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9 The Reorganization of Administrative Space in France and its Colonies

Reorganizing the structures of local government and justice were among the early priorities of the French Revolution: even as the electoral assemblies were established in 1789, the decree that called them into existence spoke of future restructuring to come. Everyone seemed agreed that the somewhat haphazard administrative spaces that had served the Ancien Régime required reform, the unequal and often overlapping jurisdictions of provinces and royal governorships, of *sénéchaussées* and *bailliages*, each in its own way reflecting royal and provincial rights, jurisdictions, and privileges – the very privileges that the revolutionaries were set on abolishing. Besides, their unequal size and powers meant that French men and women, the new citizens whom the revolutionaries set out to create, were treated very differently in different parts of the country. Many had little or no direct access to local government or to the courts. Others faced long and gruelling journeys to faraway towns if they wanted to plead their case before a judge, journeys that they would pay for in lost wages and days' labour on the farm. In a society committed to ideals of liberty and equality, the maintenance of the existing structures seemed untenable, so that, for ideological reasons if for no other, reorganizing local government and justice was one of their priorities from the start. It was a concern raised in the *cahiers de doléances* (registers of grievances), and it had been aired in the *Encyclopédie*.[1]

But, of course, these citizens were not just units of governance to be moved around like pieces on a chessboard: the revolutionaries had not yet come to think of the French people, as Napoleon Bonaparte would subsequently do, as people whose principal function was to be administered by the state. They were often long-established in their local communities and were accustomed to the administrative ways of the old order. They travelled on fixed days to markets in nearby towns, they paid dues to their *seigneur* (lord) and taxes to the king, and a majority

1 M.-V. Ozouf-Marignier, *La formation des départements: La représentation du territoire français à la fin du 18^{e} siècle*, Paris: Éditions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 1989, p. 26.

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among them respected the festivals and holy days of the Church. They thought of themselves as French, of course, but for most of them that was only one of their multiple identities. They were also Bretons or Burgundians, provinces that were rich in heritage and that commanded a proportion of their loyalty. They might also have defined themselves by language or dialect, by estate, or by religion. Not all, of course, were Catholic, but for those who were, especially in deeply religious areas, that, too, was a form of identity and one that might distinguish them from others. And territorially, as we know from the writings of soldiers when they were called far from their native town or village, they still had their roots in their *petit pays*, their immediate locality, often an area of a few villages or parishes that formed a natural unit in their perception and defined the spatial framework of their daily lives.[2] A great deal of local autarky still survived. When it came to their loyalties and their sense of who they were, it was these multiple experiences that often defined them, and in many parts of peasant France, in particular, they could make people deeply traditionalist and eager to hold on to their old ways.[3] If the revolutionaries were to reorganize the polity, even in France itself, they would have to be aware of local traditions and proceed with a certain caution and pragmatism. And it is clear, from the opening exchanges on the division of the territory in the National Assembly in November 1789, that some at least among the deputies were. They knew that their major task was to divide up the old provinces, and they recognized that provincial loyalties often ran deep. This would be more than an exercise in administrative logic. It would be an attempt to reshape France and, in the process, to change the assumptions of the people who lived there. Territory would become a resource both for state development and for the spread of revolutionary ideology.[4]

Of course, those who spoke out for the retention of the old provinces were often driven by an innate political conservatism, showing a reluctance to submit to centralism or to a unifying state ideology. Some noted the inconvenience that would result from new secular authorities that cut across established parish structures and objected that, in the words of the deeply conservative comte d'Antraigues, "the division into departments will cut across Church dioceses",

2 X. de Planhol, *An Historical Geography of France*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 203–206.

3 E. Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1976, esp. pp. 41–49. Weber has been criticized, rightly, for basing his analysis on some of the most backward parts of France, but in the first half of the nineteenth century many of his observations ring true.

4 C.S. Maier, *Once Within Borders: Territories of Power, Wealth and Belonging since 1500*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016, p. 2.

leaving them split and dysfunctional.[5] More generally, they feared that any new system would prove disruptive to honoured traditions and established customs. And a system that claimed to be founded in logic and mathematical principle, like the one that Sieyès and Thouret brought before the National Assembly, filled some with disbelief. What was to be sacrificed in the name of this supposed logic? How could a territoriality be justified when so many towns were dependent for their prosperity on the existing, somewhat haphazard administrative structures that had grown, with no apparent logic, over the centuries, and when peasant life was defined by its habits and customs, its fairs and markets? Change would necessarily cause casualties, bankruptcies, and distress. Thouret's plan might appear disinterested and technocratic, with its claims to be founded in science and the cadastre; but how far was there a place for cold mathematical solutions to an issue that lay at the heart of local life and culture? Those who were opposed to Thouret's proposal tended to take refuge in ideas of what was natural, claiming that the existing distribution of urban authorities owed more to "nature" and physical features – valleys, rivers and mountain ranges – than to any false logic that might be imposed by Paris in the name of supposed equality.[6] They doubted whether these could be discarded without dehumanizing the map of France.

