

# ICWA LETTERS

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## Gwadeloup, Depatman<sup>1</sup> Fwansé Amewik

PARIS, France

Sept, 2000

By Jean Benoît Nadeau

Last June, on our way to the Institute's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary in New Jersey, my wife Julie and I made a Caribbean detour to Guadeloupe, a set of nine islands 6,750 kilometers away from Paris — but still in France.

I hate sitting on a beach, so I had other reasons for going to the Tropics. Guadeloupe, like most of overseas France, highlights many of the peculiarities, qualities and flaws of France's centralized system — a topic that will be the object of this newsletter and the next two. Guadeloupe is not alone: ten other former colonies are regarded as genuine, albeit remote, parts of France — much like Hawaii and Alaska are parts of the United States. Together they harbor five percent of the French population and 20 percent of the territory.

Overseas France has played a significant role in the French worldview. Its non-European neighbors — Australia, Brazil, Venezuela, Canada — give the French plenty of opportunities to mind their business where no one expects them. New Caledonia, next to Australia, is the world's fourth biggest producer of nickel. French Guiana, which shares borders with Brazil, has been the home of France's profitable commercial space program.<sup>2</sup> French Polynesia's 3,521 islands give the French control over a swath of Pacific Ocean four times the size of Alaska — for more privacy during nuclear testing (see table, page 2).

Long known as the Sugar Islands, Guadeloupe and Martinique are the oldest ancient parts of overseas France. Things have changed, and the Sugar islands have become the Banana Islands, although a more appropriate name should be Subsidy Islands — for all the billions the French are pouring to compensate the lack of local development and the noncompetitive planter economy. Yet Guadeloupe and Martinique remain dear to the French, as they've always been. At the end of the Seven-Year War, in 1763, the victorious British gave the defeated French a choice: keep the Caribbean *or* Canada. The French kept sugar cane and hurricane, instead of maple sugar and acres of snow. That is just one more reason why a French-Canadian Fellow studying France couldn't help but go to Guadeloupe and see for himself.

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Guadeloupe floats in the Caribbean among a 600-kilometer-long string of islands between the Venezuelan coast and Puerto Rico. Most of the 430,000 Guadelupians live on the two main islands of *Basse-Terre* (Leeward Land) and

<sup>1</sup> Guadeloupe, *Département français d'Amérique* (French Département of America) – In French Creole.

<sup>2</sup> The reason for installing a launching pad in French Guiana is the proximity of the Equator. This increases the slingshot effect and permits the sendoff of much bigger loads than at Cape Kennedy, Florida, which is farther north.

# FRENCH DEPARTMENTS

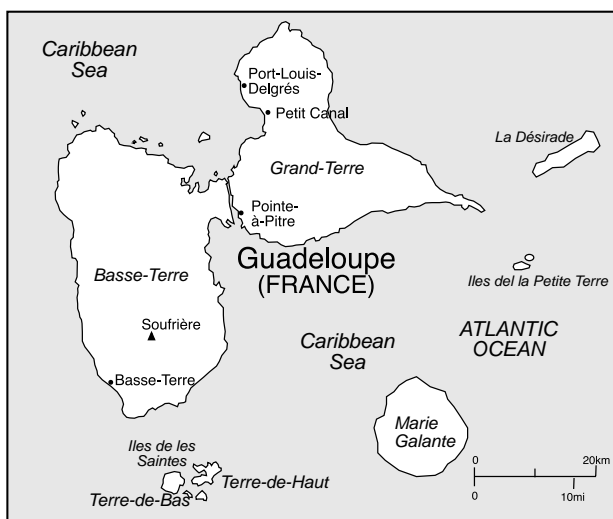
NAME	LOCATION	NEIGHBORS	(sq. km)	POPULATION	STATUS
French Guiana	South America	Brazil Surinam	83,534	185,000	Département
French Polynesia	Pacific Ocean	Samoa Easter Is.	4167 + 5,500,000 sea	219,000	Territoire
Guadeloupe	Caribbean	Puerto Rico Venezuela	1,705	428,000	Département
Martinique	Caribbean	Puerto Rico Venezuela	1,080	415,000	Département
Mayotte	Indian Ocean	Madagascar	374	131,000	Collectivité territoriale
New Caledonia	Pacific Ocean	Fiji islands Australia	18,575	197,000	Territoire
Reunion	Indian Ocean	Madagascar Mauritius	2,512	685,000	Département
Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon	Atlantic Ocean	Canada	242	6,700	Collectivité territoriale

Grande-Terre (Big Land). The name of Guadeloupe often comes in association with that of Martinique, but the two are distinct *Départements* (the basic French administrative unit). One hundred kilometers of sea separate them and this is fortunate, because Guadelupians hate *Martiniquais* — who dominated Caribbean trade in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, forced a return to slavery and constantly maneuvered against Guadeloupe for favors and advantages from Paris. Nature has been kind enough to put another island in between — Dominica, an ex-British colony not to be confused with the Dominican Republic. Compared to Martinique, Guadeloupe has never had a well-defined personality. It is in fact a land of ambiguity, whose people are both attached to France and eternally dissatisfied with it.

