

**“The Idea of the Nation Was Superior to Race”:
Transforming Racial Contours and Social Attitudes
and Decolonizing the French Empire from
La Réunion, 1946–1973**

Héloïse Finch-Boyer

Abstract Scholars assume the loss of Algeria in 1962 marked the end of French colonialism and a hardening of racialized categories of difference in France, overlooking how race and class categories became more porous in the overseas departments (départements d’outre-mer, or DOMs) after a new, welfare-led, French colonialism was initiated by Prime Minister Michel Debré (elected deputy of La Réunion in 1963). Comparing the provision of social welfare in the DOMs before and after 1962 demonstrates that Debré’s new health insurance, family allocations, and housing laws offered DOM populations improved social mobility beyond colonial-era racial boundaries. Welfare encouraged Réunion Islanders to support political attachment to France and undermined support for DOM autonomy movements. Combining scholarship on decolonization, French welfare, and the social history of La Réunion, the article reevaluates the place of French overseas departments in decolonization history, in studies of French racial categories, and in modern France.

We are . . . French from continental France, or French from faraway islands . . . animated by the same faith in our national destiny and our nation.

Michel Debré, 1963 election campaign speech in La Réunion

A year after the 1962 French defeat in Algeria, Michel Debré resigned as prime minister of France and became a National Assembly deputy for La Réunion, the French overseas department with the largest population. Debré sought election on a multicultural island in the south-west Indian Ocean where a vocal Communist movement demanded autonomy from France. To win, Debré used a new political discourse

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that praised racial diversity in La Réunion as a successful example of the Gaullist republican values of “national solidarity” and “national cohesion” across the oceans.¹ Debré claimed that in La Réunion, “thirteen thousand kilometers from the metropole, men and women of such different origins feel the constant sentiment to belong tightly to the French nation.”² For Debré, Réunion Islanders’ ethnic and cultural diversity would never lead to social divisions but would foster a strong feeling of being French. Contradicting assumptions that the French Right has always defined Frenchness in racial and religious terms, this article demonstrates how Debré’s assertion of multiracial overseas Frenchness moved away both from state-led racialized distinctions about who was “French” in metropolitan France after 1962 and from previous racist attitudes toward the overseas departments (*départements d’outre-mer*, or DOMs), by creating a race-blind welfare policy in the DOMs that undermined political autonomy movements there.³

Debré’s 1959 visit to La Réunion as prime minister (accompanying de Gaulle) combined a new era of social legislation for overseas France with political repression of the DOM autonomists. Rather than ignoring the crushing poverty in La Réunion as the French administration had done before, Debré used his considerable influence in central government to create new welfare policies that radically changed social mobility in La Réunion and the other overseas departments. Elected a deputy of La Réunion in 1963, Debré played a leading role in creating the “global parity” finance laws, the Fonds d’Action Sanitaire et Sociale Obligatoire (FASO), the Bureau des Migrations des Départements d’Outre-Mer (BUMIDOM), and shantytown laws, which radically transformed DOM societies. His welfare programs offered social mobility outside colonial-era racial and class positions but eroded support for autonomy.

Scholars assume that the loss of Algeria in 1962 marked the end of French colonialism and a hardening of racialized categories of difference in France.⁴ This overlooks how race and class categories became

¹ “Allocutions président Charles de Gaulle et Debré visite de la Réunion,” *Le progrès*, July 15, 1959.

² Archives Départementales de la Réunion (hereafter ADR), 57 W 12, Conseil Général de la Réunion. Discours de M. Michel Debré, Mar. 26, 1966.

³ Herman Lebovics, *True France: The Wars over Cultural Identity, 1900–1945* (Ithaca, NY, 1992); Patrick Weil and Catherine Porter, *How to Be French: Nationality in the Making since 1789* (Durham, NC, 2008); Gérard Noiriel, *The French Melting Pot: Immigration, Citizenship and National Identity*, trans. Geoffroy de Laforcade (Minneapolis, MN, 1996).

⁴ Martin Evans, *Algeria: France’s Undeclared War* (Oxford, 2011); Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca, NY, 2006); Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, 1995); Achille Mbembe, “Provincializing France?,” *Public Culture* 23, no. 1 (2011): 85–119; Todd Shepard, “Decolonization and the Republic,” in *The French Republic: History, Values, Debates*, ed. Edward Berenson, Vincent Duclert, and Christophe Prochasson (Ithaca, NY, 2011), 252–61.

more porous in the DOMs after a new welfare-led French colonialism was initiated by Debré. This article suggests that a focus on European France and its links with colonialism has led major scholarship on modern France to overlook former colonial spaces that became part of contemporary France.⁵ It reevaluates the place of French overseas departments in decolonization history and demonstrates that the intersection of race and politics in overseas France is an integral part of politics in the French Republic.

A growing sentiment exists that one cannot understand French history—or the French state—without considering French colonial experience, but scholars disagree about the consequences of French colonial experiences in contemporary France.⁶ Some emphasize that racial discrimination has been inherent to articulations of French citizenship and French universalism.⁷ Others believe that republican ideology overcomes community divisions or *communalisme* (a French reading of multiculturalism) through assimilation that protects vulnerable groups.⁸ Scholars debate this question through studies of French state welfare to colonial and ex-colonial populations. Welfare to DOM populations is conventionally studied through Réunionnais or Caribbean migration to the metropole with the BUMIDOM program, usually read simply as a discriminatory “colonial-era anachronism.”⁹ Scholars look-

⁵ See, e.g., Berenson, Duclert, and Prochasson, *French Republic*, which largely overlooks overseas France. The following authors examine the DOMs yet treat post-1962 metropolitan and overseas France as separate entities: Robert Aldrich and John Connell, *France's Overseas Frontier: Départements et Territoires d'Outre-Mer* (Cambridge, 1992); Herman Lebovics, *Bringing the Empire Back Home: France in the Global Age* (Durham, NC, 2004); Peter Redfield, *Space in the Tropics: From Convicts to Rockets in French Guiana* (Berkeley, CA, 2000). An exception to this trend is work on the political relationships between France and La Réunion, e.g., by Gilles Gauvin, *Michel Debré et l'île de la Réunion: Une certaine idée de la plus grande France* (Villeneuve-d'Ascq, 2006); and Françoise Vergès, *Monsters and Revolutionaries: Colonial Family Romance and Métissage* (Durham, NC, 1999).

⁶ Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard, and Françoise Vergès, *La république coloniale: Essai sur une utopie* (Paris, 2003); Joshua Cole, “Understanding the French Riots of 2005: What Historical Context for the ‘Crise des Banlieues’?,” *Francophone Postcolonial Studies* 5, no. 2 (2007): 69–100; Alice Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895–1930* (Stanford, CA, 1997); Alice Conklin and Julia Clancy-Smith, “Introduction: Writing Colonial Histories,” *French Historical Studies* 27, no. 3 (2004): 497–505; Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (Chicago, 2005).

⁷ Ann Laura Stoler, “Colonial Aphasia: Race and Disabled Histories in France,” *Public Culture* 23, no. 1 (2011): 121–56; Achille Mbembe, “Provincializing France?,” *Public Culture* 23, no. 1 (2011): 85–119; Gérard Noiriel, *Le creuset français: Histoire de l'immigration, XIXe–XXe siècles* (Paris, 1988); Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel, and Sandrine Lemaire, eds., *La fracture coloniale: La société française au prisme de l'héritage colonial* (Paris, 2006).

⁸ Weil and Porter, *How to Be French*; Adrian Favell, *Philosophies of Integration: Immigration and the Idea of Citizenship in France and Britain* (New York, 2001); Jean-Loup Amselle, *Vers un multiculturalisme français: L'empire de la coutume* (Paris, 1996).

⁹ Audrey Ducoulombier, “Parity Is about ‘Race’: French Republican Citizenship and the French Caribbean,” *Modern and Contemporary France* 10, no. 1 (2002): 75–87; Anny Dominique Curtius, “Utopies du BUMIDOM: Construire l'avenir dans un ‘là-bas’ postcontact,” *French Forum* 35, no. 2–3 (2010): 135–55; Kristen Stromberg Childers, “Departmentalization, Migration, and the Politics of the Family in the Post-war French Caribbean,” *History of the Family* 14, no. 2 (2009): 177–90; Ivan Jablonka, *Enfants en exil: Transfert de pupilles réunionnais en métropole, 1963–1982* (Paris,

ing at other immigration programs, especially after the Algerian conflict ended in 1962, also conclude that French institutional structures were prejudiced because negative perceptions of French colonials' ethnic difference created racialized institutional distinctions between "citizens" and "immigrants" in France.¹⁰ This article does not counter arguments about the colonial legacies underpinning French social welfare but highlights their implicit bias toward the metropole as the location of French racial representations—and French history—after 1962.

A metropolitan bias contributes to a widespread view that the 1962 loss of Algeria reframed the idea of the French nation toward the metropole, making the Republic "[retreat] into the hexagon" (Mbembe) becoming "more European than any regime since 1789" (Shepard).¹¹ Yet such statements erase DOM populations from contemporary French history—currently 2.5 million French citizens in overseas France if the *collectivités* and *pays d'outre-mer* in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans are included.¹² Ignoring overseas France then allows sweeping statements about the inherent racism of the French state to exist—one thinks of Ann Laura Stoler's claims that France is a "racially inflected political formation" and a "racial state"¹³—even in the face of significant counterevidence, particularly from La Réunion. Even scholars of overseas France who criticize Debré's welfare programs and excoriate French republican influence as "colonialist," all claim that life in La Réunion today demonstrates that multiculturalism has succeeded in La Réunion and there is institutionally supported tolerance for racial, cultural, and religious diversity.¹⁴

Scholarly and popular opinion is sharply divided, however, over the reasons for successful French multiculturalism in La Réunion.

2007); Françoise Lionnet, "Disease, Demography, and the 'Debré Solution': Stolen Lives and Broken Promises, 1946 to 2006 and back to 1966," *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 11, no. 1–2 (2008): 189–210; Laurent Jalabert, *La colonisation sans nom: La Martinique de 1960 à nos jours* (Paris, 2007).

¹⁰ Amelia H. Lyons, "Social Welfare, French Muslims, and Decolonization in France: The Case of the Fonds d'Action Sociale," *Patterns of Prejudice* 43, no. 1 (2009): 65–89; Minayo Nasiali, "Native to the Republic: Negotiating Citizenship and Social Welfare in Marseille 'Immigrant' Neighborhoods since 1945" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2010); Todd Shepard, *Invention of Decolonization*; Elisa Camiscioli, *Reproducing the French Race: Immigration, Intimacy, and Embodiment in the Early Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC, 2009).

¹¹ Mbembe, "Provincializing France?," 90; Shepard, "Decolonization and the Republic," 261.

¹² Institut National d'Etudes Démographiques, "La France de métropole et d'outre-mer," www.ined.fr/fr/pop_chiffres/france_entiere (accessed Oct. 26, 2010).

¹³ Stoler, "Colonial Aphasia."