Reform of this kind could not be achieved without creating victims. As Ted Margadant reminds us, there was a "complicated institutional heritage" that had "generated vested interests in hundreds of towns that served as central places for the law courts, fiscal agencies, bishoprics and other jurisdictions of the old regime", all of which, he adds, "can best be understood as expressions of urban social power".[7] Defenders of the status quo were not acting out of conservatism alone. They were talking for their constituents, for existing office holders, and for entrenched urban interests. And they were expressing what they recognized as a deep-rooted provincial sentiment, which had a profound emotional appeal that could not be simply ignored or swept away with disdain. How, asked the Baron de Jessé on 19 October, did they propose to overcome the sentiment that attaches the inhabitant of a province not just to the land but to the name of that land?[8] Why should they antagonize local people unnecessarily when compromise could so easily be achieved?

5 Ozouf-Marignier, *La formation des départements*, p. 49.
6 Ibid., p. 42.
7 T.W. Margadant, *Urban Rivalries in the French Revolution*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, p. 18.
8 Ozouf-Marignier, *La formation des départements*, p. 48.

But that was not, of course, the revolutionaries' way, and, in the same spirit in which they reformed the system of weights and measures, changed the currency, and scrapped the Gregorian calendar, all in the name of rationalization, so they took a radical approach to reorganizing space, by sweeping away all the existing jurisdictions and establishing units of local government and justice that they deemed more in accord with the principles of the French Revolution and of a fundamental rationalism. The principles underlying the reform are well known: the country was to be divided, as nearly as was possible, into equal administrative units, equal both in geographical area and in population; and the main administrative town should be as centrally placed as possible so as to make it accessible to the largest possible number of people. Indeed, access was to be a primary consideration, so that the citizenry would not be unduly inconvenienced when they had dealings with the representatives of the state: this concern was repeated by both the urban elites across France and the deputies to the National Assembly in Paris.[9] For this reason, the units of government should not be too large or the principal towns too distant from the people they administered. But how many of these units – soon to be known as *départements* (departments) – would France need to cover the entire territory in an equitable manner? The decree of 22 December 1789, which first laid out the scheme, talked rather imprecisely of between 75 and 85 departments, but the detail remained to be worked out: for that to be done satisfactorily, everything could not be decided centrally. The deputies would have to consult local people, to find out more about their habits and movements. The principle, however, was clearly accepted: there would be some 80 departments, each divided into a number of districts (the exact number was to be determined by local needs), as well as, at the most local level, cantons and communes.[10] In this way, the deputies believed, every French man or woman would be able to access the administrative and juridical services he or she might require. Privilege was seen to have been abolished, while the new system that was proposed had a pleasing Cartesian logic. Everyone would have a place in the administrative system, and the local authorities, in their regular reports to one another, would both bring problems to the attention of the level above them (and eventually to the ministries in Paris) and inform ordinary people in the towns and villages of their rights and obligations under the law. The deputies were satisfied with their work: there was a certain balance and elegance to it all.

9 B. Lepetit, *The Pre-Industrial Urban System: France, 1740–1840*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 210–211.

10 Assemblée Nationale, decree of 22 December 1789.

For the revolutionaries there was also a democratic aspect to these reforms. Having rid France of units of governance that smacked of Ancien Régime privilege, the men of 1789 wanted to ensure that the new authorities would be answerable to the people they administered. So they prescribed a system of elections at every level of government, to the departmental and district assemblies, municipal councils, and even courts and school boards. But not all elections were direct, nor did they necessarily place real power in the hands of the people. Only municipal personnel and justices of the peace were directly elected; for elections of deputies to the National Assembly and of departmental and district administrators, a system of electoral colleges was introduced, with second-degree electors chosen by primary assemblies at the canton level; it was at this very local level that the majority of French citizens were invited to cast their vote.[11] The constant resort to voting to renew local administrations soon lost much of its appeal, however, as the declining participation figures across the revolutionary period demonstrate. Those chosen tended to be drawn from the same wealthy elite throughout the revolutionary decade. With the passage of time, moreover, the government's concern for democratic answerability dimmed, until under Napoleon the principle was largely abandoned. Local government became answerable upwards, to Paris and the minister of the interior, while local officials, from mayors to prefects, would be appointed rather than elected. It was a very Napoleonic solution to the question of where authority should lie and how provincial France should be governed.