By many standards, Guadeloupe is a little tropical

paradise where one's main risks — outside of hurricane season — are either being knocked out by a falling coconut or mango, or being hit by a driver who's had a few too many *ti-punchs* (wee-punches) made of local planter rum. Combining the best of two worlds, the French have made the place a lush, tropical version of France with roundabouts, well-paved roads, communal schools, lycées, yellow post offices and blue telephone booths. People drive brand-new cars, jog or cycle on the highway, work or wait for nothing to happen and complain about the weather.

Although a legitimate part of France, Guadeloupe has an unmistakable New-World feel, because it has no history to speak of, and not much to see and do, except driving around and doing the great outdoors. Hurricanes frequently damage or destroy the few buildings with his-



torical significance, which is why most churches are made of concrete. The oldest thing around is the very strong Fort Louis-Delgrès in Basse-Terre.

This leaves only people to speak to and nature to look at. The terrain changes every seven kilometers or so, from sugar-cane fields to banana-growing slopes, and from rich farmland to sterile volcanic slopes and chaotic valleys. The archipelago is densely populated, but large portions of land remain empty. The volcano of La Soufrière (1,467 meters) stands high above the mountains and deep valleys that makeup the inhospitable and magnificent interior of Basse-Terre. The mangrove (a dense mass of shrub and trees growing in seawater marshes), one of the biggest of the entire Caribbean, covers nearly 50 kilometers of shoreline.

The human landscape is no less monotonous. Over 80 percent of the population descend from slaves brought from Africa. Guadelupians have created a number of social categories based on skin color. Pure blacks are known as *Kongos*. Mixed with white, blacks become *Chabins* (mulatto). Another group, the *Z'indiens*, are descendants of the 25,000 replacement workers from India who came after the abolition of slavery in 1848. Any white or black with some Indian features becomes *Z'indien*. Whites makeup about five percent (20,000) of the population. Slightly less than half (8,000) come from the *Métropole*: they are labeled *Blancs*, *Blancs-Métro* or *Z'oreilles* (Ears) because they understand nothing of French Creole. The 12,000 native Whites are called *Békés* (an Ibo term for white) or *Blancs-pays*. Not all *Békés* are descendants of slave owners, but they are regarded as such because a

great proportion of them still hold the economic levers. None of these groups is more — or less — legitimate in calling themselves Guadelupians: they all arrived at about the same time.

Not all is perfect under the sun. Unemployment is at 28 percent and some sections of the main city, Pointe-à-Pitre, are shantytowns easily the equal of those around Managua and Mexico City — to name the few I know. Granted, the black-market economy is thriving and most people live in cabins for which they pay no rent because nobody knows who owns the land. That sharply reduces the cost of living. But new international trade rules and increased competition have severely undermined the plantation economy, now under conversion. Strikes — two a day — are generally violent, because the legacy of slavery has never been overcome.

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The day after our arrival, Guadeloupe celebrated the 152<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the abolition of slavery. Our plan was to go out and party with the locals, but our host discreetly kept us home. Most celebrations were peaceful, but the ambiance was tense in the center of Pointe-à-Pitre, where protesters forced merchants to close shop. At the penitentiary, prisoners celebrated the day with a riot. At night, a *Z'oreilles* teacher was captured and tied naked to the statue of an Abolition-war hero.

Because I was suffering from a sprained ankle, I would have missed the most interesting event of the day anyway: a 25-kilometer commemorative march from Pointe-à-Pitre to Petit-Canal, the old entry port of the slave trade. Our friend took us there a couple of days later.



*In 1493, Christopher Columbus mistook the three falls known as Le Carbet for one single 240-meter-high fall. In spite of a population of over 200 inhabitants per sq. km, the islands that make up Guadeloupe remain unpopulated on a large part of their 2000-sq.km territory.*

Petit-Canal must be the saddest place in Guadeloupe. It's a sleepy town of 6,500 next to the mangrove, but in fact cut off from it by an escarpment. The thing to see in Petit-Canal is *les Marches aux esclaves* (The Slaves' Stairs), that climb the escarpment toward a church. From this vantage point, I observed at leisure the dullness of the mangrove, garbage burning in a nearby dump, a few tied-up cows grazing around their tethers' perimeters and a row of palm trees stretching from a jetty that used to be the landing spot for slave ships. The slaves were unloaded, washed and taken up the monumental stairs leading to the church to be baptized before being auctioned off.

