

ABSTRACT

Guadeloupe and Martinique in the latter half of the 19th century were in the process of rapid economic, political and social change. Their three principal groupings were the whites, the coloureds and the blacks who comprised the majority of the population. During this period the white plantocracy in Guadeloupe was fast losing the economic dominance which it possessed during slavery and by 1902 it had been superseded economically by metropolitan and Martiniquan companies. However, in Martinique, although many individual planters became pauperised, the local white group managed to retain its economic pre-eminence. In both colonies the native black and immigrant populations were the victims of an undisguised economic exploitation and only the installation of the Republican government in France spared them from the rigours of the "new form of slavery" which had been instituted by the local whites under the Second Empire.

* The French colonial policy of assimilation was responsible for marked changes in French colonial life. By the end of the 19th century an educated coloured elite were the new political rulers and they had also wrested important sinecures in colonial administration from the whites. In Martinique, this coloured elite was still in firm control of politics by 1902. In Guadeloupe, however, the less powerful coloured group was being seriously challenged by the socialists, led by a small number of privileged blacks, and the colony was heading for an uneasy alliance between the white factory

owners and the black socialists. Although some blacks had secured petty administrative and political posts and sinecures and many Grande-Terre blacks were active supporters of the Guadeloupean Socialist Group, the larger percentage of blacks still remained excluded from these elitist political squabbles. Only in their cultural collectivity could the blacks find any real solace from their continued dispossession.

French colonial society was an extremely complex one. Republicanism had seriously upset the white social order when it acknowledged among other things, that male universal suffrage was the right of both Frenchmen and colonials, regardless of their colour. Although the social values of the whites persisted, their racist ideology was seriously undermined by these new political rights which the system of assimilation had conferred on the coloureds in particular. The result was the emergence of some form of political compromise in both colonies between the whites and the coloureds (as in Martinique) or the whites and the blacks (as in Guadeloupe).

Throughout all this social, political and economic upheaval, France remained the dominant factor which shaped colonial society. Dependence on France grew as each social group used the metropolis as a shield against the aspirations of the other. And France, under assimilation, collaborated fully by accepting its role as mediator, protector and final arbiter. The result was that these two French colonial societies developed according to their unique pattern which nevertheless contained astonishing peculiarities.