But once the general principles had been established, the hard work of dividing the territory into the new administrative units still remained to be done, and, to their credit, the deputies did not propose to impose a new centralist structure without first testing public opinion. Exactly how many departments should there be, and how many districts did each deserve? Which cities should be given the key administrative functions; which were rewarded with colleges and tribunals? And, given that every town of any size believed that its claims should be paramount, how were the claims of one town to be balanced against those of its rivals? What were the criteria for granting such distinctions? These were not matters that the Committee of the Constitution felt itself adequately briefed to answer, and it therefore, quite sensibly, set up a subcommittee, the Committee of Division, whose task it was to collect the necessary intelligence from people on the ground and to propose a division of the territory that would meet the requirements of the Constituent Assembly. Having sought opinions

11 M. Crook, *Elections in the French Revolution*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 158.

from all around the country and listened to petitions from supplicant towns and cities, the Committee of Division reported back to the deputies early in the following spring, and the new division of the territory was decreed on 26 February 1790. It had been a huge undertaking. The number of departments was now fixed at 83, and each had between 3 and 9 districts; there were over 44,000 communes. There would be elections, too, at every level: elected mayors and municipal councils, and elected bodies to run the districts and departments. In accordance with the principle still religiously observed in the early months of the French Revolution, it was important to establish clear lines of answerability, down to the electors as much as up to the central government – and the revolution, unlike Napoleon's empire that followed, placed great value on answerability and on election. A new administrative map had been drawn, one that would serve as a basis for the different levels of local government and justice across more than two centuries.[12] Within a few months, elections had been held, the new authorities put in place, and a new era in French governance launched. Along with the revolutionary calendar, it was perhaps the most important transformative step in bringing the revolution into people's everyday lives. Centuries of tradition had been cast aside and, in Michel Vovelle's phrase, both space and time had been "reconstructed" anew.[13]

Some might question, of course, the degree to which the former provincial identities were really allowed to die. Indeed, there was a striking similarity between the old administrative map of France and the new. The Committee of Division would usually start from the existing provinces, and work from there, rather than bring parts of former provinces together in entirely new units. Just how many units depended on a province's land area and population. Thus Languedoc was to be divided into seven departments, Brittany into five, and Burgundy into three so that, collectively, they still maintained something of their old provincial identity. Some of the old provinces had, of course, been notably small, and they would generally be left as a single department, named after a local river, coastline, or mountain range that would strip it of all seigneurial associations. Thus the Périgord simply became the new department of the Dordogne, the Quercy was transformed into the Lot, the Roussillon into the Pyrénées-orientales. Where the old territorial divisions were really small, and

12 Assemblée Nationale, decree of 26 February 1790.

13 M. Vovelle, "L'espace et le temps reconstruits", in: Collectif, *L'espace et le temps reconstruits: La Révolution française, une révolution des mentalités et des cultures?*, Aix-en-Provence: Publications de l'Université de Provence, 1990, pp. 381–386.

some of the provinces were tiny, they might usefully be amalgamated to form a single territorial unit on the same scale as its neighbours. In this way, the Béarn and the Basque country were united as the Basses-Pyrénées, the Bresse and the Bugey became the Ain, and the independent provinces of Aunis and Saintonge were merged into the Charente-inférieure.[14] A new identity might have been created, but the people of the region still shared the same customs and the same dialect. In this way, it was hoped that the new departments could be more than administrations, inspiring a feeling of local loyalty and belonging in their inhabitants. And to a degree this can be shown to have worked. A younger generation came to see their department as part of their identity, and during the Napoleonic Wars we find that young conscripts away from home for the first time were not afraid to declare their loyalty to their department or to describe it as their country, their *pays*. In their letters home they expressed pleasure at stumbling on fellow soldiers from their home department. So, for instance, when his unit was ordered to Moscow in 1812, François Bourbier wrote that he found consolation in the company of others from the Oise, boys like himself, from the villages around Beauvais.[15] Everyone could claim to belong to a department; it was an affiliation that was attached to everyone, and over time, with the demise of provinces and parishes and seigneuries, it would become an accepted descriptor, even a source of shared pride.

That is not to say that the process was completed without difficulty, or without friction, for what was presented to the National Assembly as the outcome of scientific debate was often shaped by months of wrangling between rival communities and those who spoke in their name. Where there were to be winners and losers, it was important to have a powerful political voice in Paris, someone who could silence dissident voices. For it was not always as easy to establish an agreed structure as it was in Brittany or Burgundy, where the old provincial lines were clear. What, for instance, of the south-west, where even the Committee of Division was reluctant to lay down the number of departments that should be created? Leaving these decisions to local people merely embittered the arguments between them, especially as Bertrand Barère, one of the most committed defenders of local interests, was set upon creating a department for his home town of Tarbes, a town of only 6,000 people on the

14 A. Forrest, "Le découpage administratif de la France révolutionnaire", in: Centre Méridional d'Histoire (ed.), *L'espace et le temps reconstruits: La Révolution française, une révolution des mentalités et des cultures?*, pp. 3–12.