The Stairs are meant as a form of private memorial — or of pri-



*The Slaves' Stairs in Petit-Canal was the old entry port of slave ships. Over 80 percent of the population is descended from black slaves, and this legacy remains.*

vate mortification, judging from the temper of the locals. No travel book, no information bureau, not even a road sign guides visitors to Petit-Canal, and we would have missed it entirely without our friend. The only written documentation, carved into the stairs, are the names of the African tribal regions where the slaves had been seized. Nothing else. The handful of locals that sit around have nothing to say — which is unusual, since most Guadelupians are rather friendly.

Petit-Canal is a striking metaphor for Guadeloupe, because slavery has been the cornerstone of its history and remains its perpetual stumbling block. How else could it be? An entire people cannot reinvent itself overnight — if at all. The French colonists brought the first slaves to the island in 1635, chained them for two centuries, and the slaves called the place home when they were set free.

There must always be a first, and the first Abolition, decreed by the Parliament in 1794, was not well received by the planter class. With the support of the British, the planters of Martinique maintained the slave system despite the Parliament. The British tried this in Guadeloupe too, but the locals kicked them out and began running the guillotine, reducing a sizable part of the planter class by the length of a head. In 1802, Napoléon reestablished slavery — partly under the influence of his wife, Joséphine, a *Béké* from Martinique — and sent troops to reestablish order. The Abolitionists fought, and the top-ranking Black officer, Louis Delgrès, seeing that everything was lost, blew himself up with his last 300 men in the fortress of Matouba.

Until recently, that period's heroic episodes had no

place in textbooks or memorials. This is strange, because the struggle embodied so much of the Republican ideals of *liberté, égalité* and *fraternité*. But the *République* doesn't value local heroes — partly out of an attempt to create a uniform French identity. All French kids are taught about their ancestors the Gauls, and Guadelupian kids are French too. It was only two years ago that the locals raised a statue to Ignace, an officer who died in the last pitched battle against Napoleon's army. As to Delgrès, a mere plaque honors his memory in Matouba, but this is only fair in my opinion since Matouba is not the Alamo. Why blow himself up with 300 men when he thought everything was lost? He could have fought it out.

Slavery has been abolished for good a century and a half, but the suffering, the racism, the hopelessness and the imbecilic self-destructive impulses have left more than traces. "We want to create the Guadelupian Man. Our policy is anti-colonialism," says Guy Clavier, the General Secretary of the UGTG — *Union Générale des Travailleurs Guadeloupéens* (General Union of Guadelupian workers), a Marxist-Leninist union with a predilection for roadblocks. "The class struggle in Guadeloupe is against a framework of colonial domination."

\* \* \*

Guadelupians have friendly smiles but the quiet ambience of the island is deceptive. Guadeloupe is a social volcano. One statistic tells of the malaise. In 1998, 14 strikes erupted in Martinique. But in Guadeloupe, for the same year, 721 — two a day!

The big strike, when we were there, was at the main seaport. For 15 days, no goods were shipped in or out — a big problem for an island that has never been self-sufficient in anything, not even fish. "The issue was the respect of labor standards," says Clavier. "When we went on strike, the bosses said, 'OK, we'll negotiate.' I said, 'There's nothing to negotiate, we already have a signed agreement. We want the agreement and the laws to be applied. No more, no less.'" It didn't stop him for asking for more, though.

Many people complain that the UGTG would like to be the law itself. The union began in 1971 as a gathering of students and plantation workers. Now 60 percent of unionized labor is with the UGTG — 70 percent in the health services, 80 percent in the local administration and 90 percent in hotels and gas distribution. "Our goal is to



Guy Clavier, head of the Marxist-Leninist union UGTG, represents 60 percent of all unionized labor on the islands. He wants many things: higher wages and better working conditions, but also power. His nationalist program could be summarized in one word: anti-colonialism.

win power, not only money," says Clavier. What power? Well, the UGTG is now managing some hotels...

Guadeloupe has a long tradition of violent conflict, with little dialogue. The UGTG stakes a claim, blocks the road and refuses to talk until the owners say yes to everything — unless the riot squad breaks the roadblock. In September 1999, two UGTG militants were condemned for violence against policemen. In the riot that ensued, one policeman was severely injured by a flying conch — not the kind of shell you find casually on the sidewalks of Pointe-à-Pitre.