¹⁴ Scholarship on utopian Creole projects in La Réunion includes Françoise Lionnet, "Continents and Archipelagoes: From E Pluribus Unum to Creolized Solidarities," *PMLA* 123, no. 5 (2008): 1503–15; Laurent Medea, "Creolisation and Globalisation in a Neo-colonial Context: The Case of Réunion," *Social Identities* 8, no. 1 (2002): 125–41; David Picard, "'Being a Model for the World': Performing Creoleness in La Réunion," *Social Anthropology* 18, no. 3 (2010): 302–15; Françoise Vergès, "Vertigo and Emancipation, Creole Cosmopolitanism and Cultural Politics," *Theory, Culture and Society* 18, no. 2–3 (2001): 169–83.

Some attribute La Réunion's broadly harmonious society to Paul Vergès's Parti Communiste Réunionnais (PCR) and its activism for Creole culture, ignoring that after 1957 the PCR lost widespread political support and many Réunion Islanders actually supported Debré's programs.¹⁵ Other scholars only focus on state institutions, ignoring PCR activism and local voices entirely.¹⁶ My approach uses new administrative, private, and newspaper archive sources and wide-ranging oral history in La Réunion, which prior historians did not consult.¹⁷ I argue that Debré's new approach to DOM welfare and his dismissal of previous French racist policies crushed popular support for Communist programs of autonomy from France by subsidizing increased racial and social mobility with welfare.

Examining the linked struggles over social legislation in La Réunion, other DOMs, and the French Union allows scholars to understand French decolonization as a contested *idea* in the 1950s rather than a straight path leading to the formation of separate nation-states.¹⁸ From the nineteenth century through the 1950s many French colonies attempted to end their colonial status and "decolonize" by gaining the same social rights as the metropole, rather than by seeking independence.¹⁹ This reframes "decolonization" as a debate about equal social rights in the colonies *and* the DOMs, rejecting a simple metropole-colony framework. Comparing attitudes to social legislation in the DOMs gives a broader context to Aimé Césaire's political programs in Martinique—usually examined in isolation—by demonstrating how Debré's

¹⁵ Françoise Vergès and Carpanin Marimoutou, *Amarres: Créolisations India-océanes* (Paris, 2005).

¹⁶ E.g., Edmond Maestri and Danielle Nomdedeu-Maestri, *Chronologie de la Réunion: De la départementalisation à la loi d'orientation* (Saint-Denis, 2001); Yvan Combeau, *La vie politique à la Réunion, 1942–1963* (Saint-Denis, 2001); an exception is Gilles Gauvin, "Le Parti Communiste de la Réunion (1946–2000)," *Vingtième siècle* 68, no. 4 (2001): 73–94.

¹⁷ However, I have been repeatedly refused access to the PCR archives and PCR newspaper *Témoignages* in Le Port, La Réunion. I relied on the Réunion Departmental Archive copies of *Témoignages* (which are "damaged and remain unrepaired" and mostly impossible to consult until the early 1960s) as well as the incomplete holdings of *Témoignages* at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris and the Colonial Archives in Aix-en-Provence.

¹⁸ Tony Chafer, *The End of Empire in French West Africa: France's Successful Decolonization?* (London, 2002); Frederick Cooper, "Possibility and Constraint: African Independence in Historical Perspective," *Journal of African History* 49, no. 2 (2008): 167–96; Cooper, "Provincializing France," in *Imperial Formations and Their Discontents*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler, Carole McGranahan, and Peter Perdue (Santa Fe, NM, 2007), 341–77; Cooper, "From Imperial Inclusion to Republican Exclusion? France's Ambiguous Postwar Trajectory," in *Frenchness and the African Diaspora: Identity and Uprising in Contemporary France*, ed. Charles Tshimanga et al. (Bloomington, IN, 2009), 91–119.

¹⁹ Chafer, *End of Empire*; Mamadou Diouf, "The French Colonial Policy of Assimilation and the Civility of the Originaires of the Four Communes (Senegal): A Nineteenth Century Globalization Project," *Development and Change* 29, no. 4 (1998): 671–96; Albert Ramassamy, *La Réunion: Colonisation et intégration* (Saint-Denis, 1987); Françoise Vergès, *La loi du 19 mars 1946: Les débats à l'Assemblée constituante* (Saint-Denis, 1996); Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge, 1996); Cooper, "Reconstructing Empire in British and French Africa," *Past and Present*, no. 210, suppl. 6 (2011): 196–210.

welfare programs directly targeted Césaire's and Vergès's autonomy programs.²⁰ La Réunion is thus analyzed not simply as a French DOM but as part of broader proxy struggles about Communist influence in the global South during the Cold War.²¹ Social welfare in La Réunion is also integral to histories of the Indian Ocean, increasingly understood as a transnational and revisionary oceanic space offering a new perspective for understanding European empires, postcolonial societies, and the links between them, as other scholars and I have demonstrated.²²

This article has four sections. The first demonstrates that, before Debré's first visit to La Réunion, the French administration did not want to apply metropolitan social legislation to the DOMs owing to their implicit belief that overseas populations were naturally poor. The second section demonstrates how a 1959 visit to La Réunion drove Debré and de Gaulle to claim multicultural Frenchness was now compatible with French republican ideology rather than a threat, backing this up with new social policies for overseas France. The third section demonstrates how Debré's 1963 finance law (especially FASO social allocations) changed racialized perceptions of worker categories, creating social mobility in the DOMs and diminishing Communist Party activism. The fourth section demonstrates how Debré's new shantytown laws enabled poor populations to directly claim new rights from the state, taking over the traditional role of Communist Party grassroots activism. The article concludes that to understand the racial contours of social welfare and decolonization throughout the French Republic, one must consider the experiences in the overseas departments and the continuation of republican welfare-led colonialism after the Algerian war.

Civil Servants in La Réunion Believe That Nonwhites Are Naturally Poor and Racial Diversity Threatens National Loyalty (1946–1962)

After World War II, La Réunion's two deputies—Raymond Vergès and Léon de Lepervanche—joined the Caribbean deputies (Gaston Monnerville, Aimé Césaire, and Leopold Bissol) in the unique constituent

²⁰ Andrew Daily, "Staying French: Martiniquans and Guadeloupeans between Empire and Independence, 1946–1973" (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2011); Gary Wilder, "Untimely Vision: Aimé Césaire, Decolonization, Utopia," *Public Culture* 21, no. 1 (2009): 101–40.

²¹ Christopher Lee, *Making a World after Empire: The Bandung Moment and Its Political Afterlives* (Athens, GA, 2010); Héloïse Finch, "Le rôle de l'antenne Omega à la Réunion pendant la Guerre froide," *Revue historique de l'Océan Indien* 2 (2006): 220–35.

²² Isabel Hofmeyr, Preben Kaarsholm, and Bodil Frederiksen, "Introduction: Print Cultures, Nationalisms, and Publics of the Indian Ocean," *Africa* 81, no. 1 (2011): 1–22; Engseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley, CA, 2006); Françoise Vergès, "Looking East, Heading South," *African Studies Review* 44, no. 2 (2001): 141–49; Héloïse Finch, "Governing Rights in La Réunion: Social Legislation, Landholding, Housing, and the Making of France in the Indian Ocean, 1946–2009" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2009).

assembly convened after the Liberation to propose that their colonies become French departments. On March 14, 1946, the French National Assembly voted unanimously to integrate La Réunion, Guadeloupe, Martinique, and Guiana politically and socially with metropolitan France, so they would become French overseas departments.²³ “After fraternity and liberty, we come to demand equality [with the metropole] in law, the equality of rights . . . through the application of social laws,” stated Guianese deputy Gaston Monnerville in the 1946 debates.²⁴ Monnerville acknowledged that according to the 1946 law, the DOMs should have full social citizenship: the right to benefit from metropolitan French labor laws, retirement pensions, health insurance, and employer contributions.²⁵

Leaders in French African colonies other than La Réunion also wanted to follow this model, which theoretically integrated the DOMs with metropolitan French departments, leaving no distinction between the metropole and overseas. In the French constitution of October 1946, the French Empire was renamed the “French Union.” All the other colonies became *territoires d’outre-mer* (overseas territories, or TOMs): each had a distinct juridical status, and universal suffrage was not achieved for a decade. While the DOMs had nominally been assimilated to France in March 1946, in practice the DOMs had an ambiguous status: part of France but with seats in the French Union. Anticolonial activists in the overseas departments still worked alongside anticolonial activists in Paris. Moreover, in terms of improved social conditions, there was little change for populations in the French overseas departments or French African colonies until the end of the 1950s. All groups in the French Union demanded French social legislation as their right. Yet apart from Algeria, social legislation was applied only to the minority of civil servants and urban laborers in the DOMs and the overseas territories.²⁶ The French administration did not want to apply metropolitan social legislation to the rural majorities in the DOMs or in the TOMs because of the financial context and the implicit belief that exotic overseas populations were naturally poor.

²³ In 1870 all Réunion Islanders became colonial French citizens, without legalized distinctions of race or culture. They could all vote for a deputy in the French Assembly. The same voting rights were given in other “old colonies,” that is, colonies that became part of France from the seventeenth century to 1870, many of which stayed with France after independence, including French India, Guiana, La Réunion, Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon, the four communes of Senegal, New Caledonia, French Polynesia, and those in the Antilles. The 46–451 law was published on March 19, 1946, in the *Journal officiel de la République française*. The French government initially committed to accomplish full assimilation of the overseas departments in two years.

²⁴ Debates in the *Assemblée nationale constituante*, 1st session, Mar. 14, 1946, 755.

²⁵ For descriptions of the three kinds of citizenship (including “social citizenship”), see T. H. Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class, and Other Essays* (Cambridge, 1950).

²⁶ Cooper, “From Imperial Inclusion to Republican Exclusion?”

Racial distinctions in La Réunion also compromised the 1946 reforms because they divided society. The island was unpopulated when French and Malagasy settlers arrived in 1663, and socially “white” Réunion Island families had dominated the French plantation colony since then. By 1946 a mere dozen white landowning families owned 60 percent of the cultivable land, and there was only a small middle class of administrators, merchants, and legal and medical professionals.²⁷ In contrast, 85 percent of La Réunion’s population of 250,000 were descendants of Chinese, Indian, Malagasy, and African indentured laborers and slaves.²⁸ Their diverse ancestries broadly mapped onto working-class social positions with no majority collective racial identity, although color and race prejudices thrived.²⁹ Land and factory owners organized laborers into work gangs based on perceived racial and religious hierarchies: Indian-ancestry Creole overseers, African-origin Creole workers, and Comorian and Malagasy ex-indentured laborers all worked in racially divided teams in the La Mare sugar estate in the 1950s.³⁰ Poor “whites” (*petits blancs*) attempted to maintain social distinctions from other groups, working in geranium cultivation and subsistence agriculture rather than on sugar estates.³¹ In the French West Indies there was broadly comparable social and racial inequality, although these populations had more clearly differentiated African ancestry, unlike in La Réunion.³² In La Réunion (unlike Mauritius after 1948) there were no elected political leaders of African or Indian origin, and political clientelism served existing white economic interests. Rural laborers usually voted for the landowners’ choice and were a significant “vote bank” in La Réunion, since half of the entire popu-

²⁷ “Journaliers, colons et planteurs,” *Témoignages*, Apr. 15, 1955.

²⁸ Based on the prefecture’s interpretations of “mixed race” populations and professions from the 1954 Institut National de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques survey, Centre des Archives Contemporaines, Archives Nationales, France (hereafter CAC) 19940180/9, Préfecture de la Réunion, Situation démographique de la Réunion, June 1, 1957. While administrators described Réunion Islanders as “mixed race,” local categories in 1950s La Réunion would have nonetheless defined these populations as resembling African, northern or southern Indian, European French, or Chinese, in varying degrees of mixing.

