

Increased imports of slaves formed only half the problem: the other half was their high price. Not only were colonists buying more slaves; they were paying more for them. Before the American Revolution, slaves cost less than 1000 livres each in the French Antilles; after, they cost more than 1250 livres,³⁹ a price considered "excessive" even by generally moderate observers.⁴⁰ Thus expenditure for slaves increased by more than 100 percent in a decade. This was significant because slaves represented by far the greatest expense on a plantation. Indeed, one official observer claimed at the end of the old regime that slaves accounted for nearly 70 percent of the total value of all plantations on Saint Domingue.⁴¹ Any increase in the price of slaves was therefore a matter of grave concern for the colonists.

Planters could not afford to pay for these expensive slaves, at least not immediately. They insisted on buying them, however, for two reasons: first, to make good the losses of the American Revolutionary period when shipments had been rare; and second, to expand their operations, particularly on Saint

³⁴ P.D. CURTIN, *The Atlantic Slave Trade, a Census* (Wisconsin, 1969), p. 216. Curtin's figures may be somewhat low, see Stein, "Measuring," p. 519.

³⁵ STEIN, "Measuring," p. 519.

³⁶ C. FROSTIN, *Les révoltes blanches à Saint Domingue* (Paris, 1975), p. 29.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

³⁸ CURTIN, *Census*, pp. 75-84.

³⁹ R.L. STEIN, *The French Slave Trade in the Eighteenth Century* (Wisconsin, 1980), p. 141.

⁴⁰ B. WIMPEFEN, *Voyage à Saint Domingue pendant les années 1788, 1789 et 1790* (Paris, 1797), p. 100.

⁴¹ Archives de la Chambre de Commerce de Marseille, H 19. Plantation records indicate slaves to represent about 70 percent of the value of all plantation assets; see, for example, Archives Nationales, 107 AP 128.

Domingue, the largest of the French colonies and the only one with good lands not yet being cultivated. The problem was that it took from two to four years before increased slave purchases could translate into increased sugar or coffee production, and then several more months were needed before the increased production finally yielded increased revenues. To get through this lengthy interim period, many planters quite simply refused to pay their debts, unilaterally extending the length of time allotted for payment for the slaves.⁴² Generally the planters paid about one-quarter of the slaving debt in cash, with the remainder being promised in notes coming due in from three to twenty-four months. These notes, however, were only as good as the colonist's word. The French creditor had no way to force the colonist to honor his obligations, particularly since colonial courts — which dealt with such matters — invariably decided in favour of colonial debtors. The planters took advantage of this and turned the short-term loans into long-term loans which they used to finance their expansion; in effect, they forced the French port merchants to invest in the colonies. Their strategy nearly worked. Late in the 1780s and early in the 1790s, things were finally beginning to straighten out for the planters. The volume of colonial commodities produced rose rapidly, and, aided by rising prices, plantation revenues began to grow significantly. Unfortunately for the planters, all this occurred too late; the Haitian Revolution and the French Revolutionary Wars suddenly put an end to what had promised to be an exceptionally profitable era.

It was also too late for the French port merchants. The colonial practice of delaying payments came at a particularly bad time for the merchants. As with the planters, capital investment by the merchants in the 1780s grew enormously. To begin with, exports directly to the colonies more than doubled in the 1780s. Further, there was great growth in the slave trade, and most merchants dealing with the colonies were also involved in slaving. French slavers doubled their expeditions after the American Revolution, from an average of 55 per year in 1771-77 to 110 per year in 1783-92.⁴³ Further, slaving expeditions cost much more to fit out in the 1780s, rising from about 175,000 livres in the 1760s to 225,000 in the 1770s and 275,000 in the 1780s.⁴⁴ This meant that French merchants were investing an average of about 30m livres per year in the slave trade after the American Revolution, as opposed to only 12m before. Their annoyance at delays in receiving payments from the colonies is therefore quite understandable: although slaving profit margins remained on paper what they had always been, it was now difficult to realize them in practice. As one slaving company complained in the 1780s: "Misfortune seems to attach

⁴² R.L. STEIN, "The Profitability of the Nantes Slave Trade, 1783-1792," *Journal of Economic History*, XXXV (1975), pp. 790-1.

⁴³ STEIN, *French Slave Trade*, pp. 208-9.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

itself to our expeditions to Guinea. We have not succeeded with a single one".⁴⁵ The slavers' only hope was that increased colonial production would eventually mean quicker and fuller payments from the planters.

Until that happened, the merchants were in trouble. They had proceeded with a programme of massive expansion in the face of a major national recession, and they found themselves in a credit squeeze. Most port merchants of any consequence — at least along the Atlantic coast — relied on capitalists in Paris for credit, but the economic and financial crises of France in the 1780s made this credit more difficult to obtain. As the Chaurands complained in 1786, "Credit granted by Paris bankers is expensive since money costs 10 percent annually".⁴⁶ Even the port merchants who did not have to borrow money directly from the Parisians found the 1780s difficult. These "independent" merchants still had to rely on Parisian capitalists for basic banking facilities. For example, most commercial paper of any significance originated in Paris; it was the easiest to negotiate. As the Nantes Consulate (chamber of commerce) pointed out in 1798, "Payments for sales and purchases of merchandise are made in paper drawn on Paris, and one rarely sees bills circulating which are payable on Nantes".⁴⁷ Thus, any financial problems in the capital would have serious repercussions in the ports.

In this manner, the domestic-agrarian and colonial-commercial economies were linked, and the problems of the former spilled over to the latter. A series of bad harvests reduced tax revenues and completed the ruin of the government's finances, already in great difficulty because of the American Revolution. Wealthy financiers who handled the government's finances and whose short-term loans enabled the government to function fell victim to the crisis and many went bankrupt. Their clients in the ports were also affected: at best they experienced serious difficulties in getting credit or in remaining solvent; at worst, they too went under. One of the most prominent examples of this occurred in 1787 when the Treasurer General of the Marine, Claude Baudard de Sainte-James, failed, leaving debts of nearly 20m livres.⁴⁸ Shock waves were felt in the ports.

French colonial commerce was thus in a rather ambiguous state in the 1780s. On the one hand, it was growing in terms of volume and especially in terms of value. By 1790, it reached levels which had seemed inconceivable a generation earlier. On the other hand, it provided its investors with a great deal of frustra-

⁴⁵ Archives Départementales de la Loire-Atlantique, 1JJ5, 9-6-1788.

⁴⁶ Archives Départementales de la Loire-Atlantique, 1JJ3, 13-4-1786.

⁴⁷ Archives Départementales de la Loire-Atlantique, C608, 14-11-1789.

⁴⁸ DENISE OZANAM, *Claude Baudard de Sainte-James* (Geneva, 1969), pp. 167-9.

tion. Although profit margins for merchants remained as high as they had been before, there was a fairly lengthy delay before paper profits became real profits. This delay occurred at a singularly inopportune time, for it coincided with major problems in the French domestic economy. Participants in colonial commerce had to operate in a period of tight money just when they needed a maximum of flexibility. In spite of its very real and close ties to international markets, the French colonial economy was not completely isolated from the mainstream of the national economy, and a crisis in the latter inevitably influenced the former. Merchants and planters were therefore justified in their complaints, not because they were no longer making fantastic profits, but because they were in danger of being suffocated by an ailing domestic economy.