To the union's credit, the local business class is hardly a model of enlightenment — "archaic" and "paternalistic" are the most frequently heard adjectives. In many ways, the master-slave relation has persisted. Until recently employees were fired if they tried to bring in the union. Guy Clavier credits the top-ranking civil servant, Préfet Jean-François Carencu, with forcing employers to sit and talk, rather than sending in the riot squads as did his predecessors. Shortly after his arrival in July 1999 the new Préfet, being a man of the Left, declared to the Paris daily *Libération*: "The State has a share of responsibility in the disorder because it didn't enforce the respect of law. We have to make employers understand that a workers' agreement and a union representative are mandatory [under French labor law]. But the right to travel and to work is for everyone." Guy Clavier credits himself for making the Préfet realize that half of the strikes would be avoided if employers just respected regulations.

Institute of Current World Affairs

"Carencu understands better than his predecessors that he holds the gas and the lighter."

In the ten days we were there, I tried to understand why Guadelupians are so much more violently and stubbornly *revendicateurs* (simultaneously claiming and protesting) than *Martiniquais*. The answer is complex.

For one, the UGTG's hardball tactics have set the standard because the union completely dominates all of Guadeloupe's labor relations whereas none of Martinique's four main unions represents more than a quarter of the workers. Another reason: an unknown proportion of Guadeloupe's owning class is from Martinique, and the Guadelupians dislike these neighbors. More importantly, Guadeloupe is far more "working class" than Martinique, where a strong black middle class has been on the rise for a century — and a middle class is always a factor of stability. This was an unexpected result of the eruption of Martinique's mount Pelée in 1902. In less than two minutes, the volcano destroyed the town of St-Pierre and killed 30,000 people — reducing the 12,000-strong Béké class to a mere 2,000. They remain 2,500 now, one-fifth of that in Guadeloupe. The local Blacks filled the gap, but this replacement process never happened in Guadeloupe.

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Like a few other people interviewed, Guy Clavier complained bitterly that Guadeloupe never had any significant intellectual production. That, too, is a result of not developing a strong black middle class. In Martinique, two intellectual stars shine particularly brightly: Aimé Césaire, the poet-mayor of Fort-de-France, and Frantz Fanon (1925-1961), the psychiatrist and political theorist. Their writings on *négritude* (the state of being black), revolt and colonialism became world-famous and partly inspired the decolonization movements in Africa — as well as Guy Clavier's anti-colonial doctrine, which sounds like a rehash of Fanon's book *The Wretched of the Earth*.

Different places, different customs. Guadeloupe has produced a disproportionate number of Olympic champion, so it was only normal that Guadelupians celebrated the Abolition of slavery with athletic competitions rather than readings of Césaire, Fanon *et al.* The biggest event was an inter-company relay race in Pointe-à-Pitre. The firemen's team won, followed by the *Gendarmerie* and the national electric utility. These are not companies, properly speaking, but Guadeloupe doesn't have enough local private businesses with enough employees to make up a team for a relay race.

Better economic conditions would probably soothe the legacy of slavery and the general feeling of alienation, but transforming a plantation economy into something else remains the unmet challenge. Being a part of France has been very beneficial in terms of stan-

dard-of-living and infrastructure, which are impeccable. But the local prosperity and affluence is totally artificial.

"Subsidies, grants, social transfers and civil-servant salaries make up 80 percent of our economy," says Éric Édinval, a professor of economics at the University of Pointe-à-Pitre. All civil servants, native or metropolitan, receive a 40-percent indemnity in addition to their salary to compensate for the high cost of living. Most of the money is consumed in the form of imported goods and returns to the *Métropole*. "Our production has remained agrarian and the local economy has been just too small to provide a big enough base for the development of manufactured goods."

Trade with neighbors is the obvious way to increase the economic base for development, but the French administration hasn't encouraged this. Moreover, Guadelupians who have been trying find that neighbors cannot afford what little Guadelupians produce. Quite the opposite, some of the manioc, yams and meat found in Guadeloupe come from neighboring non French islands, which produce at lower cost. That's the downside of being better-off than the neighbors.

"The Convention of Lomé doesn't help either," says Édinval. This trade deal between Europe and former colonies allows custom-free imports from African and Caribbean countries to comprise up to five percent of the total European market. This Convention alienated Guadeloupe and Martinique even more from their neighbors. Indeed, neither is regarded as a former colony: they are a part of France. So Dominica, for instance, sells custom-free coconuts to Guadeloupe, but slams an entry tax on each Guadelupian coconut landing on its shores. "For Dominica, Europe is 30 kilometers away," says Édinval. "They can see it on a clear day!"

