Slavery on the Balance Sheet:  
Pierre-Samuel Dupont de Nemours and the Physiocratic Case for Free Labor

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The half-century preceding the French Revolution witnessed a boom in tropical commodities, especially sugar, in France's Caribbean colonies, leading to a dramatic increase in the number of African slaves toiling in the French empire and a growing debate over the institution of slavery. The link between sugar and slavery was made most explicit by Enlightenment writers such as Helvétius, who thundered that “not a single cube of sugar arrives in Europe which is not stained with human blood,” and Voltaire, whose antihero Candide is told by a slave cruelly mutilated by his master, “This is the price paid for the sugar you eat in Europe.”

Defenders of slavery, especially colonial planters, merchants, and others who benefited from the transatlantic economy, stressed the profits brought by the sugar trade to the French nation, and argued that only Africans could withstand hard labor in the tropical environment. Opponents of slavery, many of whom would later organize themselves as the Société des Amis des Noirs, made emotional appeals against the cruelty of slavery, but rarely addressed the claims that the plantation system was economically beneficial to France or that its abolition would...

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bring financial hardship. However, in a remarkable essay published in the Physiocratic journal *Les Ephémérides du Citoyen* in 1771, Pierre-Samuel Dupont de Nemours, a young economic theorist and editor of the journal, argued that slavery was not only morally reprehensible, but also economically wasteful, and that the added expenses required to purchase, maintain, and discipline slaves and to track down and capture runaways made it a more costly system than free labor. Dupont’s attack on the economic case for slavery failed, however, to achieve its desired impact, partly because it is buried within his review of Saint-Lambert’s anti-slavery novella *Ziméo*, and partly because the Physiocratic principles that inform his argument failed to fully represent the rapidly changing global economy of the eighteenth century and consequently fell out of favor soon after he wrote it.

In her recent study, *Trading Places*, Madeleine Dobie has argued that anti-slavery sentiment in France derived not from a principled moral objection to the enslavement of other human beings, as scholars such as Lynn Hunt and Jean Ehrard have argued, but rather “from within the new field of liberal political economy … Economic discourse was not just an important facet of abolitionism but rather the principal conceptual register in which slavery and emancipation were discussed in France between 1763 and the French Revolution.” Dobie is correct to note that public criticism of slavery, relatively rare in the early eighteenth century, became increasingly common in the decades preceding the French Revolution, and that most pre-revolutionary opponents of slavery, recognizing that France’s lucrative foreign commerce depended on slave-produced commodities from the colonial Caribbean, envisioned a gradual transition from slavery to freedom that would jeopardize neither France’s strategic position in the Atlantic world, nor the prosperity of its colonial possessions. It is my contention, however, that Dobie has reversed cause and effect in her analysis of French Enlightenment discourse on slavery. I will argue instead that French critics of slavery came to their opposition on moral and ethical grounds, and that only after deciding that slavery was immoral did they seek to persuade their compatriots that it was not economically necessary.

Moral and material considerations were not so neatly separated in the eighteenth century as they appear today. For the Physiocrats, both were interwoven by a providential plan, which Dupont called “the pattern mapped out by Nature herself to ensure the welfare of mankind on this earth.”

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elaborated by the court physician François Quesnay, held that agriculture was the source of all wealth and that replacing mercantilist regulations with a free market in grains would ensure the prosperity of the nation and the well-being of its citizens. Jessica Riskin writes, “the Physiocrats made the economy an integral part of the natural world, its naturalism literal and absolute,” while Liana Vardi notes that the Physiocrats believed that “nature’s message had always been there for man to see.” More than a simple economic school, Physiocracy was also a quasi-religious movement, with its master (Quesnay) and loyal disciples, and whose doctrines were believed (by its initiates, at least) to hold the key to human happiness. Dupont and his fellow Physiocrats believed that prosperity and harmony would inevitably result if humanity would just follow the dictates of nature.