15 A. Forrest, *Napoleon's Men: The Soldiers of the Revolution and Empire*, London: Hambledon and London, 2002, p. 137.

eve of the French Revolution. It was not an obvious choice, especially given its relative isolation and the lack of any major roads across the Pyrenees into Spain, but once a department of the Hautes-Pyrénées had been approved, governing a slightly artificial territory carved out of the surrounding countryside, other decisions followed, including the creation of a much-contested department in the Landes. These decisions are not to be explained by mathematical accuracy and had little enough to do with administrative logic. It was simply that Barère, already a formidable political powerbroker, was determined to win. As he himself would admit when he looked back on the moment in 1834, the departmental administration "was only obtained after fighting off the resistance and the ambitions of the surrounding provinces, all envious of such a rich and beautiful territory".[16]

The petitions and protests that form the archive of the Committee of Division show quite conclusively that the same pattern was repeated all over France, as towns and cities, seeing an opportunity for self-advancement or fearing the jealousy of their neighbours, fought like cat and dog over every administrative office.[17] They conferred status, they brought outsiders into their communities to transact business, and they kept hotels and shops open through their custom. And so the outcome was important. Civic leaders knew that, in many cases, their future prosperity depended on it, as towns that lost out in this auction of public offices might face decades of relative decline. The administrative and judicial system that came into being in the French Revolution, and which was revised under the empire, produced a new hierarchy of towns and cities that would leave its mark on future growth and prosperity. Those small towns that missed out on courts, schools, or other administrative functions risked seeing their populations decline across the nineteenth century; some carried on their fight for recognition well into the Third Republic.[18]

But, we may ask, how much respatialization really took place, especially at the urban level? Let us assume, with Bernard Lepetit, that where the

16 J.-B. Laffon and J.-F. Soulet, *Histoire de Tarbes*, Roanne: Editions Horvath, 1982, pp. 185–186; J.F. le Nail and J.-F. Soulet (eds.), *Bigorre et Quatre-Vallées*, Pau: Société Nouvelle d'Editions Régionales et de Diffusion, vol. 1, 1981, p. 36.

17 Archives Nationales (AN), series D-IV bis is the major source for studying the division of the territory in 1789–1790. It contains the papers of the Constitutional Committee of the National Assembly and the Committee of Division of the Legislative Assembly and the Convention. Letters from towns and cities requesting departments and districts, classified by department, can be found in D-IV bis 3–18; disputes between towns over districts, some dragging on until 1795, are in D-IV bis 56–76.

18 Margadant, *Urban Rivalries in the French Revolution*, pp. 440–441.

established centres prevailed, it meant that the existing order was perpetuated, whereas a victory for the lesser towns implied far-reaching changes. He finds that in 54 departments – around two-thirds of the total – the *chef-lieu* (centre of administration) went to the town that already had administrative responsibilities in the Ancien Régime, whereas, of the new administrative centres chosen, 3 went to a town better-placed geographically within the department, 6 to the town that performed most functions (and was therefore of greatest value to the communities of its agricultural hinterland), while in 12 the choice of *chef-lieu* might appear somewhat random. These figures suggest that the Committee of Division was quite cautious, conservative even, in its reluctance to change town-country relations where existing structures offered apparent stability. In others, it was clear that there was no solution that satisfied local people and that the choice of departmental and district *chefs-lieux* was so divisive that it was better deferred. So in half of the new departments created in February 1790, no town was designated as the administrative capital as none could be agreed upon. In 17 departments, they voted to have several rival towns taking on the functions of *chef-lieu* in turn, often – though not always – because there was no obvious central point and no town was obviously pre-eminent (predominantly rural departments like the Ardèche and Dordogne are easier to explain here than departments like the Gard and Hérault, where the claims of Nîmes and Montpellier might seem to have been self-evident). The solution of an alternating administrative centre was not, of course, intended to be permanent; it was a costly and cumbersome idea, and it was quickly abandoned. But two conclusions can be drawn from these hesitations and compromises. The Committee of Division was indeed influenced by the endless lobbying to which it was subjected. And the arguments of rural communities, cut off by poor communications, were often acceded to.[19]

In its broad outlines, the map of departments that was established during the French Revolution continues to function today, which is a credit to the work of the original Committee of Division and the care they took to consult with local people.[20] But the process of reconstructing administrative and judicial space was a complex one, and it was not completed in 1790. That

19 Lepetit, *The Pre-Industrial Urban System*, pp. 212–213.

20 To the original number of 83, 3 were added during the French Revolution and French Empire: the Vaucluse was added after the annexation of the Comtat-Venaissin in 1791; the Loire was created out of the Rhône-et-Loire in 1793 to punish Lyon for its "treasonable" activity during the Federalist Revolt in 1793; and Napoleon created a new department of the Tarn-et-Garonne in 1808 from territory previously divided between the Lot, Lot-et-Garonne, Gers, Aveyron, and Haute-Garonne. Avignon, Montbrison, and Montauban became *chefs-lieux*.

distinction fell to Napoleon Bonaparte and his advisors in the Conseil d'État (Council of State), which in 1800 revised the structure of French local government to incorporate prefects and subprefects in every department with the aim of creating a more centralized and hierarchical structure. Prefects were not elected: they were appointed by Napoleon Bonaparte and were brought in from another region, or another department of state, to ensure that they would not be too beholden to local interests. And where they failed to carry out his will, they were subject to instant recall. As the specialist on French local government Brian Chapman expresses it, the prefect's job was "to perform the First Consul's will; when no orders were given, he was to interpret by his own sense of the nation's interests what Napoleon would wish in the circumstances".[21] Public opinion was to be closely scrutinized and any show of dissent noted, to which the government's response was often brutal. Prefects could call up units of the National Guard, or they could ask for military reinforcements to be sent from Paris, when they were faced with rioting and assaults on the prefectures, as happened in Caen in 1812 following a grain riot.[22] What had been an exercise in democracy in the early months of the French Revolution had been converted into a highly centralist model of local governance.