²⁹ Unlike Martinique, whose Creole elite class is known as *béké* and claims racial whiteness, in La Réunion there were more possibilities for colored Réunion Islanders to join the ranks of the urban bourgeoisie, or become small rural landowners from the nineteenth century. See David Gagneur, “Prosopographie des élites politiques d’une colonie républicaine: La Réunion, 1870–1914” (PhD diss., Université de la Réunion, 2005); Michelle Warren, *Creole Medievalism: Colonial France and Joseph Bédier’s Middle Ages* (Minneapolis, MN, 2011); and Julie-Caroline Mathieu, “Stratégies d’une industrie réunionnaise: Les Etablissements Isautier à l’échelle d’une vie: Charles Isautier (1917–1990)” (PhD diss., Université de la Réunion, 2010).

³⁰ AM (municipal worker), interview by author, Sainte-Marie, La Réunion, June 25, 2011.

³¹ Alexandre Bourquin and Hubert Gerbeau, *Histoire des petits-blancs de la Réunion: XIXe-début XXe siècle: Aux confins de l’oubli* (Paris, 2005).

³² Michel Desse, “Classes moyennes et identité dans les départements français d’Amérique,” in *Entre assimilation et émancipation: L’outre-mer français dans l’impasse?*, ed. Thierry Michalon (Rennes, 2006), 103–12.

lation worked in agricultural labor, three-quarters lived in extreme poverty, and most did not own land. Even by the late 1950s only the children of landed families or urban professionals—1 percent of the total population—had a secondary school education.³³ From the early twentieth century, trade union movements led by educated liberals in La Réunion—usually urban professionals rather than landowners—called for Réunionnais workers to have the same rights as metropolitan workers.³⁴

After gaining DOM status in 1946, political elites in La Réunion disagreed whether economic or social reforms would resolve the island's problems. Landowners worried that being an overseas department would transfer decision making to metropolitan French administrators who knew nothing of La Réunion. They did not understand why metropolitan inspectors were shocked at the thatched huts in which most Réunionnais laborers lived. Landowners believed that huts were “by far the best buildings adapted to the country's climate” rather than shameful signs of social inequality.³⁵ Thus Henri Cornu, an urban elite and land manager for the Sucreries de Bourbon company, claimed that mass poverty in La Réunion derived from exclusive trade and customs with the metropole since 1892, rather than from landowners' exploitation of rural laborers.³⁶

Other Réunionnais elites disagreed with the landowners' fear of the metropole. Mobilizing as the La Réunion branch of the Parti Communiste Français (PCF), they hoped that metropolitan administrators would sweep away “colonial” inequalities maintained by landowners.³⁷ The PCF in La Réunion hoped to obtain French social rights for all Réunionnais, whom they portrayed as *loyal French citizens*—rather than as racially different peoples—who had fought for France but still suffered from the inheritance of colonial slavery. The PCF posed the strongest challenge to landed interests, but political clientelism by landowners hampered PCF efforts to gain popular support. *Le monde* described the divisions between Communist and landowner political parties in the Saint-Denis election office in November 1948. “[There

³³ CAC, 19940180/9, Préfecture de la Réunion, Situation démographique de la Réunion, June 1, 1957.

³⁴ Prosper Eve, “Le syndicalisme à la Réunion, 1900–1968” (French *doctorat d'état*, Université d'Aix-en-Provence III, 1989); Chantal Lauvernier, *Ban-Bai: Raymond Vergès, 1882–1957: Essai biographique* (Le Port, 1994).

³⁵ Archives de l'Evêché de Saint-Denis de la Réunion, 24BVI/1, Notes sur les problèmes sociaux dans les usines de la Mare, de Savannah et de Grand Bois, anon., Oct. 28, 1948.

³⁶ Archives du Centre de l'Histoire Contemporaine à Sciences-Po (hereafter AHC), 9 DE 1, Henri Cornu à Michel Debré, Confidentiel: introduction à la vie réunionnaise, Apr. 11, 1963. Cornu was a widely respected administrator for Sucreries de Bourbon, but not a landowner.

³⁷ “Correspondance parlementaire,” *Témoignages*, May 28, 1947; “La mauvaise foi des réactionnaires,” *Témoignages*, May 20, 1947.

were no candidates] other than communist or anticommunist. . . . The delegates . . . place[d] themselves on either side of an invisible line. . . . No one crossed the line during the [two-hour] count. Two camps . . . in which there were . . . equal numbers of blacks and . . . real peasants [as in metropolitan France].”³⁸ The journalist noted that poor, socially nonwhite Réunion Islanders (glossed as “blacks”) were just as likely to support the landowners as they were the Communist Party. The Communists fought for the rights of poor workers, while landowner coercion, violence, or bribes strongly pressured poor laborers to support candidates who did not want social legislation for La Réunion.

Unlike these clear divisions between Réunionnais political groups, the French administration did not have simple solutions to organizing DOM social legislation and economic development. Before 1946 each colony had to pay for itself by raising its own taxes. Powerful colonial governors and locally elected colonial councils reported to the Colonial Ministry. After 1946 the DOM deputies insisted on being attached to all the metropolitan ministries, as the metropolitan departments were, rather than being only under the Ministry of the Interior, as in Algeria.³⁹ Each DOM prefect, alongside the local *conseils généraux*, negotiated with all the different ministries in Paris; but Paris knew nothing about the overseas departments.⁴⁰ By 1953 government officials in Paris had still not noticed that La Réunion was now an overseas department, and Pierre Philip, La Réunion’s third prefect, complained that Paris still addressed correspondence to “the colony.”⁴¹

Hampered by administrative problems relative to “reconstruction” and by fighting two colonial wars, France thus failed to apply social legislation to the DOMs, contravening the 1946 law. Moreover, bureaucrats, ministries, and French prefects in the DOMs did not consider that the overseas populations really needed, or deserved, to have the same social rights as in the metropole. The DOM prefects influenced Paris, because they had far more local authority, prestige, and power than metropolitan French prefects (derived perhaps from their replacement of colonial governors).⁴²

In 1947 Robert Delavignette in the Colonial Ministry also did not think that the DOM populations had a right to equal social legislation. He wrote to other ministries summarizing a report from Martinique

³⁸ André Blanchet, *Le monde*, Jan. 25, 1949.

³⁹ Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mer (hereafter CAOM), FM/IAFFPOL/373, Césaire et Bis-sol, De Lepervanche et Vergès, Archimède et Girard à M. le ministre de l’outre-mer, Feb. 2, 1947. ADR, 249 W 36, Préfet Béchoff, L’île de la Réunion en 1951, July 14, 1951.

⁴¹ Centre d’Accueil et Recherche des Archives Nationales (hereafter CARAN), F/1cIII/1352, Préfet à M. [le ministre] de l’intérieur, Rapport mensuel janvier 1953, Feb. 2, 1953.

⁴² Paulin Bruné, *Mon dieu, que vous êtes Français: Essai sur la décolonisation par assimilation, Martinique, Guadeloupe, Guyane, Réunion* (Paris, 1996).

and suggested that DOM populations were cynical, seeing social rights “as the way of improving their standard of living at the state’s expense without giving anything notable back.”⁴³ This view, in which DOM populations did not have the basic right to French social legislation, again implied that their poverty was normal.

Until Debré’s arrival, La Réunion’s prefects and central government did not view DOM populations as the equals of metropolitan French. They only saw La Réunion’s strategic importance for French influence in Madagascar and in the Indian Ocean. Any social improvement for the island would serve purely geostrategic aims.⁴⁴ Philip clearly thought that Réunionnais were a culturally different people who were naturally poor. In a 1952 description of settlements around sugar estates on the island, Philip wrote of “a curious symbiosis between the ‘leprosy’ of Western industry and the poverty of the populous Asian monsoon countries [inhabited by] Creole workers, an exotic underclass, traditionally malnourished, underproductive, whose only needs are seeking shelter against the tropical sun and the diluvial rain.”⁴⁵ In this administrative view, Réunion Islanders needed only basic shelter. Their poverty was natural because they were “exotic,” not white.

During the 1950s the *petits blancs* were the only Réunion Islanders that the administration considered worthy of poverty relief. These groups were as poor as other islanders, but they always elicited special concern in official reports. The second prefect of La Réunion, Roland Luc Béchoff, even created an ad hoc poverty relief program specifically for *petits blancs* to emigrate to French-leased agricultural land in Madagascar.⁴⁶ In public, administrators proclaimed Réunion Islanders French. In private, they linked their poverty to their racial diversity and sought to improve only *petit blanc* lives. Before Debré’s involvement, then, the French administration worried about overseas French poverty only when it concerned European-looking populations who appeared to be in racial “decline.”⁴⁷

⁴³ CAOM, FM/IAFFPOL/373, Note confidentielle par Delavignette pour M. le directeur des affaires économiques, M. le directeur du personnel, M. l’inspecteur général du travail, May 1, 1947.

⁴⁴ CAOM, FM/IAFFPOL/385, Rapport fait par M. Roux, inspecteur des colonies concernant les questions sociales à la Réunion, Mar 30, 1946; CAOM, FM/IAFFPOL/386, Général de corps d’armée Pellet à M. le président du conseil (EMDN), M. le ministre de la France d’outre-mer, Sept. 9, 1947; CAC, 19940180/240, Paul Démange, préfet de la Réunion à M. le ministre de l’intérieur, June 15, 1948.

⁴⁵ ADR, 57 W 69, Préfet de la Réunion Pierre Philip à M. le ministre de la reconstruction et de l’urbanisme (sous-direction habitat), Nov. 7, 1952.

⁴⁶ Joël de Palmas, “L’émigration réunionnaise à la Sakay ou l’ultime aventure coloniale française, 1952–1977” (PhD diss., Université de la Réunion, 2004).

⁴⁷ CARAN, F/1c1/238, Rapport de M. Pierre Montel, secrétaire de l’état à l’AIR sur son voyage d’étude et inspection en Afrique du 16 au 31 mars 1953, n.d.; CAC, 19940180/9, Le problème démographique réunionnais et l’émigration réunionnaise à Madagascar, June 1, 1959.

From 1947 the French administration focused on agricultural subsidies to landowners.⁴⁸ In the African areas of the French Union, including La Réunion, the French administration provided family allowances for civil servants in 1950—populations better off than the majority. In 1952 some French social legislation also applied to salaried workers in the overseas departments (a measure brought to French Africa in 1956), but sharecroppers and agricultural laborers were not salaried. The PCF in La Réunion accused the French administration of treating Réunion Islanders as second-class French citizens in a colonial world and attempted to mobilize Réunionnais of all racial groups into forming a nonracial class consciousness.⁴⁹

From 1953 the new Communist leader was a Réunion Islander named Paul Vergès—son of Raymond Vergès—who had returned to the island after working for the Communist Party in Paris.⁵⁰ Paul Vergès's party critiqued the economic development, but the French administration saw this as an attack on France. In response, the French state highlighted the non-French and nonwhite ancestry of Vergès and other racially suspicious political opponents, emphasizing the official view that La Réunion's population was not really equal to metropolitan French citizens and did not have the right to political critique.