Guadeloupe's main exports are sugar, rum and bananas, although sugar is definitely waning — only rum holds its ground. Bananas are the biggest industry of



*According to economist Eric Edinval, a complicated maze of treaties, Guadeloupe's artificially high standard of living and its plantation economy stand in the way of better trade with neighboring islands.*

Guadeloupe. Forty thousand Guadelupians — a quarter of the workforce — depend on bananas for their livelihood, but this staple of all breakfasts has been the object of vicious trade battles pitting France and Europe against everyone else. Now receiving financial transfusions from Paris and Brussels, Guadeloupe's banana producers must rally, or die. "If our banana industry doesn't reorganize, the entire region will be destabilized," says Sylvestre Mardivirin, owner of a small plantation and former head of a planters association. "It's our only export."

In the coming years, the French government will provide billions of francs to the islands in additional development aid, but this will predictably do no more than the previous billions. At least until the locals get the right idea.

Édinval, who is a member of the university's



*This mongoose is a reminder that the fragile ecology of islands creates an obvious limit to what can be done. Successfully introduced to Martinique to get rid of snakes, mongooses were then brought to Guadeloupe to fight rats. But rats are nocturnal, whereas mongooses are diurnal — so they never met. Instead, the mongooses fed on birds and the splendid parrots of Guadeloupe disappeared.*





Bananas grow in “hands” on a “bunch” that can weigh up to 90 kilograms. Each bunch is ended with a flower, known as la popote, that is apparently a German delicacy. Germans are the biggest banana eaters of Europe.

*laboratoire d'économie appliquée* (applied economics lab), is looking for the right idea. “I was discussing the issue with Trinidad’s head of economic development, and I was asking why it’s only the Jamaicans who sell reggae!” he says. “We could pool the production of many staples with other islands and produce transformed goods. We have to develop value-added concepts, and look at everything we have.” One such product is excellent rum. Guadelupians still haven’t managed to find a distinctive niche or a quality label that would fetch a higher price or more volume for this liquid sugar. For that matter, they still haven’t persuaded even the metropolitan French to adopt rum as a drink of choice outside of tropical vacation time. There is much work ahead.

Yet, Guadeloupe has some strengths. It boasts the biggest and most modern port and airport of the entire Caribbean. The population is also much better educated than that of most neighbors — although two-thirds of school kids leave high school without a degree. Tourism is on the rise but, as a consumption industry, tourism will feed no local base until other ventures retain the cash spent. Under study at present, the rebuilding of the old sugarcane railway between the Grande-Terre plantations could be one such venture. Three neglected natural features of the place also bring some hope — the virtually untouched rainforest, the scenic interior and the mysterious man-

grove — but ecologic tourism has limits.

The ocean is the fourth neglected feature. Guadeloupe is an archipelago of nine islands, but the people have hardly anything to do with the sea. One local expression is telling: Guadelupians refer to the two main islands as *le Continent* — as opposed to the seven other islands that make up the archipelago. The “Continental” couldn’t care less about the sea, except for the few fish it provides. In fact, Guadeloupe imports fish. Until recently it didn’t even house a school of navigation. Guadelupian star athletes are runners and football players, not skippers or divers. This quasi sea-phobia is certainly a result of the slave trade: people were purposefully turned away from the sea — since it meant freedom. Alienation, always.

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As we drove around “the Continent,” burning up some good Venezuelan petrol, we noticed a number of conveyor belts set high over the road with hooks carrying bunches of green bananas — on their way to the global market place.

So much of Guadeloupe’s fate relies on the produce of this four-meter-high, celery-like plant. A century ago, banana plants were regarded as mere weed that coffee pickers used to cover themselves against the rain. Nowadays, 450 plantations produce about 100,000 tons per year and thousands of workers in plantations, offices and processing plants earn their living picking, selling and transforming hands and hands of the oblong fruit.

The banana plantation we visited, *La Plantation Grand Café Bélier*, bears the name of the crop that formerly provided the glory of Guadeloupe: coffee. This great cash crop fetches a high price, but coffee has two big flaws: each tree produces no more than two kilos of coffee per crop and takes three years of growing before becoming productive. When a hurricane completely wiped out the coffee crop in 1928, most planters, facing ruin, forgot coffee and turned to bananas because a new generation of refrigerated banana boats could carry the fragile fruit to Europe before it rotted.