The Consulate's decrees completed the division of the territory that Sieyès and Thouret had begun, replacing the revolutionary districts with *arrondissements*, each to be administered by a subprefect, reorganizing the courts and tribunals to restore a hierarchy of civil law courts and bringing courts and administrative offices together in the same towns and cities. As Ted Margadant rightly emphasizes, the decisions taken in 1800 may have been altered marginally over the years, making allowance in some cases for the growth of new industrial towns or the decline of agricultural market towns (as with the coal and iron town of Saint-Etienne, which replaced Montbrison as *chef-lieu* of the Loire in 1855). Wars resulted in new departments in Nice and Savoy. But otherwise there would be few changes before the particular problems of the Paris Basin were recognized in 1960 with the creation of five new departments in the Parisian suburbs. In most respects, however, even in the face of pressure from other towns for departments or for a share of the administrative spoils, the territorial settlement that was established under the Consulate would endure.[23]

Bonaparte would go even further with his policy of standardization, when in 1802, by the terms of the Concordat, he integrated the administration of the

21 B. Chapman, *The Prefects and Provincial France*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1955, p. 17.
22 P. Coftier and P. Dartiguenave, *Révolte à Caen 1812*, Cabourg: Cahiers du Temps, 1999.
23 Margadant, *Urban Rivalries in the French Revolution*, p. 368.

Catholic Church with the structures he had approved for secular administration.[24] Henceforth the rules of the cadastre were to be applied to Church administration, too, with the previous bishoprics – many of them quite tiny in terms of geographical area – abolished and new bishoprics created that corresponded to the departmental structure. It seemed rational in a world where the Catholic Church was increasingly treated as a department of state and where bishops would instruct their clergy to preach that civil disobedience was sinful or that defying the conscription law incurred the loss of one's eternal soul. But this was entirely in line with Napoleon's vision of local government, where the department, the district or *arrondissement*, and at the most local level the commune, were primarily administrative divisions, whose main purpose was to regulate the population and carry out the government's will. It was by this criterion that local people would judge them, and in some areas they would be found wanting or would be deemed too intrusive, too concerned to interfere in their autonomy.

Not all aspects of local life were effectively regulated and not all administrative tasks fell neatly into the new administrative order; and where they did not, the districts and municipal authorities risked losing much of their relevance. Or again, where the new authorities presumed to interfere with local ways and customs, they risked being defied. Poaching and smuggling as well as gleaning and forest laws, these were areas where local government had seldom interfered in the past, and many peasants felt themselves to have been freed from any form of control or policing during the outbreaks of anti-seigneurial violence that marked 1790 and 1791 in many areas of the country. Local people did not expect to be challenged by mayors and district officials if they entered communal forests to shoot rabbits or pick up firewood, and when they were accosted or arrested, trouble could flare. In part, the problem lay with the new administrative boundaries and the fact that, though they had been fixed with an impeccable Cartesian logic when deputies in Paris looked down at the map they were creating, they seldom took account of the woods, copses, and forests that sprawled across the French countryside. They seldom fitted easily into rigid administrative borders or corresponded to areas of policing, and as such they offered welcome relief to those wishing to slip between administrations to avoid the attention of the authorities in pursuit of game or poaching trout. For urban administrators unfamiliar with the network of smugglers' tracks and sheep runs that peppered the French countryside, they proved

24 For a detailed discussion of the Concordat and its implications for the Catholic Church and clergy, see R.J. Dean, *L'église constitutionnelle, Napoléon et le Concordat de 1801*, Paris: R. J. Dean, 2004.

a source of continual conflict and frustration as well as a challenge to their own authority and legitimacy.

The management and administration of France's forests is a good illustration, if such were needed, of the centralist agenda of the urban elites who oversaw the reform of local government. They were concerned with abstract principles above local customs, and to rid the countryside of the hated officers of the Eaux et Forêts, the target of anger and resentment in many parts of France, they were eager to pass responsibility for the upkeep of forests and the execution of forest laws to local people. From 1789, as Kieko Matteson demonstrates, the authority of the old forest guards was undermined, and the National Assembly's rather vacuous injunctions to respect the law often went unheeded, as peasants rushed to capitalize on what they imagined to be the rightful benefits of revolution, from the ending of seigniorial authority to the subdivision of common land. Only in May 1790 did the National Assembly formally give local and regional administrations – the new departments, districts, and communes – formal responsibility for woodland conservation.[25] In the process, it left them to impose unpopular rules on the people, who had only recently been led to believe they were freed from Ancien Régime legislation, and to take charge of forests that had never been seen as part of their jurisdiction. It also left them powerless poachers, who moved seamlessly across their prescribed boundaries. When there was any ambiguity, country people easily returned to their old habits in defiance of the new administrative structures.