Vergès's mother was from Indochina, and he and his brother Jacques Vergès (who became a famous anticolonial defense lawyer) were born there.⁵¹ The French administration deployed images and discourse of the untrustworthy Métis to demonstrate Vergès's origins were "Asian" rather than "French." Fear of the "half-blood" in La Réunion was not part of its local political culture because the elite colored population had achieved a modicum of social acceptance and economic mobility since the nineteenth century.⁵² Yet the French administration resurrected racist criticism of the dangerous Eurasian to discredit Vergès's political views and politically silence his party. In 1957 Vergès's newspaper *Témoignages* reprinted criticisms of French policy in Algeria that had freely circulated in metropolitan French newspapers. The French administration in La Réunion took Vergès's newspaper to court

⁴⁸ In La Réunion, landowners used subsidies for mechanization. They started evicting sharecroppers en masse from 1952. This slowly began to restructure male employment in La Réunion from agricultural work to the highly subsidized state construction sector. CARAN, F/1cIII/1363, Préfet de la Réunion à M. le ministre de l'intérieur, Objet: Rapport mensuel de mai 1954, June 5, 1954.

⁴⁹ "Plus de 6 000 travailleurs et chômeurs," *Témoignages*, Apr. 2, 1957.

⁵⁰ Vergès worked in the Front Uni des Etudiants in Paris and at the Section Coloniale of the French Communist Party, a special office that coordinated Communist activities in the French colonies. Vergès, *Monsters and Revolutionaries*, 137.

⁵¹ Gauvin, *Michel Debré et l'île de la Réunion: Une certaine idée*; Vergès, *Monsters and Revolutionaries*.

⁵² Gagneur, "Prosopographie des élites politiques."

for defamation, demonstrating that free speech for Réunionnais was not as “free” as in metropolitan France.⁵³

The administration started police surveillance of other French citizens who were not clearly white.⁵⁴ Its racialized police surveillance differed from French policy in West Africa and Polynesia, where fear of Communism led the French administration to assimilate alleged Communist leaders to government posts.⁵⁵ In contrast, France believed that Réunion Islanders’ purported racial loyalties to China, to India, or to Communist or Muslim groups would manipulate poor Réunion Islanders to reject France’s influence in La Réunion. This was a ludicrous attempt to distinguish the loyal French inhabitants from disloyal “foreigners” on La Réunion, which had a large mixed-race population and no clearly defined racial majority. Yet the administration put racially suspect groups under surveillance by the *renseignements généraux* if they appeared to support foreign political doctrines.⁵⁶ The administration feared that French immigration laws were inappropriate for La Réunion, because overseas-born inhabitants of La Réunion could become French citizens and their children born in La Réunion became French citizens automatically. For Philip and Béchoff, Chinese and Muslim Réunion Islanders could never be loyal French.⁵⁷ Philip even stopped Indian immigration, as it might encourage La Réunion’s Hindu population to seek links with an independent Mauritius or with India, and sought to deny applications for French citizenship in La Réunion from these groups.⁵⁸

In 1956 Paul Vergès’s party achieved the height of its electoral success, winning two of La Réunion’s three seats for the National Assembly, eleven General Council seats out of thirty-six, and seven of La Réunion’s twenty-three municipal governments. Victory for a party that critiqued the French regime in overseas France worried the French administration. In his last dispatches from La Réunion in 1956, Philip

⁵³ “Procès de témoignages,” *Témoignages*, Mar. 5, 1957.

⁵⁴ CARAN, F/1cI/238, Préfet à [M. le] ministre de l’intérieur, traduction d’un télégramme chiffré, Feb. 19, 1953.

⁵⁵ Alexander Keese, “A Culture of Panic: ‘Communist’ Scapegoats and Decolonization in French West Africa and French Polynesia (1945–1957),” *French Colonial History* 9 (2008): 131–46.

⁵⁶ CAC, 19940180/240, Préfet de la Réunion à M. le ministre des affaires étrangères, Objet: Activité politique de la minorité indienne implantée sur le territoire de la Réunion, May 4, 1955.

⁵⁷ CARAN, F/1cIII/1363, Préfet de la Réunion à M. le ministre de l’intérieur, Objet: Rapport mensuel avril 1955, May 6, 1955; ADR, 57 W 69, Préfet de la Réunion Pierre Philip à M. le ministre de la reconstruction et de l’urbanisme (sous-direction habitat), Nov. 7, 1952.

⁵⁸ CAC, 19940180/240, Préfet de la Réunion à M. le ministre des affaires étrangères, Objet: Activité politique de la minorité indienne implantée sur le territoire de la Réunion, May 4, 1955; CARAN, F/1cIII/1363, Préfet de la Réunion à M. le ministre de l’intérieur, Objet: Rapport mensuel avril 1955, May 6, 1955; “Où s’arrêteront les ‘méthodes’ préfectorales de gouvernement[?],” *Témoignages*, May 13, 1955.

worried that continuing poverty in La Réunion would lead popular opinion against France. However, he claimed that bureaucracy, not state racism, handicapped social reform in La Réunion. “Without [administrative changes], Paul Vergès will be right when he [makes] parallels between Algeria and La Réunion [by saying,] ‘there is no reason for the Creole people not to demand its independence, in order to escape slavery and capitalist exploitation.’”⁵⁹

Yet instead of pushing for social reform in La Réunion, in 1956 the next prefect, Jean Perreau-Pradier, used his state authority to encourage widespread electoral fraud and gerrymandering in La Réunion specifically to reduce Communist Party influence and silence claims for reform. Thanks to his maneuvers, the Communists lost their two seats in the National Assembly and their majority in all but one of La Réunion’s city councils by 1959.⁶⁰ The Communist Party in La Réunion increasingly claimed that French social justice did not apply on the island and that the French administration was inadequate, corrupt, and colonialist.⁶¹ The French administration saw in these claims a threat to French power overseas. In 1959 Vergès formed the PCR, now independent from the French Communist Party, following similar movements by Césaire and other DOM political groups.⁶² The PCR now sought the abolition of the prefects and the island’s separation from what it saw as the foreign French colonial power.⁶³ Economic elites and the French administration viewed these developments with alarm. Yet neither the elites nor the French administration had a viable solution for defeating Vergès and his move for La Réunion’s political autonomy. “Poverty is spreading at a menacing speed, and with it Communism. Everyone is worried,” noted Cornu.⁶⁴

Fear of DOM autonomy pushed the French administration to repress political critique in overseas France without creating any major social reforms. Implicit state racism—which assumed that DOM populations were naturally poor unless they looked European—was also an ideological barrier to social reform in the DOMs. The main beneficia-

⁵⁹ CARAN, F/1cIII/1363, Préfet de la Réunion à M. le ministre de l’intérieur, Objet: Rapport sur l’activité du mois de mai, May 30, 1956.

⁶⁰ CAC, 19940180/244, Préfecture de la Réunion, La situation politique de ce département, June 5, 1959; Eugène Rousse, *Combat des Réunionnais pour la liberté*, vols. 1–2 (Saint-Denis, 1993).

⁶¹ “Le tribunal administratif dira si les ‘indigènes’ de la Réunion ont le droit de choisir librement leurs élus,” *Témoignages*, Oct. 19, 1957.

⁶² In 1956 Aimé Césaire abandoned the French Communist Party and in 1957 cofounded the Parti Progressiste Martiniquais. In 1958 the Union des Femmes Françaises in La Réunion founded the Union des Femmes Réunionnaises.

⁶³ CAC, 19940180/244, Préfecture de la Réunion, La situation politique de ce département, June 5, 1959; “Dénonçant le carcan de la tutelle,” *Témoignages*, Aug. 21, 1958; “Il faut faire des élections cantonales,” *Témoignages*, Mar. 27, 1958.

⁶⁴ AHC, 9 DE 1, Henri Cornu à Michel Debré, Confidentiel: Introduction à la vie réunionnaise, Apr. 11, 1963.

ries of social legislation in the DOMs during the 1950s were full-time salaried workers and civil servants—a minority of the total populations. Debré’s later programs would contrast with state assumptions about racially suspect loyalty to France, by targeting the mass poverty in La Réunion and by celebrating multiculturalism as inherently French. These reforms were also predicated, however, on a continuing political repression of autonomy movements.

**“Réunion Is a Moral Value for France”:
Debré and de Gaulle Rethink Race and Empire**

In June 1958 General de Gaulle assumed full political powers in France after the Algerian crisis had finally destabilized the French Fourth Republic. Michel Debré, a trained lawyer, was one of de Gaulle’s most committed political supporters. His first post in de Gaulle’s government was minister of justice. Debré spent 1958 and 1959 writing the new Fifth Republic constitution, which sought to reaffirm the place of France in the world and the role of democracy in France. While the constitution gave provision for statute changes in the overseas territories, there was no such provision for changing the statute of the overseas departments (including Algeria). In 1958 de Gaulle proposed a truce in Algeria. The fateful “*paix des braves*” backfired, and the white French Algerian minority—the *pieds noirs*—became mistrustful of de Gaulle’s intentions in Algeria. In 1959 he appointed Debré prime minister of France.⁶⁵ De Gaulle hoped that Debré’s appointment would help him retain credibility with the *pieds noirs* in Algeria, because Debré wished Algeria to remain French.⁶⁶ Unlike de Gaulle, Debré was ideologically invested in maintaining Algeria and the other overseas departments, to the extent of fomenting settler insurrection in Algeria in 1958.⁶⁷

De Gaulle also faced independence movements elsewhere in the ex-French colonies, renamed the French Community in 1958. In July 1959 de Gaulle and Debré attended the fourth executive meeting of the French Community in Madagascar and visited Réunion Island. The Indian Ocean visit was important: Philibert Tsiranana, recently elected president of Madagascar, supported African independence inside the French Community, the recently renamed French Union, and Vergès had just started calling for La Réunion’s political autonomy from France.

When de Gaulle arrived in La Réunion, with Debré at his side, he

⁶⁵ Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria, 1954–1962* (New York, 2006); Evans, *Algeria*.

⁶⁶ Part of Debré’s February 1960 law in Algeria—applied to the French overseas departments on October 15, 1960—was the “administration et pacification de l’Algérie” through the state control of potentially troublesome civil servants by transferring them to work in the metropole. Gauvin, *Michel Debré et l’île de la Réunion: Une certaine idée*, 208.