One interesting feature of banana culture is that it’s banana season 365 days a year. It takes only nine months for the sprout to yield a banana bunch of 40 to 100 kilos. One tree yields only one crop. Fortunately, by the time of the harvest, the next sprout, stemming from the roots of the old, is already two-meters-high and ready to grow a banana bunch. When the fruit is collected, the mother plant is chopped and the sprout is now head of the family. Over two years, the field will have given seven crops of bananas.

Bananas have been great for Guadeloupe, but most tropical countries have found bananas great too. For a long time, Guadeloupe and Martinique enjoyed a quasi-monopoly in supplying France and some of Europe, in-

cluding the Germans, who are crazy about bananas but who had no former colonies. As a result of the negotiations of the Customs Union of 1957, the Germans contracted to buy cheaper bananas from US companies — dubbed *les bananes-dollars*. In 1962, President Charles de Gaulle decided that France should restrict two-thirds of its national market to French bananas. The overall result is that two European producers, France and Spain, controlled about 20 percent of the European market. The Convention of Lomé, which gave former colonies custom-free access to European markets, made the first serious dent in the French bananas' protected market in the 1980s and early 1990s. But the producers of Guadeloupe and Martinique were defenseless when the Chiquitas, Doles and DelMontes of this world found ways to crack open the European market.

"All our problems come from the fact that our fixed costs are too high. Our workers have to be paid French minimum wages and we have to comply with French labor rules," says Sylvestre Mardivirin, a small producer and former head of the planters' association who defended every protectionist measure tooth and nail. "Multinationals and foreign producers pay workers 20 times less than we do. They make children work. They have no legislation against women workers. They spray pesticide when people are still in the field. They have no union to deal with." Another reason is size. The biggest plantation in Guadeloupe, 300 hectares, would be the smallest in Ecuador. And size means economies of scale. The result is that French bananas reach Le Havre at a cost of over six dollars per kilo, whereas the so-called *bananes-dollar* come in at three dollars — and sell for about four dollars per kilo.

The European union instituted various compensation mechanisms to protect its own producers, but multinationals and foreign governments successfully debased the system through various rulings, especially after the creation of the World Trade Organization in 1994. The European market is now oversupplied with bananas and European producers lost their monopoly on the selling of import licenses, one big source of income.

As a result, the number of producers in Guadeloupe has melted from 700 to 450 in seven years. There are positive aspects to this: planters are buying up competitors, getting bigger and becoming more cost-effective. But this requires investing, and they already owe 120,000 FF (U.S.\$17,000) per hectare on average. "So the multinationals are moving in. They have already bought the ripening depots in Spain and France, and they have begun buying plantations here," says Mardivirin.

"I don't blame Americans for wanting 100 percent of our market when they already held 80 percent. That's business," says Mardivirin. "But I do blame Europe and France for not speaking for us. During the last WTO panel on banana the U.S. Department of Trade and the compa-



*Banana planter Sylvestre Mardivirin doesn't blame American multinationals for wanting 100 percent of the European market when they had 80 percent already, but he blames France and Europe for making the banana-exporting case of Guadeloupe and Martinique poorly.*

nies came forward with 50 private lawyers while the European Commission had only three civil servants from the Agriculture Department. We lost, naturally. The Agriculture Department was in favor of appealing the ruling, but the Ministers' Council refused. We've been in limbo since then. In order to have a common policy, Paris and Berlin must agree, but the Germans, who care mostly about price, show no initiative and the French Foreign Affairs show no hurry."

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Listening to Mardivirin speak, I had a gut reaction very typical of a North American.

"Instead of sitting on their hands, why don't you planters make your own representation and initiate talks with the Germans, maybe with the help of the regional council?"

"Only the French government could do this."

He repeated this a few times, changing the tone, but didn't say much more because there was not much more to say. In the French system, foreign trade is the prerogative of the State, and there's only one State. A regional assembly has no legitimacy to do this, not even the right, contrary to the situation with American States or Canadian Provinces.

Without exaggerating the impact of politics over life and business in general, the way power is shared — or not shared — in the French system explains many of the





*During a mangrove tour, our guide sits on a specially designed paddleboat in front of a colony of frigate birds. The Guadelupians are just beginning to realize the potential for eco-tourism their islands represent.*

problems in Guadeloupe. The differences with North America never cease to amaze me. True, the French system accommodates the French temperament. Yet there is no doubt that the economic and social alienation described earlier could be reduced if the system allowed unleashing more local initiative. But first things first.

Article one of the French Constitution states that France is *une République indivisible* (one indivisible Republic<sup>3</sup>), and that all citizens must be equal before the law. An entire book could be written on the meaning of this phrase. The French understanding of equality is that the law itself must be the same all over the country and cannot vary from one region to another. As a consequence, the French distrust self-rule and recognize absolutely no degree of sovereignty for any regional assembly. The monopoly on law-making belongs to the French Parliament. The only exceptions are found overseas, but Guadeloupe is not an exception.