The relatively brief heyday of Physiocracy from the late 1750s to the early 1770s coincided with a moment of crisis in France’s overseas empire and a lively debate regarding its future. The loss of Canada, Louisiana, and much of France’s foothold on the Indian subcontinent as a result of the Seven Years’ War was a national humiliation, and the resulting imperial retrenchment toward the remaining Caribbean colonies increased the relative importance of plantation slavery and tropical commodities to the French state. The abolition of the corrupt and inefficient Compagnie des Indes in 1769 stimulated debate regarding the relative merits of monopolistic trade companies versus free trade, although, as James McClellan and François Regourd note, “the principles of mercantilism rather than capitalism or industrial expansion focused the government’s colonial and overseas vision virtually down to 1789.” The military imperative of revenge against Britain, which consolidated its position as ruler of the seas as a result of the Seven Years’ War, also contributed to debate as to whether colonies should be seen primarily as projections of France’s military power abroad, or as purely financial ventures. Some French statesmen, notably the duc de Choiseul, saw the plantation colonies (which had been easily overrun by the British during the war) as militarily useless, and hoped to establish a new settlement colony to replace Canada and provide manpower to defend the empire. Dupont engaged with these issues in his writings; in a 1769 treatise, Du commerce et de la Compagnie des Indes, he criticized colonialism, condemned the company’s monopoly over trade with the Orient, and argued that it would cost the nation less to buy tropical commodities

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from other nations than to subsidize the failed company with capital that would be better spent in domestic improvements.\(^7\)

The occasion for Dupont to present his economic case against slavery was the publication of a new edition of Saint-Lambert’s *Saisons*, a volume of poetry that also included three short stories. One of these stories, *Ziméo*, was the tragic tale of an African prince lured into captivity by Portuguese merchants and sold into plantation slavery in Jamaica, where he escaped to the mountains and became the leader of a war of revenge and liberation against the English colonists. Meanwhile, unbeknownst to Ziméo, his betrothed, Ellaroë, and her father, captured along with him, have fallen into the hands of an enlightened planter, the Quaker Wilmouth, who treats them and his other slaves with kindness. The improbable climax of the story comes when Ziméo is reunited with his lost loved ones and agrees to spare the good master who had treated them well. Saint-Lambert’s story, romantic and somewhat lachrymose, offers an emotional and moral case against slavery, presenting the slave rebel Ziméo as a noble and heroic character and his cause as justified. (Surely it is significant that Ziméo’s revolt threatens to annihilate the English rather than the French). The overall message of the story, however, is reformist rather than revolutionary. The slaves of the good master remain loyal during the revolt, even choosing to remain on the plantation rather than join the maroons, while the brutalized victims of his more rapacious neighbors join the rebellion and slaughter their erstwhile masters.

After summarizing *Ziméo* for his readers, Dupont commented, “This story, which demonstrates how much Negro slavery is hateful and detestable in itself, offers us the occasion to develop a calculation through which we hope to prove that it is also a useless and burdensome crime for us. It was about two years ago that we made this calculation, the idea of which the famous Benjamin Franklin had already suggested in 1751, and thereafter we had often shared it with our friends.”\(^8\)

Dupont’s text then makes an abrupt shift from book review to economic treatise, as the remainder of his essay is devoted to the exposition of a detailed (yet, as we shall see, speculative) analysis of the economics of slavery.

That Dupont should have invoked Benjamin Franklin to support his case is not surprising, as the Philadelphia sage was both an early supporter of the antislavery cause and the Anglo-American best known to the French learned public. Furthermore, Riskin observes that the Physiocrats were among Franklin’s earliest French admirers, sensing in his work “a congenial model of nature and of natural science, one that ascribed moral purpose to nature and privileged these

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purposes in scientific explanation.”

Jacques Barbeu Dubourg, a Physiocrat, physician, and experimental scientist, published a French translation of Franklin’s writings and circulated his essays in manuscript form among Physiocratic circles. These evidently included Franklin’s 1751 “Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind,” which criticized mercantilist restrictions on economic activity in the colonies, and asserted, “The labor of slaves can never be so cheap here as the labor of workingmen is in Britain.”