Revolutionary politics could create ambiguities as well as resolve them, especially where areas continued to be redefined or where courts and other administrations were handed out as rewards for good behaviour to deserving local authorities. Political considerations were never far away, and where cities behaved badly, retribution might follow. Indeed, there are cases where local areas changed hands several times in accordance with the ebb and flow of the revolutionary tide. Lyon and its department, the Rhône-et-Loire, provide perhaps the best example of this, when, after the federalist revolt in 1793, the department was split in two, leaving Lyon with an artificially amputated department of the Rhône. But such political decisions might have unforeseen consequences. As the police were organized by the department, this left the criminal fraternity of Lyon with an enticing range of departmental boundaries to cross after holding up stagecoaches or robbing travellers on the highway.

25 K. Matteson, *Forests in Revolutionary France: Conservation, Community and Conflict, 1669–1848*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 111–114.

Better still, viewed from a criminal standpoint, was the political geography of Lyon and its eastern suburbs, especially the notorious *faubourg* (suburb) of La Guillotière on the left bank of the river opposite the Presqu'île, which, conveniently for those seeking an escape from the law, changed hands several times during the revolutionary decade, being alternately attached to the Rhône and the Isère. "A five-minute walk across the Pont de la Guillotière", remarks Richard Cobb, not without a certain satisfaction, "would bring the man on the run into the Isère and to a *faubourg* notorious for its violence and its anarchy and for the number of its carters' inns". To stack the odds slightly further against the gendarmes, the borders to the north of Lyon had also been considerately drawn. Here, "on the road to Paris, brigands, bandits, highwaymen, counterfeiters and political murderers could be assured of a safe refuge in the *commune* of Vaise, which further specialized in attacks on the Paris-Lyon mail coach. From the north-east end of the city, a quarter of an hour's walk would take the law-breaker into the Ain." In many instances, this would leave the police empty-handed and escort the wrongdoer to the sanctuary or safe house he sought.[26]

A common thread running through revolutionary discourse on local government reform was the government's obligations towards men who were no longer mere subjects of a king, but citizens enjoying rights that had to be respected. It was as citizens that they had the right to justice, just as it was as citizens that they were called upon to fulfil their obligations towards society and to the state. In metropolitan France, this principle may have operated reasonably smoothly, with each layer of administration representing certain tasks and duties; but then in metropolitan France, everyone was a citizen, and such distinctions as remained did not affect their obligation to pay tax, their need to appear before conscription boards, or their right to go to law. If the new division of the territory achieved a wide degree of acquiescence, it was because it could be integrated into the fabric of daily life, not just for the administrative elite, but for the population at large. More than the revolutionary calendar, which people in the countryside had little reason to use or even to know about, the new territorial divisions were used and were found to be convenient. As a consequence, when war came and France began to annex adjacent territories, French administrators concluded that what worked well in France should be extended to the occupied territories. By 1810, following the annexation of Holland and much of northwest Germany, the French Empire had swollen to 130 departments, all organized

26 R. Cobb, *Reactions to the French Revolution*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972, pp. 45–46 and 238.

according to the French model and administered wherever possible by local people.[27] It had become transnational, a Europe-wide lesson in modernization and administrative efficiency.

Yet in the early years of the French Revolution, the new division of the territory was reserved for France alone, and where it was extended abroad, it was to continental Europe. It was not proposed to extend the principle to France's overseas colonies, which were administered by French governors with the help of provincial assemblies composed of representatives of the white settlers. In colonies like Saint-Domingue, there was no question in 1789 of extending the rights of citizenship, either: this was a society where nine-tenths of the population was composed of black slaves, in law the property of the plantation owners rather than citizens in their own right. Moreover, with the growth of the slave trade in the years following the American War of Independence, the disproportion in numbers between white settlers and black slaves increased, raising tensions between the communities on the island and emphasizing the role of race in any emerging concept of citizenship. Saint-Domingue was seen in Paris as a colony, and colonies required colonial solutions. The National Assembly could not even agree that it needed to establish a separate colonial committee to legislate for the colonies. Instead, it insisted that it was for the colonists – and in the Caribbean that meant principally the white planters – to pass their own laws and write their own constitution. This was a dangerous strategy to follow.[28] The 1780s had been a decade of particular turbulence, with class antagonisms opening up between the rich planters and the poor white population, for whom status was dependent on the continuance of racial privilege. And institutionally, the French Revolution weakened colonial governance, as the overthrow of the Ancien Régime in France undermined all the traditional sources of authority in the colonies: the governor, the intendant, the law courts, the military garrison, and the militia. In the process it had, as David Geggus phrases it, "enflamed social and political aspirations while weakening the institutions that held them in check".[29]

In France's colonies in the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean, race lay at the very heart of the problem, and it was a problem that the French Revolution, by opening citizenship to all adult males, could only exacerbate. Many of the

27 L. Bergeron, *France under Napoleon*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981, p. 213.

28 Archives Parlementaires, vol. 11, pp. 40–42, séance du 29 décembre 1789 (sitting on 29 December 1789), "Tableau de la situation actuelle des colonies présentée à l'Assemblée nationale".

