

**Paul Cheney, *Cul de Sac: Patrimony, Capitalism, and Slavery in French Saint-Domingue*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017. pp. vii+264. 3 maps. 4 graphs. 7 figs. 2 tabs Pbk. ISBN 9780226679259 Pbk \$32.00)**

In 1791, the French colony of Saint Domingue (now Haiti) was the largest producer of sugar in the Americas, outstripping the combined output of Britain's own sugar colonies. Twenty years later, in the wake of the Haitian Revolution and the rise of the first black republic in the Americas, it exported no sugar at all. Based upon the extensive correspondence between the absentee family in Brittany owning a large plantation in the Cul de Sac region in the colony and their agent there, this study offers an important perspective on social and economic shifts during these two decades. Specifically, Cheney argues that by 1791 the plantation in particular and the colonial society and economy in general was caught in its own cul de sac, 'a dead end of a peculiar manifestation of early modern capitalist accumulation' (p. 6). Intensive exploitation of slave labour lowered costs and raised profits, but required massive indebtedness to cope with the fluctuations in the price of slaves and sugar, the major inputs and outputs of the system. Absentee families such as the de la Ferronnayses provided access to metropolitan capital, but Cheney argues that they also contributed to the social instability of the colony by introducing economic clashes with resident planters, a growing number of whom were free people of colour. Cheney therefore hints at an overlap between economic interests and revolutionary activism in the early stages of the Haitian Revolution which has been more fully explored by Laurent Dubois, Stewart King and Michel-Rolph Trouillot.

In economic terms much of the book is framed in the light of recent literature by Justin Roberts, Trevor Burnard, John Garrigus and others on the proto-industrial or even -capitalistic nature of the eighteenth century plantation economy in the Caribbean, and the role of Enlightenment ideas in the reform of management. Relying on the letters between the de la Ferronnayses and their agents in Saint Domingue, Corbier *père* and *fils*, Cheney argues that the high productivity of the plantation in the Cul de Sac reflected the heavy investment in slaves and regional infrastructure such as aqueducts, and new means of management. This included systematic steps to reduce illness and increase productivity and fertility among slaves, inspired by prevailing Enlightenment ideas, albeit within the broader framework of plantation slavery. The Corbiers therefore showed the same spirit of 'petit Enlightenment' which Trevor Burnard identified in Thomas Thistlewood in Jamaica, their near contemporary, and the case for seeing continuities as well as change is further reinforced by Cheney's argument that the de la Ferronnayses merely extended their social and economic strategies from France to Saint Domingue. Estates were built up (and undermined) by patterns of kinship and patronage rather than the more impartial relations to be expected in a more fully capitalistic society. In that respect Cheney's view of the plantation system mirrors Robert Stein's study of the French slave trade, as one fundamentally shaped by the *ancien regime*.

Cheney also argues that warfare often had an important and destructive effect on economic and social development. Although recent work on 'slavery's capitalism' by Sven Beckert and others has largely seen 'war capitalism' as a positive force,

underwriting the slave system, Cheney also shows how the American Revolutionary War challenged the system, disrupting prices and reducing productivity. Plantations were cushioned by growing reliance on credit offered by metropolitan merchants, leading to growing indebtedness, as well as a process of agricultural diversification – such as the creation of provisions grounds – which also reduced productivity. The study therefore helps to contribute to a more complex and nuanced picture of warfare, the state and the development of colonial or global capitalism in the eighteenth century, which emphasises the potential for warfare to retard as well as promote progress.

‘Seen from the perspective of this book’, Cheney concludes, ‘... French Saint Domingue looks less like proof of capitalism’s power of creative destruction than the long persistence of a crisis-prone social and economic system’ (p. 6). The economic expansion of the mid- to late-eighteenth century was achieved largely by following the logic and increasing the scale of existing approaches, supported by metropolitan capital, which had disruptive social effects that helped to create the conditions for the Haitian Revolution. On the basis of the evidence that Cheney presents, it is hard to disagree with this judicious and nuanced assessment.