Dupont wrote to Franklin on May 10, 1768, “I had known you as … the Physicist, the man whom nature allows to unveil her secrets. My friend Monsieur le Docteur Barbeu du Bourg has since communicated to me several of your writings concerning the affairs of your country.”

Including an endorsement from Ziméo’s author in his essay, Dupont suggested that the two men served the same purpose—denouncing slavery—by different means. He modestly wrote, “M. de Saint-Lambert is a sublime poet, while we are mere calculators, not cold but severe. Happily those whom we seek to persuade are not less sensitive to the calculation of their interests than to the portrait of their duties.”

He then went on to outline his argument, writing, “Never has one seriously claimed that it was good and admirable to enchain one’s peers and to treat them as beasts of burden … but [defenders of slavery] believe that it brings great savings, that the labor of slaves who are not paid wages or salaries, is much cheaper than would be the labor of free men, who would have to be paid; finally, if the latter were employed in the cultivation of our colonies, sugar would be too expensive.”

Dupont denounced such crassly self-interested defenses of slavery, remarking, “To say that it is legitimate to enslave a man in order to have his labor more cheaply, is to say that it would be legitimate to murder him on the open road in order to have his money more cheaply.”

Declaring that it was “a gross error” to believe that the only cost of slaves to their masters was the cost of their food, Dupont then presented his readers with a set of actuarial calculations to estimate the true total cost of plantation labor. Franklin’s influence on Dupont is clear in that both men’s arguments enumerated the same categories of expenses associated with slavery: purchase price, the opportunity cost of lost interest, the risk of loss of life, expenses for food and

\[\text{\textsuperscript{9}}\text{Riskin, 111-2, 73-4.}\]


\[\text{\textsuperscript{11}}\text{Dupont letter to Benjamin Franklin, May 10, 1768, quoted in Riskin, 114.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{12}}\text{Dupont, 216-217.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{13}}\text{Dupont, 217-218. A decade after Dupont’s essay, the marquis de Condorcet would make an almost identical argument, including the same comparison between slavery and highway robbery, to deny that one could justify immoral acts on the grounds of economic utility. See Schwartz (Condorcet), Réflexions sur l’esclavage des nègres (Neufchâtel: Société Typographique, 1781).}\]
clothing, the cost of supervision, and low productivity resulting from the slave's lack of interest in the product of his labor. Dupont asserted that an adult male laborer cost 1200 livres to purchase, that this purchase tied up investment capital that otherwise could be invested at ten percent interest per year, and that the average working lifetime for a slave on a Caribbean sugar plantation was just eight to ten years. Nor was this all. In order to ensure the work discipline of slave laborers, Dupont asserted, planters had to employ one overseer for each ten workers and maintain a security force to prevent revolt and to track down runaways. Adding to these hidden expenses the costs of feeding and clothing the slaves, Dupont asserted that the true operating costs of slavery came to 420 livres per slave per year, or twenty-eight sous per day of work. He then concluded, “We ask if, when there are now in Europe twenty or twenty-five million souls who have barely ten écus or thirty livres per year on which to live, if there would be a lack of free men willing to go to earn … twenty-eight sous per day in the islands? … Would it not be enough merely to post in what place the work is to be found, and by what port one could embark?”

While Dupont's balance sheet of the economics of slavery gives the impression of statistical precision, it is, much like the Tableau Economique of his master François Quesnay, an essentially speculative and hypothetical exercise, and rested upon assumptions that were more a matter of conjecture than of demonstrable fact. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's critique of Quesnay's Tableau Economique could just as easily apply to Dupont's calculations on the economics of slavery. She writes, “The Tableau constitutes … a counter-factual argument, and suffers … from the confusion between its reliance upon concrete historical facts and its development of hypothetical situations logically derived from the initial, real data.” Similarly, James McLain notes Dupont’s “habit of inventing, or of manhandling already collected, statistics to prove his points,” and argues that “Du Pont's analysis of slavery combines his own imaginative powers in creating plausible statistics to support an argument for the abolition of slavery that, although coinciding with Du Pont's own concept of moral justice, is based strictly on Physiocratic principles.”