⁶⁷ Michel Debré and Odile Rudelle, *Trois républiques pour une France: Mémoires* (Paris, 1984).

proclaimed Réunion Islanders “passionately French.” He promised to maintain France’s place in the Indian Ocean and the French presence in overseas France.⁶⁸ Debré was highly impressed at what he interpreted as Réunion Islanders’ “exceptional” welcome for de Gaulle. Given the racial diversity of Réunionnais, Debré was also surprised at their patriotism. “It was moving to see the impression of national unity across the astonishing variety of faces,” Debré noted in his memoirs.⁶⁹ For Debré, La Réunion could prove the viability of the French Republic overseas. Yet he was shocked at the “shameful” and “scandalous” indifference of the metropolitan administration to the social situation on the island.⁷⁰

In his memoirs Debré recalled his conviction that French national unity should be capable of containing racial difference and making overseas France “true French lands for people proud to be French.”⁷¹ This vision underpinned Debré’s policy initiatives in overseas France as demonstrated by his memoirs, ministerial correspondence, and public speeches. On his return from La Réunion in 1959, Debré used his influence as prime minister to improve awareness of overseas France in government and to create social change through legislation. He wrote to all ministries, emphasizing their responsibilities to overseas France. He set up a regular interministerial committee on DOM issues. He hosted dinners at Matignon where overseas deputies could meet central administrators. Unsurprisingly, given his own quasi-religious commitment to state service, Debré’s first DOM initiative was obligatory military service, so DOM youth could fulfill their citizenship obligations and benefit from professional training in metropolitan France.⁷²

Debré’s “adapted departmentalization” law of April 26, 1960, increased power for the prefects of the overseas departments to reduce their dependence on central ministries (as Philip had complained in 1956). Debré also asked Robert Lecourt to create two *loi programmes* to coordinate financial provisions for overseas France. The July 1960 law for the DOMs created new spending provisions for three years. It provided tax incentives to industry, allocated 290 million francs to the minister of overseas France, and granted 119 million francs to all other

⁶⁸ CAC, 19940180/9, Préfet de la Réunion à M. le ministre délégué auprès du premier ministre, Objet: Visite de M. le général de Gaulle, président de la République française, à la Réunion le 9 et 10 juillet 1959, July 18, 1959; “Allocutions président Charles de Gaulle et Debré visite de la Réunion,” *Le progrès*, July 15, 1959; Michel Debré, *Trois républiques pour une France: Gouverner 1958–1962* (Paris, 1988) (hereafter *Gouverner 1958–1962*).

⁶⁹ Michel Debré, *Trois républiques pour une France: Gouverner autrement, 1962–1970* (Paris, 1993), 22.

⁷⁰ Debré, *Gouverner 1958–1962*, 350.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 351.

⁷² According to Pierre Messmer, cited in Gauvin, *Michel Debré et l’île de la Réunion: Une certaine idée*, 18. Obligatory military service applied in the Antilles in 1961 and in La Réunion in 1963 (Debré, *Gouverner 1958–1962*, 352).

ministries responsible for policy in the DOMs.⁷³ From 1960 Debré's "subsidy tap" started flowing. It radically changed economic mobility and racial perceptions in overseas France.⁷⁴ Not everybody saw these changes as positive, however; many especially criticized the increase of prefect powers.⁷⁵

Debré's most unpopular measure was the 1960 *ordonnance Debré*. It allowed DOM prefects to transfer civil servants in the DOMs who "threatened the public order" to the metropole.⁷⁶ Debré's private note to overseas prefects emphasized that the statute specifically targeted civil servants who criticized "France and the French character of the DOMs."⁷⁷ Used to suppress free speech among civil servants working in the DOMs, the statute exiled thirteen civil servants from La Réunion who were *suspected* of Communist sympathies to work in metropolitan France, as well as one Guianese, nine Guadeloupeans, and three Martiniquais. Although Debré's statute grew out of events in Algeria and opposition movements in La Réunion and Martinique, the French administration retained it until 1972.⁷⁸

After the Algerian defeat in March 1962, Debré resigned, disillusioned, from his post as prime minister. Later that year de Gaulle held new legislative elections after dissolving the French parliament to prove his triumph over party politics. Debré lost his Indre-et-Loire seat. In La Réunion the constitutional court annulled the first electoral district results for these National Assembly elections because of corruption on both sides (especially by the French administration, which carried out significant fraud to ensure Vergès's defeat).⁷⁹ New elections were called for 1963. Vergès was a serious contender for the post, with significant support in La Réunion. His right-wing opponent, Gabriel Macé, mayor of Saint-Denis, did not have strong support even among his own party. To ensure that right-wing factionalism in La Réunion did not allow Vergès to win, a Réunionnais senator named Georges Repiquet asked Debré to represent the right wing in La Réunion and fight for the

⁷³ *Loi programme* 60-776. The *loi programme* for the *territoires d'outre-mer* was voted on June 23, 1961.

⁷⁴ Gauvin, *Michel Debré et l'île de la Réunion (1959-1967)* (Paris, 1996); José Nosel, "Appréciation de l'impact économique de la départementalisation à la Martinique," in *50 ans de départementalisation outre-mer*, ed. Fred Constant (Paris, 1997), 25-71.

⁷⁵ Even supporters of Debré conceded that this did not have the intended effects.

⁷⁶ *Ordonnance n°60-1101* du 15 octobre 1960 relative au rappel d'office par le ministre dont ils dépendent des fonctionnaires de l'Etat en service dans les DOM dont le comportement est de nature à troubler l'ordre public.

⁷⁷ CAC, 19940180/254, Premier ministre aux préfets DOM, Objet fonctionnaires . . . nature à troubler l'ordre public, Nov. 16, 1960.

⁷⁸ The statute was announced two weeks before de Gaulle proclaimed "Algérie algérienne" and followed the growing Organisation de la Jeunesse Anti-coloniale Martiniquaise, a group of ten thousand members calling for "Martinique pour les martiniquais."

⁷⁹ Gauvin, *Michel Debré et l'île de la Réunion (1959-1967)*.

parliamentary seat. After consulting with de Gaulle, Debré accepted the offer in early 1963.⁸⁰ De Gaulle was adamant about maintaining France's influence in La Réunion.⁸¹ He informed Alfred Diefenbacher, the new prefect of La Réunion in 1963, that "La Réunion has a moral value for France and is an oceanic extension of the national territory."⁸² After the Algerian defeat, de Gaulle could not abandon France's overseas departments to political parties seeking autonomy from France.⁸³

Debré also intended "to defend faraway France . . . to assure the security of [people proud to be French], [and] to prove that the idea of the nation was superior to race."⁸⁴ As his election speeches and writings demonstrate, Debré recast Réunion Islanders' racial diversity as no longer a threat to French loyalty. Race was unimportant for being a French citizen as long as one was loyal to the French state. Departing from the 1950s beliefs that Réunionnais were naturally poor and underserving of French social legislation, Debré proclaimed that France recognized Réunion Islanders as French, whatever their ancestry. "French solidarity and fraternity must have the same meaning in La Réunion as in Marseille, Paris, Tours, or Strasbourg. How can you not feel the heart of Paris beat profoundly on this land? Our union is eternal."⁸⁵ For Debré, Réunion Island was an integral part of France: "historically, culturally, socially, and sentimentally a French province."⁸⁶ This echoed long-standing beliefs of the Réunionnais elites. Debré's innovation was to underpin such rhetoric with policy measures specifically to improve social equality among La Réunion's nonwhite population.

Debré's election campaign viewed La Réunion's place in France as an extension of the Gaullist formats of republican citizenship and the centralizing French state, but the PCR, *L'humanité*, and *Le monde* denounced his campaign as an overtly "colonialist" maneuver.⁸⁷ Debré's campaign rhetoric was stark. "Vote for Debré, or tomorrow you will all be Russian!" his campaign warned,⁸⁸ demonstrating his perception of La Réunion's importance in Cold War proxy struggles, not just metropole-colony relationships. For Debré, either Réunion Islanders were pro-French and their race was unimportant, or they were pro-

⁸⁰ Gauvin, *Michel Debré et l'île de la Réunion: Une certaine idée*.

⁸¹ Gauvin, *Michel Debré et l'île de la Réunion (1959–1967)*, 13.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 102.

⁸³ Gauvin, *Michel Debré et l'île de la Réunion (1959–1967)*.

⁸⁴ Debré, *Trois républiques pour une France: Gouverner autrement 1962–1970*, 22.

⁸⁵ AHC, 9 DE 1, Elections législatives du 5 mai 1963, 1er circonscription, Candidat Michel Debré.

⁸⁶ CAC, 19790543/74, Document provisoire: Rapport d'enquête monographique préalable au plan directeur régional de la Réunion, première frappe, Mar.–Apr. 1963.

⁸⁷ "Réunion III—Au Royaume du Père UBU," *L'humanité*, Mar. 6, 1963.

⁸⁸ Yann Le Masson, dir., *Sucre amer*, 1963. Available in the Bibliothèque Nationale, France, NUMAV-31733.

Communist and might as well be Russian. According to Debré's logic, it was impossible to be both French and Communist. Debré's rhetoric, underpinned by legislation, began to reconfigure perceptions of race in La Réunion through a celebration of islanders' diverse yet inherent Frenchness, contrasting with perceptions of non-French immigrants in metropolitan France after 1962.

To ensure Debré's win, de Gaulle actually encouraged state intervention in the 1963 elections in La Réunion, and the French administration in Paris and La Réunion paid for Debré's campaign. Debré's election campaign poster superimposed his profile onto de Gaulle's profile; the only time de Gaulle ever allowed a politician to use his image in an election campaign.⁸⁹ Two weeks before the 1963 election, the prefect of La Réunion asked the minister of overseas France for help in promoting "the interest of the [electors] for the candidacy of Michel Debré . . . [including] the attribution of an extra subsidy for the planters who were victims of cyclone Jenny."⁹⁰ Debré—who no longer had any official role in government—announced this financial aid in the name of the French state during his campaign.

The PCR, in contrast, viewed Debré's ideas of French citizenship in La Réunion as a colonial-era practice of celebrating the "mother country." The director of a short film released in 1963 about Debré's election to the Réunion Island seat shared the party's view.⁹¹ The film, *Sucre amer*, portrays France as a violent colonial power in La Réunion. It paints a picture of Debré's campaign as the French state's cynical manipulation of mixed-race Réunion Islanders who were an exotic Creole people, not at all "French." This contradicted not only Debré's claims but also the party's 1950s claims that Réunion Islanders were French. It also overlooked the probability that many Réunion Islanders did see themselves as French, especially those who had fought in World Wars I and II, or done military service.⁹² In the film's final scene, Vergès proclaims to a large crowd "the urgent need to finish, as quickly as possible, with the colonial oppression!" The camera pans over the cheering PCR supporters, with their fists in the air as the credits roll. In contrast to Debré's republican rhetoric, Vergès's campaign attacked electoral corruption and proposed La Réunion's "decolonization"

⁸⁹ Gauvin, *Michel Debré et l'île de la Réunion: Une certaine idée*, 254.

⁹⁰ CAC, 19941080/41, Préfet de la Réunion à M. le ministre d'état chargé des DTOM, Elections législatives partielles du 5 mai 1963, Apr. 20, 1963.

⁹¹ Le Masson, *Sucre amer*.

⁹² Rachel Mnémosyne, "Les soldats réunionnais dans la Grande Guerre, 1914–1918" (PhD diss., Université de la Réunion, 2006); Alex Maillot (social activist and retired priest of Le Chaudron), interview by author, Saint-Paul, La Réunion, June 5, 2008; Jean-Paul Carpaye (builder), interview by author, Saint-Denis, La Réunion, July 3, 2009.

through political autonomy from France.⁹³ Despite significant grassroots support, Vergès could not compete with the personal association that many people made between Debré and the revered de Gaulle. State support and local political pressure decided the election in favor of Debré. Prominent, socially white economic leaders such as Jacques Caillé, Albert Avril, and Cornu, as well as Roger Payet, the head of the Confédération Française des Travailleurs Chrétiens, the largest trade union, and Albert Ramassamy, one of the first nonwhite political activists (later a socialist senator of La Réunion), also supported Debré.⁹⁴ The Communist Party was definitively beaten, but not silenced.⁹⁵

Debré's acceptance of multiracial Réunion Islanders and his welfare programs also intended to crush the autonomy movements. Debré predicted to Diefenbacher that "once poverty has disappeared from [La Réunion], the Communists will lose the fundamental reason for their success." Immediately after winning the election, Debré decided that France should concentrate on improving the social conditions of all Réunion Islanders—and the DOMs in general—without distinction of race, rather than seeing nonwhite poverty as natural and putting nonwhite populations under surveillance.⁹⁶ State-imposed welfare would repay islanders' loyalty to France and crush leftist political critique.