Between themselves, the French refer to the overseas as *les Dom-Tom*. But a Tom isn't a Dom, and a Dom isn't a Tom.

DOM stands for *Départements d'Outremer* (Guadeloupe, Martinique, French Guiana and Reunion). They are former colonies that became part of the Republic in 1946 when the French government gave the status of Département to the islands, and French citizenship to the former colonials. The great benefit is that social programs and public services are identical to those of the *Métropole* — in theory. The downside of being a DOM is that there

is no such thing as self-rule, or the least level of political autonomy.

A TOM is a *Territoire d'Outremer* (Overseas Territory) — like Polynesia, New Caledonia and Wallis-et-Futuna (see list below). These former colonies were integrated into the Republic in 1957, but they have retained the right to secede — contrary to *Départements*. Their status is also more federative. They send deputies and senators to Paris, but make some laws on their own, decide their own budgets, and manage themselves. The downside of being a TOM: social benefits and programs cannot be those of the *Métropole*.<sup>4</sup>

The key figure in a *Département* is *le Préfet*, the official representative of the Republic. We have no such conception in North America. Akin to a non-elected governor, *le Préfet* runs all police matters and is responsible for the local management of each ministry. Regarding treaties, the *Préfet* oversees their application, but has no more power to negotiate than local politicians. This structure is the same overseas as in metropolitan France; there are 100 *Préfets* serving 100 *Départements*, including Paris.

As a rule, the *Préfet* is never a native of his appointed *Département*. This is how far it can get from home: Félix Éboué, the first black governor of Guadeloupe in 1936, was a native of French Guiana! Because the *Préfet* has no local ties and is appointed for only three years, he's the natural arbitrator, and people turn to him for functions that are not even part of his work description — like the arbitration of strikes, or solving quarrels between may-

<sup>3</sup> The word "une" must not be understood as merely the translation of the indefinite article "a", but as "one".

<sup>4</sup> One category called *collectivité territoriale* (territorial community) refers to *Départements* with special powers. They are St-Pierre-et-Miquelon, in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and Mayotte, one of the Comoros Islands in the Indian Ocean. As to the Southern Islands and Antarctica, they rank among territories for legal reasons, but the Penguins who inhabit them have no special rights.



Although separatism is clearly marginal, the French government is toying with the idea of a special status for overseas Départements.

Violent separatism was sidetracked 15 years ago, but threats remain. This graffito, close to the university, warns Guadeloupe's Préfet Jean-François Carencu that he could meet a fate like that of Claude Érignac, the Préfet of Corsica who was shot dead in 1998 by Corsican nationalists. The sentence in Creole says, "France can't rule over Guadeloupe."

ors. The inconvenience is that an outsider is often unaware of local realities involved in things as elementary as hurricanes, or dealing with Marxist-Leninist, conch-wielding, road-blocking separatists.

This conception of government is alien to the political reflexes of North Americans, where the federal system is the norm, where each Province or State is sovereign, makes its laws, manages its own affairs, and where administration is the business of locals. In comparison, France is extremely centralizing and homogenizing — the French term for this is *Jacobinisme* — and this accounts for radically different cultural and social reflexes. If Canada had remained a part of France, it would have had no power to make laws whatsoever and there would have been no Parliament in Quebec City or Toronto. The French parliament would wire decrees and send Préfets to overlook their application. It's not by chance that Guadeloupe celebrates the Abolition of slavery a week after Martinique: the ship carrying the news arrived in Guadeloupe a week later!

It would be a mistake to label the status of Guadeloupe as colonial in spirit, because the overseas Départements are treated just like any other Département of France. In fact, they are almost certainly treated *too much* like France.

\* \* \*

Although generous in concept, the assimilation of

former colonies into the Republic didn't overcome one major obstacle: double standards.

Oblivious to its own stated principles of a Republic one-and-indivisible, the French administration showed no hurry to give former colonials the metropolitan standards in administration and programs that they had bargained for. After becoming a Département, Guadeloupe had to wait for 12 years before colonial institutions began to be replaced. Social services and benefits were only gradually matched to those of the *Métropole*. Minimum wages overseas, for instance, didn't match those of the *Métropole* before 1996. As to the *Territoires*, the Constitution grants them a different status, but it took a very severe rebellion in New Caledonia in the 1980s to bring the French administration to recognize they were not colonies anymore.