I would concur with Fox-Genovese and McLain on the hypothetical nature of Dupont's statistical argument, but would further elaborate that this hypothetical argument is predicated upon the Physiocrat's a priori assumption that, in the divinely inspired natural order of things, morality and economic rationality could not be in conflict with one another. As Dupont put it, “[Self] interest is always in accord with the most severe justice, and almost always with benevolence, [while]
wickedness and oppression … are but the result of poorly understood interests.”

If slavery was immoral, as Dupont and Saint-Lambert both believed it to be, then it could not also be profitable, at least once all of its hidden costs and externalities were taken into account. Dupont would, therefore, seek empirical proof for a position that he had first adopted on ethical, rather than economic grounds.

As McLain notes, some of Dupont's statistical arguments and inferences are at best questionable. Following Franklin, Dupont factored into the expenses of slavery the “opportunity cost” of forgoing interest income of ten percent on the capital used to purchase slaves—a comparatively high rate of return that also entailed significant risk of loss, which does not figure into the calculations. He somewhat arbitrarily factored in a ten percent surcharge on the price of each slave for the maintenance of public order, without evidence that this figure corresponded to actual defense costs in the colonies or that these charges were paid primarily by the planters themselves. In fact, as historians of the French Caribbean have demonstrated, the issues of paying for defense and service in colonial militias were hotly debated topics between the colony and the metropole.

Finally, Dupont estimated the average working life expectancy of a slave as no more than eight to ten years. This figure was generally accepted at the time, and was cited by defenders of slavery, such as the colonial official Pierre-Victor Malouet, as well as by opponents of the practice. Moreover, the inability of the slave population of the French Caribbean to maintain itself through natural reproduction seemed to attest to the truth of this grim statistic. The reality, however, was somewhat more complicated, as contemporary scholarship on the demographics of slavery and the Atlantic slave trade has demonstrated.

While new arrivals to the Caribbean (both free and enslaved) experienced horrific death rates due to the unfamiliar disease environment, Creole slaves born in the Americas, as well as African-born slaves who survived an initial period of “seasoning,” could expect to live much longer than ten years, and slave societies with high proportions of native-born slaves, notably the southern United States, were thus able to increase their enslaved populations through natural reproduction. This greater life expectancy was surely one factor in the preference,

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17 Dupont, 222-223.
noted by observers such as Moreau de Saint-Méry, for Creole over African-born slaves.²⁰

In calling for the replacement of slavery by free labor, Dupont rejected the common claim that white Europeans, natives to the temperate zone, could not survive harsh labor in the tropics. Blaming the poor health of white colonists on their idleness and debauchery, he declared that the first settlers, pirates and frontiersmen, “resisted better than today’s colonists, precisely because they were more laborious.”²¹ He went on to stress the superiority of free white labor in ethnocentric terms, calling white Europeans “one of the most lively and robust species that Heaven has placed on the earth … clearly superior … to the Negro, to the Asian, and to the native of America.”²² Here as well, Dupont followed Franklin’s lead, for the Pennsylvania philosopher had also closed his essay with the hope that the American colonies would become sites of free white settlement rather than predominantly African slave societies.²³

Rather than simply leaving the point with this assertion, however, Dupont hedged his bets somewhat. That he should do so is not surprising, for the claim that white Europeans could not withstand labor in the heat of the tropics had been repeated so many times as to become a truism in eighteenth-century French discourse. The climate theory of human difference enjoyed a respectable intellectual pedigree, as it was endorsed by Montesquieu and Buffon, and was the most frequent argument made by pro-slavery apologists, such as Malouet and Moreau de Saint-Méry, that slavery, however distasteful, was a necessary evil in tropical colonies. The recent Kourou disaster, in which thousands of white colonists sent to Guyana under the Choiseul ministry died of hunger and disease, seemed to confirm the mortality of the Torrid Zone to white settlers, at least to those required to perform heavy physical labor.²⁴ For Dupont to suggest that free French colonists were to toil in the tropical sugar cane fields would surely have provoked a furious response.