In 1963 members of the left-wing French press, Vergès, PCR activists, and a prizewinning filmmaker disregarded the potential benefits of Debré's campaign and his moves to improve welfare provision for the DOMs. They simplistically denounced it as a continuation of French colonialism, even though Debré's attitude to DOM poverty relief was manifestly different from that of La Réunion's landowning families, who saw thatched huts as ideal accommodation, or that of the French state, which saw Réunion Islanders in the 1950s as naturally poor unless they were white. Some Réunion Islanders would agree about this "colonialist" analysis today.⁹⁷ Yet the "colonialist" critique overlooks the fact that

⁹³ CAC, 19941080/41, Elections législatives du 5 mai 1963, 1er circonscription de la Réunion, Liste d'union contre la fraude.

⁹⁴ Private letters from these people supporting Debré's campaign are in the Debré papers, AHC, 9 DE 1; Albert Ramassamy, *La Réunion: Colonisation et intégration* (Saint-Denis, 1987).

⁹⁵ Number of people on the electoral roll: 54,170; number of votes: 38,273. Debré: 30,908 votes (80.76 percent), Vergès: 7,365 votes (19.24 percent). Gauvin has shown that there was certainly electoral fraud in later local and national elections in La Réunion between 1964 and 1967. He cautions that while it was unlikely that fraud did not occur in Debré's 1963 elections, it would be difficult to estimate the proportion (*Michel Debré et l'île de la Réunion [1959–1967]*, 121).

⁹⁶ CAC, 19940180/240, Synthèses mensuelles, May 29, 1964; AHC, 9 DE 84, Note au sujet de la Réunion, Feb. 2, 1964.

⁹⁷ Vergès and Marimoutou, *Amarres*; Jean-François Samlong, "La France prise à son propre piège?" in *La crise de l'outre-mer français: Guadeloupe, Martinique, Réunion*, ed. Suzanne Dracius-Pinalie, Jean-François Samlong, and Gérard Théobald (Paris, 2009), 19–88; Nelson Dijoux (retired Réunion Communist Party activist), interview by author, Saint-Denis, La Réunion, Oct. 30, 2008; F.D. (local government employee), interview by author, Saint-Denis, La Réunion, June 4, 2009.

the majority of Réunion Islanders saw the possibility of social mobility and voted for Debré rather than support the Communist Party's calls for political autonomy. The next section shows how Debré's new programs changed racial and social boundaries in La Réunion, undermining previous PCR activism based on mobilizing class interest.

FASO Social Legislation Improves Racial and Social Mobility but Undermines Autonomy Movements

In the DOMs and the TOMs during the 1950s, debates raged over the rights of ex-colonial citizens to the same welfare provisions as metropolitan French workers. In the 1960s, largely thanks to initiatives from Debré, France imposed new welfare and social legislation in the DOMs. Yet most scholars conclude that Debré's initiatives were oppressive, with a high "human cost," and judge DOM populations to have been simply "submissive," without ever asking how ordinary islanders felt about welfare.⁹⁸ This section specifically demonstrates how one social legislation measure changed employment possibilities for women with African and Indian ancestry by focusing on subsidized primary-school canteen workers. It emphasizes that Réunion Islanders well understood the advantages and disadvantages of this new employment and decided whether to participate in it by measuring the benefits to themselves, even if the cost was not participating in Communist Party political demonstrations.

Debré reorganized social and health care in the overseas departments on a miniature version of the metropolitan French model in 1963. DOM employer contributions funded social insurance organizations through the Fonds d'Action Sanitaire et Sociale Obligatoire (known as FASO in La Réunion or FASSO in the French West Indies).⁹⁹ FASO coordinated health and social care in the DOMs, funded by metropolitan French subsidies and by DOM private-sector salary contributions.¹⁰⁰ Although the 13.5 percent salary contributions were the same as in the metropole, FASO operated differently. In the DOMs the individual family allowance diminished after the fourth child, whereas in the metropole it stayed the same. FASO used the saved money for state-imposed "collective" benefits: access to school canteens, contraception

⁹⁸ Samlong, "La France prise à son propre piège?"; H. Adlai Murdoch, "Introduction: Departmentalization's Continuing Conundrum: Locating the DOM-ROM between 'Home' and 'Away,'" *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 11, no. 1-2 (2008): 307-25; Lionnet, "Disease, Demography, and the 'Debré Solution.'"

⁹⁹ Loi 63-778, 31.7.1963, Arrêté du 14 août 1963, modifié par arrêté du 14 octobre 1968.

¹⁰⁰ Public sector workers, such as civil servants, teachers, and other state employees, contributed to metropolitan social funds, instead of to FASO.

programs, and social workers. When FASO created better employment opportunities, women actively took these jobs up for the superior wages and social status.

The FASO fund created enormous social change in La Réunion and all the other DOMs.¹⁰¹ It improved child health through food services to children. In 1964, only eighteen months after its creation, FASO had set up 135 primary-school canteens in La Réunion. FASO also subsidized 50 percent of the salaries for municipal canteen workers preparing and serving meals.¹⁰² In 1963, before FASO municipal funding started, personnel costs accounted for 27 percent of the municipal budget for Saint-Paul (the second biggest commune in La Réunion). Personnel costs massively increased the following year, thanks to FASO money, with 56 percent of Saint-Paul's budget spent on personnel.¹⁰³

Women with African and Indian ancestry and little or no formal education now gained employment as canteen workers, no longer confined to racially profiled, low-status jobs as domestic workers or washerwomen or to backbreaking agricultural labor.¹⁰⁴ The disappearance of a nonwhite servant class inevitably worried economic elites. In 1964 La Réunion's right-wing Catholic weekly newspaper, *Croix sud*, feared that women would now be discouraged from being domestic workers and exhorted them to "love your job, even though you are badly paid!"¹⁰⁵

The secondary effect of FASO funding was to shore up political support for the municipal councils in power (all supporting Debré) and undermine popular support for the PCR. Political clientelism thrived, as FASO canteen work was based on an annually renewable contract. To obtain another contract, canteen workers had to publicly support the political party of the mayor in power, directly influencing the continued success of right-wing groups in La Réunion (the PCR did not regain any municipal government until 1971). I interviewed many people about

¹⁰¹ Jacqueline Ancelin, "D'hier à aujourd'hui: L'action sociale familiale des jeunes CAF des DOM," *Recherches et provisions* 75, no. 49 (2004): 49–59; Barbara Welch, "Table d'hôte or à la carte? French and Commonwealth Approaches to Development in the Central Lesser Antilles," *Canadian Geographer/Le géographe canadien* 40, no. 2 (1996): 136–47; Bruné, *Mon dieu, que vous êtes Français*; Arlette Gautier, "Les politiques familiales et démographiques dans les départements français d'outre-mer depuis 1946," *Cahiers des sciences humaines* 24, no. 3 (1988): 389–402; Bertrand François-Lubin, "Les méandres de la politique sociale outre-mer," in Constant, *50 ans de départementalisation outre-mer*, 73–95.

¹⁰² Gauvin, *Michel Debré et l'île de la Réunion: Une certaine idée*.

¹⁰³ Saint-Paul has more detailed budget records than Saint-Denis for this period. Archives Municipales de Saint-Paul, vol. Jan. 25, 1963, to Apr. 24, 1965, Affaire 1, Examen et vote du budget primitif pour 1963, Jan. 1, 1963.

¹⁰⁴ CARAN, F/1cIII/1363, Préfet de la Réunion à M. le ministre de l'intérieur, Objet: Rapport mensuel de mai 1954, June 5, 1954; "UFF appel femmes réunionnaises," *Témoignages*, June 2, 1950; "Les conditions misérables des bonnes créoles," *Témoignages*, Oct. 19, 1956; CAC, 19940180/9, Documentation sur le département de la Réunion et la ville de Saint-Denis à l'occasion du voyage du général de Gaulle, July 1959.

¹⁰⁵ "Regard sur la vie—employée de maison," *Croix sud*, Apr. 26, 1964.

the advantages and disadvantages of increased social mobility.¹⁰⁶ Mme. Robert, whose sister worked for Saint-Denis's municipal government, summarized their political obligations: "They were always running around for the politicians! [*Tout le temps té bat karé pou bann zhomme politique!*]." The son of a municipal employee, Mr. Gourama (Jr.) noted, "I think the people who complained about Debré were the ones who had a choice."¹⁰⁷

Between 1963 and 1973 FASO gave power to mostly right-wing municipal governments already in office, and some workers resented that better opportunities were tied to political clientelism. Mr. Gourama (Sr.) worked as a construction worker for the anticommunist Saint-Denis municipal council but secretly supported the Communist Party. He did not publicly attend Communist Party rallies because he was afraid of losing his job.¹⁰⁸ Another municipal worker's son remembered the mayor's political pressure. "Whenever one of the [French] politicians came to Saint-Denis, [Mom] had to go and welcome [him], because she worked for the municipal government. If she didn't turn up, she would have lost her job. . . . You give someone a job, and all their life they have to be grateful? I'm revolted by that political mechanism."¹⁰⁹ Yet many people—including Mr. Gourama (Sr.)—were prepared to sacrifice political ideals for improved material prospects. As one informant remembered: "It was logical! . . . Politics depends on money. . . . If you haven't got a job, the politicians come and find you, that's what politics is!"¹¹⁰ An informant in the Petite Ile neighborhood of Saint-Denis remembered, "Almost everyone was right-wing. Why? . . . If you supported the [Communist Party], you didn't get sugar [handouts]; on that basis people weren't choosy [*ils ne faisaient pas le difficile*]. . . . My parents were right-wing by obligation."¹¹¹

However, this voting "obligation" was not necessarily felt as colonialist oppression by Réunion Islanders. Another member of the Petite Ile informant's family remembered being a canteen worker and an anti-communist political activist with relish. "Ah, Michel Debré! I was his

¹⁰⁶ Almost all interviewees had mixed African and Indian ancestries; had been laborers, washerwomen, or domestic workers in 1962; and lived in Petite Ile, an urban neighborhood of Saint-Denis, La Réunion.

¹⁰⁷ Mme. Robert (retired), interview by author, Saint-Denis, La Réunion, July 10, 2009; Mr. Gourama (municipal employee), interview by author, Saint-Denis, La Réunion, July 6, 2009.

¹⁰⁸ Jean-Pierre Gourama (Jr.; local government employee), interview by author, Saint-Denis, La Réunion, July 6, 2009.

¹⁰⁹ F.D. (local government employee), interview by author, Saint-Denis, La Réunion, June 4, 2009.

¹¹⁰ F.S. (local government employee), interview by author, Sainte-Marie, La Réunion, June 19, 2009.