29 D. Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002, p. 9.

revolutionary politicians in Paris were far better disposed to give rights to non-whites than were the three provincial assemblies on Saint-Domingue itself, whose distrust of the black and mixed-race populations was ill-concealed. The racial composition of French Caribbean society, especially in Saint-Domingue, was complex. It was not simply a matter of a class of rich white planters employing black slaves to cut the sugar cane; there were also free people of colour, the descendants of slaves, no doubt, but descendants also of the white *habitants* (plantation owners) to whom they owed their free status. And by 1789, there was a large free black population, men and women who had in many cases been slaves but who had received their freedom when their masters had retired to France, or in return for sexual favours, or as a reward for long years of loyal service. Under French law, those who had acquired their freedom had the same rights as whites; but in the French Antilles in the 1780s, few whites were prepared to respect that law or to treat them as their fellow citizens.

As the numbers of slaves and free men of colour increased, the white population of the islands became more conservative, more resistant to compromise. They felt more and more insecure, too, as they became a smaller and smaller minority in the Dominguan population. By 1789, nearly 90 per cent of the population of Saint-Domingue consisted of African slaves, while the number of free people of colour approached 50 per cent of the free population (huge proportions when compared to the South of the United States or to Britain's Caribbean colonies). The previous decade had also seen the rise of a large and self-confident free black population, notably in the larger cities, Port-au-Prince and Le Cap. These groups had their own leaders, and when the French Revolution broke out in France, they knew that they would get a much fairer hearing from the Assembly in Paris than ever they would from the white planters on the island. For them it was imperative that all power should not be left in the hands of Saint-Domingue's provincial assemblies, since that would leave them at the mercy of the whites. Local government reform was more than a question of institutions or of rapid access to justice. It was also question of how best they could exercise their newly won rights of citizenship, how they might contest the supremacy of the white *colons* (colonists). They were determined to reap the benefits of France's revolution, too.[30]

The white planters would, of course, vigorously resist any attempt to reform the island's structures of government, especially where it risked diluting the power they exercised over their slaves. Over the previous century they had

30 J.D. Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 5.

pursued an unremitting campaign against the king's attempts to impose controls and to spread European legal and moral codes. In particular, they had resisted the imposition of the Code noir (the code governing the treatment of the black population), which, since 1685, had attempted to force planters to end abuses in the treatment of their slaves, prescribing the minimum amounts of food and clothing that they must provide, ordering their instruction in Catholicism, and cancelling work on holy days. In practice, few of these measures were implemented, while the local courts and provincial assemblies on the island made sure that the rights of the master were maintained and even, as the eighteenth century progressed, reinforced. When there were rumours of slave insurrections, the courts were even less willing to interfere in planters' rights, and in 1771 judges on the regional court in Le Cap went so far as to rule that royal justice should not come between masters and slaves.[31] Even in cases involving physical maltreatment and arbitrary sentences for offences, local justice showed no wish to intervene, no appetite for conflict with the more powerful planters. Perhaps rather cravenly, the National Assembly seemed prepared to accept their arguments and to leave matters of local justice and administration in their hands. They recognized that any root and branch reforms of justice and local government would be risky at a time when all parties on the island seemed to have intractable demands: the planters wanted greater autonomy from France, the mulattoes petitioned for full citizenship, and the slaves were becoming more aware of their collective strength in numbers.

Though they had not undergone French-style reforms, the colonies still had representation in Paris during the French Revolution, and the different interest groups lobbied and petitioned relentlessly, through their representatives, through the planters' pressure group, the Club Massiac, and, increasingly, through the municipal councils and chambers of commerce of the cities through which they traded and where they often had agents, commercial representatives, and, in many cases, family members with whom they maintained close contact. Planters and white settlers in Saint-Domingue and Guadeloupe, increasingly alarmed by the economic and political fallout from the French Revolution in France's Caribbean colonies, put pressure on the Atlantic port cities to speak up on their behalf, to defend their economic interests, and, more and more, to champion not only the slave trade, from which they themselves benefited, but the system of slavery itself. In La Rochelle, for instance, a pressure group was founded in 1789 to "bring together all those owning property in the Antilles who were resident in the *généralité* [generality] of La

31 Ibid., p. 39.

Rochelle" to persuade the town to represent their interests.[32] This had the effect of identifying the main Atlantic ports with a colonial interest that came more and more into conflict with the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, and which risked reducing their ties with their rural hinterlands. In 1790, this could lead to the perception that they were largely divorced from the towns and villages of their respective regions, which in turn led to charges of egotism and indifference.