This lack of enthusiasm explains the mixed sense of identity of Guadelupians, who mean the *Métropole* when they say "France" — thus excluding themselves from it. It's one thing to convince the Bretons, the Corsicans, the Savoyards, the Alsations, that they are all French first and foremost. But a baguette-wielding, beret-clad descendent of slaves from Petit-Canal remains a descendent of black slaves first and foremost, even in Paris.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the assimilation never entered mentalities on either sides of the Atlantic Ocean. In the 20 months I've been in France (metropolitan France), I have yet to see a map of France that includes the overseas Départements. The calendar of *la Poste* lists

<sup>5</sup> When he studied in Paris in the 1930s, Aimé Césaire had a clear vision of this. In his famous work, *Cahiers d'un retour au pays natal* (Notes for a return home), he described himself as "*le Nègre fondamental, inassimilable* (inherently Black, impossible to assimilate)." This didn't stop him a few years later, as Parliamentarian, to vote for the assimilation of Martinique into the Republic by making it a Département. His purpose was to raise the standard of living, and it did rise.

100 Départements and 26 Regions, when they are in fact 100 and 26. Any French dictionary will tell you that the surface of France is 550,000 square kilometers, omitting the surface of the overseas (95,000 sq. km., or twice the size of the Netherlands together).<sup>6</sup>

This overall ambiguity explains why Guadelupians, like all natives of overseas France, claim assimilation when they want something, but affirm their specificity when they don't want something else. And they are right on both counts.

Nationalist movements in Guadeloupe have been active since the 1960s, although the radicals have been nearly silenced.<sup>7</sup> Only ten percent of the population supports independence and about 20 percent want autonomy. A legal party like UPLG (*Union pour la libération de Guadeloupe*) attracts no more than two percent of the vote at elections. The chief reason is that Guy Clavier's UGTG has captured most nationalist energy. Its openly anti-colonial discourse is vague enough to receive a lot of adhesion, but not precise enough to go anywhere. Besides, the UGTG is not a political party but a union. What is the legitimate way for a union to have a political action? It's just one more ambiguity leading nowhere.

The French government is trying to deal with demands for more local powers. The first such attempt was the creation of regional assemblies in 1982. But what they did overseas was plain stupid: they created *la Région monodépartementale* (a one-Département Region). In France, Regions are a grouping of four or five Départements. But overseas, the legislators hit a snag: there weren't enough Départements, and they were too far apart. And remember that the Republic must be one-and-indivisible, and therefore uniform. Hence the one-Département Region. But this divided what it was meant to unite, because a new layer of politicians came in to compete for the same piece of pie.

Interestingly enough, the French government didn't fall into the trap for its own administration: the *Préfet* in each overseas *Département* is also the *Préfet* for the Region!

Nowadays, calls for a more mature status are leaving the fringes of nationalist circles and creeping into the mainstream. Last year, the presidents of the three regional councils of Guadeloupe, Martinique and French Guiana made a joint declaration demanding more autonomy. It so happened that the State Secretary to the Overseas was working on legislation that would have entrusted more responsibilities to the locals — even the possibility to negotiated trade deals with neighbors on their own. The

centerpiece was to merge the departmental and regional assemblies into a single congress. Unfortunately, in May 2000, the notion of a congress was rejected by the *Conseil d'État* (State Council) on grounds that this would be unconstitutional.

Queyranne's law was doomed to premature obsolescence because in July 2000 the French government declared itself willing to grant Corsica the power to "modify the laws of the Republic" — a serious invasion of the French parliament's monopoly over political representation. Corsica, a Mediterranean island off the coast of Italy annexed in 1768, has been a can of worms for the last 30 years. Not a week goes by without a murder or the bombing of a public building by Nationalists or the Mafia. This devolution of powers to the Corsican assembly is a serious breach in the one-and-indivisible Constitutional Pie because Corsica has always been regarded, somewhat artificially, as a part of metropolitan France, and not as an overseas Département. In all logic, a real devolution of powers to overseas Départements should follow sooner than later. But how do you divide what is one and indivisible? In any event, this is good news for the *Préfet*. It's now his bosses in Paris, and not only him, that holds the lighter and the gas. □

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<sup>6</sup> One friend of mine told me that the reason for this is that the Metro-French got burned once with the three Départements of Algeria, which became independent after eight years of bloody civil war. It's a sort of defense mechanism against the worst.

<sup>7</sup> Luc Reinette, leader of the violent KLNG (Konvoi pou la liberasyon nasyonal Gwadeloup – Convoy for the National Liberation of Guadeloupe), was repeatedly condemned during the 1980s for *atteinte à la sûreté de l'État* (Threat to national security).