¹¹¹ B.A. (local government employee), interview by author, Saint-Denis, La Réunion, June 19, 2009.

activist! I supported him [*mwin té mars ek li*]! Day or night!”¹¹² Mme. T took pleasure in attending political meetings because there would be free samosas and Coca-Cola. She was not merely content with food. She managed to get a city council job for her daughter and a social housing apartment in Saint-Denis for her sister, because she was an important neighborhood political organizer.¹¹³ Conversely, Jean-Paul Carpaye’s mother was a domestic worker for a rich family in Saint-Denis and attended Communist meetings in Petite Ile, rather than supporting the anticommunist municipal government. The family never received municipal handouts.¹¹⁴

The outcome of the improving financial climate and of Debré’s interest in La Réunion was higher incomes and improved social standing for many. When a new bank opened in Saint-Denis in 1963, Mme. B became a cleaner and stopped washing clothes for a living in the Saint-Denis river. It allowed her, she told me proudly, to holiday several times in Mauritius as part of the Bank’s *comité d’entreprise* during the 1980s.¹¹⁵ Her emphasis on the new types of holidays available to her underlines a broader result of Debré’s social legislation in the DOMs: improved prospects for people of African and Indian origin, and the rise of a petit bourgeoisie aspiring to French-style consumption practices and no longer limited by racial categorizations of labor. Increased education opportunities (derived from the expansion of financial transfers to the overseas departments) also fostered a new middle class, many of whose constituents also spurned PCR activism and autonomy movements as their conditions improved.¹¹⁶

Yet although FASO programs initiated by Debré helped erode the idea that servile labor was the only suitable job for nonwhites, racial prejudice had not been eradicated by the beginning of the 1970s, as revealed in a 1971 secret police report: “Mr. X, a teacher in a Saint-Denis high school, told his class that another teacher, Mme. Y, had advised him not to ‘uplift the little blacks [*petits nègres*] too much, or there won’t be any more domestic servants in La Réunion.”¹¹⁷ The police report specifies only that Mr. X was “known for his Communist ideas.” It completely ignores the racist ideas of Mme. Y, implying that her view was still normal in La Réunion: appropriate employment for African-origin Réunion Islanders was only low-paid domestic service.

¹¹² Mme. T (retired municipal employee), interview by author, Saint-Denis, La Réunion, Oct. 10, 2008. The Creole expression for public political support is *mars pou*—to “march” for.

¹¹³ Mme. T, interview by author, Saint-Denis, La Réunion, Oct. 7, 2008.

¹¹⁴ Jean-Paul Carpaye (builder), interview by author, Saint-Denis, La Réunion, July 3, 2009.

¹¹⁵ G.B. (retired bank cleaner), interview by author, Saint-Denis, La Réunion, May 20, 2009.

¹¹⁶ Desse, “Classes moyennes et identité dans les départements français d’Amérique,” 103–12.

¹¹⁷ CAC, 19940180/240, Préfecture de la Réunion, Note de renseignements, July 27, 1971.

Thus social legislation and increased education opportunities (aided by Debré's 1960 and 1963 pressure on the Ministry of Education) slowly began to decouple race from social class for a new group of Réunion Islanders, at the same time undermining the class-based movement of the PCR. Debré's new policies began to socially and racially integrate DOM populations in ways that their formal French citizenship had not achieved.¹¹⁸ Yet the consequence was the creation of a growing group of people who left PCR activism behind as their own conditions improved, and the increasing expectation for municipal governments, rather than landowners, to employ people.¹¹⁹

Shantytown Laws Enable Individual Claims for Social Equality (1963–1973)

Between 1963 and 1973 Debré was a deputy for La Réunion and retained considerable influence in central government through his close relationship with de Gaulle and subsequently as minister for economy and finances (1966–68), minister for foreign affairs (1968–69), and minister of defense (1969–73). Debré's influence coincided with a favorable economic climate for France. While in government, Debré mobilized funding for social housing provision in overseas France, giving preferential treatment to La Réunion. For Debré, a centralized state, rather than grassroots demands, would ensure social equality in La Réunion. This new approach was controversial. While it was clearly effective to have Debré as a powerful voice defending DOM interests, it was also arguably a new form of colonialism—welfare colonialism. Debré's statute encouraged poor Réunion Islanders of African and Indian ancestry to claim their rights to low rents and to equal treatment. This improved living conditions and contradicted the PCR's claims to be the only group representing the poor in La Réunion.

By 1963 the state-funded social housing company in La Réunion (Société Immobilière de La Réunion, or SIDR) had tried for over a decade to acquire land in Saint-Denis to build worker housing for growing urban populations. Private landowners allowed their plots in Saint-Denis to be rented for informal settlements. In the Rivière-Viadère settlement, about a thousand inhabitants (not including children) lived with an average worker income of three thousand CFA francs per

¹¹⁸ Josée Bergeron, "La politique familiale française et l'identité nationale," *French Politics, Culture and Society* 17, no. 3–4 (1999): 101–16.

¹¹⁹ Helen M. Hintjens has described contemporary municipal government clientelism in La Réunion, now even more widespread, as "the major mode of legitimation of the entire integration project [with France]" ("Reunion Island: Being There and Being French," in *Alternatives to Independence: Explorations in Post-colonial Relations* [Aldershot, 1995], 73).

month.¹²⁰ The landowners rented out their plots to workers for profit: Edouard Rivière and Léonce Viadère earned one hundred thousand and eighty thousand CFA francs per month from rents, respectively.¹²¹ The SIDR wanted to use this land for social housing, but the landowners only wanted to sell at an inflated price. Either way, the inhabitants did not want to leave. Evicting workers to construct social housing was highly political. There was strong Communist Party support in the informal settlements. Isnelle Amelin, an energetic PCR activist and the president of the Union of Women in La Réunion, regularly held meetings in the informal settlements, led evening classes to help inhabitants learn to read, and denounced the French “colonial regime” for the poverty there.¹²² Communist support dissuaded the housing company from evicting inhabitants.¹²³ The SIDR was at an impasse.

When Debré became deputy of La Réunion in 1963, he recast the informal settlements as *bidonvilles*, or shantytowns. For Debré, shantytowns were the “number one” social and political problem in La Réunion: poverty created support for the Communist Party and “opposition” to the French state.¹²⁴ In late 1963 he proposed a law to deal with the shantytowns in metropolitan and overseas France.¹²⁵ In the National Assembly, Debré cast himself as the necessary agent of moral change for La Réunion, someone able to understand the island and create “a coherent doctrine for it.”¹²⁶ He used his personal influence to pressure government ministers into passing the legislation during 1964.¹²⁷

While waiting for the law to pass, Debré persuaded Diefenbacher of La Réunion to issue a decree setting a limit for shantytown rents in three La Réunion towns.¹²⁸ He justified this as a measure of public order because charging high rents in informal settlements could

¹²⁰ In 1945 La Réunion’s currency was aligned with the other French African colonies as the CFA franc (known as the *franc des colonies françaises d’Afrique* in 1945). La Réunion retained this currency until 1975.

¹²¹ ADR, 57 W 37, SIDR, Procès-verbal du conseil d’administration, terrains, politique foncière de la société à Saint-Denis, Mar. 10, 1961; ADR, 302 W 51–52, Liste des baux consentis par M. Rivière; liste des baux consentis par Mme. Viadère Léonce sur son terrain à Saint-Denis boulevard Doret (Camélias), Jan. 21, 1961; AHC, 9 DE 31, Enquête sommaire sur les bidonvilles réalisée par les services de la construction entre juillet et septembre 1965.

¹²² CAC, 19941080/41, Ministère de l’intérieur, Renseignements généraux, Objet: Réunion organisée par le Parti Communiste à Saint-Denis, “Montgaillard” pour protester contre d’éventuelles expulsions de locataires, June 12, 1963.

¹²³ ADR, 49 W 38, SIDR, IVe plan pour les DOM, Construction des logements, 1961.

¹²⁴ Gilles Gauvin, “Michel Debré et l’île de la Réunion: Archéologie d’une identité nationale (1946–1988)” (PhD diss., Sciences-Po, 2002); AHC, 9 DE 81, Oct. 26, 1964.

¹²⁵ Assemblée Nationale, 1st session, Nov. 5, 1963.

¹²⁶ Assemblée Nationale, séance, 1963–1964, Nov. 21, 1963.

¹²⁷ See Debré’s correspondence in AHC, 4 DE 46, with Minister of Construction and Minister of the Interior.

¹²⁸ Gauvin, “Michel Debré et l’île de la Réunion: Archéologie.” The La Réunion prefecture actually published two decrees: 2829/DAG/2, on October 14, 1964, defined a bidonville, and 2616/DAG/2, on November 14, 1964, gave geographic limits for the decree’s application.

create “political” disturbances, which the Communist Party used in their criticisms of the French regime in La Réunion. The new decree fixed shantytown rents at one CFA franc per square meter for a bare plot of land, or fifty CFA francs per meter for a house in designated areas. This immediately reduced shantytown rents by about 75 percent. Debré calculated that the landowners of Rivière-Viadère would then sell their plots to the social housing company because of lost income from shantytown rents.¹²⁹ The decree repositioned the state, rather than grassroots political parties such as the PCR, as the arbiter of social justice. Despite the opposition between the French state and this local movement, there was also significant popular support for the shantytown decree, demonstrated by Réunion Islanders who wrote to the prefect.

Debré told the prefect that La Réunion’s right-wing press must now publicly support the shantytown proposals.¹³⁰ Apart from the PCR newspaper *Témoignages*, from 1946 to 1964 La Réunion’s press almost never talked about the island’s endemic poverty. Yet as soon as the prefect published the shantytown decree in 1964, the center-right paper *Le progrès* announced that “compatriots” in the shantytown lived in such bad conditions because they had no choice—a complete change from seeing multiracial Réunion Islanders as naturally poor.¹³¹ A week after the decree, La Réunion’s Catholic newspaper *Croix sud* suddenly claimed that improving La Réunion’s shantytowns was a goal of Christian social justice.¹³² The PCR was threatened by the state’s new social justice role in La Réunion.¹³³ When the shantytown decree was published in October 1964, *Témoignages* claimed not to have space to print it for a week. *Témoignages* subsequently announced that it would defend the landlords and landowners, whom the newspaper usually called “capitalist exploiters,” demonstrating that distrust of Debré led the PCR to dismiss state social improvement programs not initiated by them.¹³⁴

Instead of seeing urban poverty in Réunion Island as natural, Debré’s shantytown decree allowed individuals to claim their rights to the prefect—and the French state—without the mediation of social activist groups. The prefecture deployed the CRS (*compagnies républi-*

¹²⁹ ADR, 64 W 39, Préfet de la Réunion à M. le ministre d’état, DOM-TOM, Feb. 17, 1965; ADR, 64 W 65, Arrêté 2829/DAG/2 portant la nomenclature des villes et délimitation des secteurs où sont applicables les dispositions de l’arrêté 2616/DAG/2 du 14/10/64 concernant le montant des loyers, des terrains nus et des abris provisoires situés dans les lieux dits “bidonvilles,” Nov. 14, 1964.

¹³⁰ ADR, 64 W 19, Préfet Alfred Diefenbacher à Michel Debré, June 29, 1965.

¹³¹ “Le scandale des bidonvilles,” *Le progrès*, Jan. 24, 1964.