Squabbles over the new division of the territory generated interurban feuds and rivalries as petitioners pressed their case for recognition at the expense of their neighbours, and in submissions to the Committee of Division towns did not hesitate to condemn one another or to ridicule their claims to a departmental or a district assembly or to a college or tribunal. In particular, the smaller towns were quick to challenge the concentration of too much power in large commercial cities, and the argument was made that a more equal distribution of administrative authority would be more egalitarian and hence more revolutionary. They used a variety of arguments, some pointing to the established habits of local people, others being more concerned to denounce what they saw as the abuses that the concentration of power elsewhere would incur. Many of the smaller towns emphasized their central position in their department and drew attention to their value as markets for the surrounding countryside.[33] But across the west and south-west, petitions also revealed the extent of anti-commercial feeling in many rural areas and a particular resentment against the Atlantic port cities, underlining their irrelevance to peasants and to the rural economy of their hinterland. Older legal centres claimed precedence over Atlantic ports on the grounds that country dwellers went there to settle matters like land ownership and inheritance, custom commanding greater loyalty than commerce.[34]

So, while Nantes and Bordeaux were sufficiently dominant in their new departments to ensure their choice as *chef-lieu*, other ports faced more of a struggle. And even Bordeaux had to shrug off a plausible challenge from the market town of Libourne, which argued that it needed to retain its independence

32 M. Dorigny, "Les colons de La Rochelle se mobilisent contre les Amis des Noirs: procès-verbaux de la Société des colons franco-américains de La Rochelle", in: M. Augeron and O. Caudron (eds.), *La Rochelle, l'Aunis et la Saintonge face à l'esclavage*, Paris: Les Indes savantes, 2012, pp. 223–230.

33 Margadant, *Urban Rivalries in the French Revolution*, p. 442.

34 A wide range of municipal petitions can be found in AN, series D IV bis, papers of the Committee of Division, 1789–90; A. Forrest, "Le découpage administratif de la France révolutionnaire".

if it was not to be smothered by its larger neighbour. Bordeaux, the petition alleged, "completely stifles Libourne, eclipsing it with its shadow and devouring it to the extent that, if Libourne were to remain part of this department, it would never be able to emerge from its obscurity".[35] In this case, the petition was rejected, but a number of Atlantic ports experienced real difficulty in staking their claims. Not only was Bayonne denied the *chef-lieu* of a department; even its claim for a district was dismissed in favour of Ustaritz. In the Charente-Inférieure, Saintes won out over La Rochelle, though Napoleon finally reversed the decision in 1810. Local people argued that Saintes was a market town and a natural regional capital, while La Rochelle was a mere commercial appendage, irrelevant to local farmers.[36] Similarly, Marseilles was passed over in favour of Aix-en-Provence in its bid to be *chef-lieu* of the Bouches-du-Rhône; again, this would later be reversed in Marseilles' favour.[37] And in Normandy, where Rouen obtained the *chef-lieu* of the new department of the Seine-Inférieure, Le Havre's claim to a district was rejected in favour of the small market town of Montivilliers. Once again, the arguments centred on its irrelevance to the local economy and its perceived failure to redistribute its commercial wealth. As the villages of the surrounding area explained in a petition to the National Assembly, Le Havre "is properly speaking nothing more than an entrepôt [a warehouse] for goods brought in from abroad to be sent on to all parts of the kingdom". Its merchants were uninterested in agriculture; it was a city of "rich capitalists well versed in speculation".[38]

Colonial ports were denounced for turning their backs on the land and its people, for looking outwards to the ocean rather than inwards to the countryside, and this perception was sharpened in the early years of the French Revolution when the merchants were among the principal beneficiaries of reform. In Nantes, for instance, merchants dominated the permanent committee elected to run the city in 1789, and in 1790 provided two-thirds of the *officiers municipaux* (municipal officers), 12 out of 18, and half the *notables*, 18 out of 36.[39] In all the Atlantic ports, a colonial culture had developed that prioritized connections across the seas over domestic considerations, creating a mentality quite distinct from the concerns of agriculture or of domestic capitalism. The ports were condemned by many in the interior as belonging to the colonial

35 AN, D IV bis 8, petition from the town of Libourne, 1790.

36 AN, D IV bis 5, petitions of La Rochelle and Saintes, 1790.

37 AN, D IV bis 5, petition from the deputies of Provence in favour of Aix-en-Provence, 1790.

38 AN, D IV bis 17, petition from the towns of the District in favour of Montivilliers, 1790.

39 O. Pétré-Grenouilleau, *Nantes, histoire et géographie contemporaine*, Plomelin: Éditions Palantines, 2003, pp. 112–113.

world, wedded to an Atlantic space that was of little interest to rural communities to whom they offered little benefit. Their wealth and aloofness were equated with privilege, and during the Terror this invited reprisals: Bordeaux, most notably, was denounced as a "foyer de négociantisme" (hive of merchant self-interest), its merchants seen as an elite eager to replace the nobility as the social and political leaders of the city.[40] At a time when they faced competition for administrative responsibilities from legal centres and market towns, this was a perception that proved highly damaging, as it seemed to cut them off from their fellow citizens, to isolate their interests and to weaken their ties with the land. The port cities risked being seen as irrelevant to the lives of ordinary Frenchmen. They found themselves tarnished by their colonial connections, and, rather like the colonies themselves, they had difficulty in adapting to the demands of revolutionary respatialization.

40 V. Daline, "Marc-Antoine Jullien, après le 9 thermidor", *Annales historiques de la Révolution Française* 36 (1964), p. 161.