¹³² “Bonne nouvelle,” *Croix sud*, Oct. 25, 1964.

¹³³ “Quand l’administration et les départementalistes ‘découvrent’ un problème qu’ils ont eux-mêmes créé!,” *Témoignages*, Nov. 2, 1964.

¹³⁴ *Témoignages*, Oct. 23, 1964; *Témoignages*, Oct. 22, 1964.

caines de sécurité) riot squad, the gendarmerie, and the *police nationale* to conduct door-to-door surveys, check shantytown rent receipts, and classify houses as dilapidated. Approximately eight hundred houses were surveyed in central Saint-Denis between 1964 and 1966, and a similar number of houses in other major towns.¹³⁵

Many tenants in shantytowns wrote to the prefect to ask the police to check their living conditions. Mme. R claimed the right to low rent: "Since the shantytown inspections, [the other tenants] pay only five hundred francs. I wasn't there on the day of the inspection, I still pay twenty-five hundred francs. I ask whether you can do anything. *We are all poor and above all equal.* I don't see why they should pay less rent than me when we have the same things."¹³⁶ This was a political claim to be recognized as an equal French citizen, through the idiom of a right to pay a lower rent, the same as other poor people in Saint-Denis. Another Réunion Islander cited knowledge of their citizenship rights: "I am waiting for your services to send someone. . . . If I am asking the shantytown commission, it's because I am conscious of the law." A third letter writer emphasized, while asking for help, that her citizenship *obligations* had been filled: "I'm a mother of six children, and my eldest is fighting for France [*sous le drapeau*] in the metropole. . . . I can no longer cope with life in the poverty which surrounds me, and I am expecting another baby. Judge my situation for yourself." The conditions described in these letters and the shantytown survey demonstrate not only the slow social changes wrought by Debré's decree but also a marked change from the 1950s, when only the PCR fought for the rights of the poor.¹³⁷

Debré's shantytown law for metropolitan and overseas France finally passed in the National Assembly in December 1964.¹³⁸ It forced landowners to sell plots used as shantytowns and ensured that housing companies rehoused inhabitants elsewhere. Between 1964 and 1971 the French state funded nearly ten thousand social houses in Saint-Denis. These modernist architectural blocks continue to structure the urban landscape and social dynamics of Saint-Denis and the French West Indies.¹³⁹ In the metropole, the same *loi Debré* was used to rebuild

¹³⁵ Sainte-Clotilde, Le Port, Saint-Pierre.

¹³⁶ ADR, 64 W 1-13 series; my emphasis. I have omitted the name of the letter writer to protect the anonymity of people who are still living.

¹³⁷ For a more detailed discussion of these shantytown letters, see Finch, "Governing Rights in La Réunion."

¹³⁸ Loi n°64-1229 du 1er décembre 1964 tendant à faciliter aux fins de reconstruction et d'aménagement, l'expropriation des terrains sur lesquels sont édifiés des locaux d'habitation insalubres et irrécupérables, communément appelés "bidonvilles."

¹³⁹ AHC, 9 DE 31, Enquête sommaire sur les bidonvilles réalisée par les services de la construction entre juillet et septembre 1965; ADR, 1259 W 3, Préfet à M. [le] secrétaire d'état logement, Objet: Législation sur les loyers dans les DOM, June 10, 1966.

Table 1 Ministry of Economy and Finances shantytown renovation budget, 1966–1968 (in millions of francs)

	Paris regions	Metropolitan provinces	DOM total	Réunion	Guadeloupe	Guiana	Martinique
1966	10.9	10.2	12.0	4.3	3.9	1.2	2.6
1967	40.5	20.1	15.8	6.8	4.3	0.7	4.0
1968	27.2	21.5	18.9	6.2	4.0	4.5	4.2
Total		130.4	46.7	17.3	12.2	6.4	10.8

Source: AHC, 4 DE 46, Ministère de l'économie et des finances, Programme Bidonvilles, May 23, 1967.

the Champigny shantytown in Paris and Cap Janet in Marseille before it was replaced by the 1970 *loi Vivien*.¹⁴⁰

At the beginning of 1966 Debré declared in La Réunion that state funding for housing in La Réunion was 267 percent more than in 1955. This increase clearly derived from Debré's influence in central government after 1962 and his determination to increase funding for overseas France. In 1966 the budget for shantytown renovation in La Réunion equaled 20 percent of the entire funding for housing in metropolitan France (including the massive sums dedicated to removing shantytowns in Parisian *banlieues*). From 1966 to 1968 Debré consistently allocated more money to La Réunion than to Martinique, Guadeloupe, or Guiana (table 1). Thus Debré's shantytown initiatives (the 1963 statute and the 1964 law) enabled poor Réunion Islanders to appeal to the French administration to improve their living conditions. Debré used his influence to transform housing policy in overseas France from the laissez-faire policy of the 1950s—critiquing Réunionnais workers' thatched houses but doing nothing about them, as mentioned above—to massive funding for social housing.

Debré claimed the central state, not the PCR, was the arbiter of social justice. This worked as long as financial transfers from Paris flowed, but the 1973 oil crisis ended new welfare transfers to overseas France for almost a decade. Valéry Giscard d'Estaing's victory in the 1974 presidential election ended Debré's ministerial career and radically reshaped housing policy for all of France.¹⁴¹ From this time

¹⁴⁰ Vincent Viet, "La politique du logement des immigrés (1945–1990)," *Vingtième siècle*, no. 64 (1999): 91–103; Thierry Durousseau, "Ensembles et résidences à Marseille 1955–1975: 20 années formidables (Marseille, 2009)," www.paca.culture.gouv.fr/dossiers/xxeme_marseille/monographies/1508_cap_janet/janet.htm (accessed July 20, 2011); "Bidonvilles: Les bulldozers attaquent à l'aube," *L'express*, Feb. 28, 1965; Marie-Christine Volovitch-Tavares, *Portugais à Champigny: Le temps des baraques* (Paris, 1995).

¹⁴¹ Sabine Effosse, *L'invention du logement aidé en France: L'immobilier au temps des Trente Glorieuses* (Paris, 2003).

the Left reclaimed the discourse and also the power of solving social inequality in La Réunion. By 1976 a report warned that 60 percent of housing in La Réunion was still “shantytowns.”¹⁴² Debré’s massive funding programs during the 1960s did not transform the housing conditions for the majority of Réunion Islanders outside Saint-Denis. Yet for the inhabitants of Saint-Denis—25 percent of whom still live in social housing—Debré’s interventions changed their living conditions, enabling them to claim the right to pay low rent in informal settlements and to move into cyclone-proof concrete houses by the end of the 1960s.

Conclusion

“[Debré’s] version of France wanted to hear only its own voice.”¹⁴³ From 1963 Debré’s hegemonic republican discourse, underpinned by his political influence in Paris and La Réunion, suppressed any criticism—for example, from the Communist Party—in the public sphere. Yet Debré’s combination of personal commitment to overseas France and influence in the corridors of power was radically new. His vision of a multiracial overseas France as inherently French, rather than seeing ethnic origin as a dangerous barrier to French loyalty, was a radical departure from the 1950s state attitudes to La Réunion and from colonial-era racial divisions perpetuated by La Réunion elites. From 1959 to 1973 new social legislation and financial transfers eroded racialized labor categories in La Réunion and the other overseas departments. Debré’s centralized initiatives, although they offered poor DOM populations new possibilities of earning money outside the poverty and coercion of the plantation, sharecropping, or domestic service, eroded support for the PCR through repression and through racial and social mobility.

African- and Indian-origin women transitioned from domestic service and washing clothes to employment in school canteens thanks to FASO funding. Hundreds of families in Saint-Denis contacted the state directly to obtain redress for high shantytown rents, eventually moving into concrete apartments rather than staying in thatched cottages in informal urban settlements. Arguably, Debré’s policies from 1959 inaugurated a new era of welfare-led colonialism for overseas France, in which financing a French presence overseas in La Réunion was more important than any outmoded ideas about inferior or dangerous races or of a “civilizing mission.”

¹⁴² AHC, 9 DE 95, Groupe Réunionnais d’Etude sur l’Habitat Social, La Réunion, Apr. 1976.

¹⁴³ Samlong, “La France prise à son propre piège?” 37.

If this was a new colonial move, many Réunion Islanders also pragmatically measured the benefits to themselves. Réunion Islanders were never the passive victims of Debré's patriarchal discourses and state-funded welfare programs. They judged the benefits to themselves from the social mobility offered. This enormous expansion of social legislation enabled both elite and ordinary Réunionnais to create new understandings of multiracial Frenchness, and of social equality, distinct from colonial-era representations. Similar processes occurred for those who lived in the other French overseas departments. Although the Communists contested Debré's idea that La Réunion needed a centralized state solution to poverty, no groups (including the Communist Party) ever called for the social legislation to end.¹⁴⁴

Debré's vision of Réunion Island citizenship arguably mirrored the "multinational French citizenship" that France's ex-colonies, in the French Union, had called for between 1946 and 1960. Debré's initiatives were also exactly what the Communist Party in La Réunion had been arguing for since 1946.¹⁴⁵ Debré's vision of multiracial citizenship in overseas France was a radical new state policy that also differed from the post-1962 institutional racism toward ex-colonial immigrants no longer seen as French in metropolitan France. Debré based his vision of a new French order in La Réunion on a selective erasure of ongoing inequality in La Réunion. Critics do point to the naïveté of believing that increased social legislation would make overseas France the same as metropolitan France.¹⁴⁶ At the same time, French welfare programs and government transfers arguably fulfilled the promise of Republican Universalism. Expanded financial transfers to education, local government, and construction programs increased employment opportunities to Réunion Islanders throughout the 1960s. This ensured that many Réunion Islanders were materially better off, and social mobility was no longer confined to civil servants or racial groups perceived to be "European," as it had been in the 1950s. Despite the PCR's vocal opposition to Debré's policies, his measures had a lot of popular support among Réunion Islanders. As Debré had predicted, increasing class and racial mobility eroded mass support for the PCR's autonomy program, although this was also due to rigid state repression of Vergès and his political claims.

¹⁴⁴ Jean-Paul Révauger, "The Influence of Culture and of Institutional Factors in Social Policy: French Social Policy in Martinique," *Social Policy and Society* 1, no. 4 (2002): 285–92; Bernard Idelson, "L'espace médiatique réunionnais, hier et aujourd'hui," *Hermès*, nos. 32–33 (2002): 101–10.

¹⁴⁵ Cooper, "From Imperial Inclusion to Republican Exclusion?"; Cooper, "Provincializing France."

¹⁴⁶ Justin Daniel, "L'espace politique martiniquais à l'épreuve de la départementalisation," in Constant, *50 ans de départementalisation outre-mer*, 223–60.

Social legislation was therefore key to decolonization struggles in all the former French colonies, whether or not they became overseas departments. From the 1960s it slowly transformed the structural inequalities between French citizens in La Réunion and French citizens in the metropole. Debré's celebration of multicultural Frenchness has been overlooked in the scholarship of race in postcolonial France, which has focused on the hardening of racial barriers and the rejection of multicultural discourse in the metropole after 1962. Yet studying welfare measures for overseas France before and after 1962 challenges assertions that the contemporary French Republic has always been incapable of incorporating difference.