For this reason, Dupont suggested that free white colonists instead cultivate other crops in the Antilles, and that rather than being captured and transported as slaves, Africans should be encouraged to cultivate sugar cane in their own lands and to sell it to European brokers. He cited the recent observation of his fellow Physiocrat, Pierre Poivre, who had observed in his travels throughout Southeast

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²¹ Dupont, 237.
²² Dupont, 237.
²³ Franklin, 336.
Asia that sugar cane was cultivated profitably by free peasants in Indochina. Condemning slavery in the French Caribbean, Poivre declared, “After what I have seen in Cochinchina, I cannot doubt that free cultivators … would not have produced double the product that is drawn from the slaves.” Poivre also claimed that sugar cane grew naturally and more abundantly in West Africa than it did in the Antilles. However, as would be the case with Dupont, Poivre’s appeal for the cultivation of sugar by free non-white peasant farmers was motivated as much by moral outrage as by economic utility, as he concluded, “Such was the wish of the author of nature, who created men free.”

These observations of a fellow Physiocrat inspired Dupont to envision a very different sort of colonialism. Remarking on the horrors wrought by the slave trade along the African coast, Dupont then commented that West Africans “undoubtedly would have preferred to sell us the juice of their canes than the blood of their brothers.” Dupont imagined a civilizing mission that anticipated French policies in Africa a century later, writing, “We would have perfected their manners and our own, we would have made them industrious cultivators, and we would not have become senseless and cruel oppressors.” Finally, he argued that this humanitarian project would benefit French consumers, concluding, “The cultivation of sugar established among the Negroes in their own country … where Nature assumes most of the costs of production, would cost very little, and we would probably today have refined sugar at six liards per pound, which is its price in Cochinchina.”

Dupont’s economic arguments, however, made little impression on the growth and rising power of the plantation complex, which, Pierre Boulle has demonstrated, enjoyed unprecedented influence in French administrative circles during the period from the 1760s to the 1780s.

David Brion Davis has observed that the debate over the profitability of slavery between Dupont and his critics “was symptomatic of fundamental problems that would long haunt economic liberalism. Given the facts of history, how could it be shown that slavery was not a natural expression of individual self-interest, and thus in accordance with

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26 Dupont, 243-244.
economic laws?29 Whatever the moral merits of his cause, Dupont’s economic indictment of slavery flies in the face most of the available evidence. Even among the generally profitable plantation colonies of the Caribbean, Saint Domingue stood apart as, in the words of John Garrigus, “one of the most profitable and exploitative systems of plantation slavery in world history,” and Alex Dupuy has observed that Saint-Domingue outproduced all of the British Caribbean colonies combined, and that its planters reaped annual returns ranging from eight to twelve percent of their investments.30 James McClellan concurs, observing, “slavery absolutely permeated Saint-Domingue … No colonist questioned the institution of slavery or the proposition that colonial development depended fundamentally upon slavery.”31 Given these “facts on the ground,” it is little wonder that Dupont’s claims that slavery was economically harmful to the French metropole found few adherents among his countrymen.

One of the sources of error in Dupont’s economic calculations is his strict adherence to the Physiocratic principle that land alone is the source of all value.32 This shortcoming limited the applicability of Physiocratic theory to the rapidly changing world of the late eighteenth century, and was one of the main reasons that the doctrine was quickly supplanted by the theories of Adam Smith and his followers in the last quarter of the century. Interestingly, Pernille Røge has recently observed that, while the founders of Physiocracy, Quesnay and Mirabeau, “stress that slavery was a perversion of the natural order and that slave labour was inefficient,” the Physiocrat with the most experience in the colonial Caribbean, the onetime intendant of Martinique, Le Mercier de la Rivière, “believed that slave labour was crucial to a well-functioning plantation system” and “implied that slaves produced wealth, thus developing the notion of a produit net des nègres.”33 As the Physiocrats were primarily concerned with cereal cultivation in metropolitan

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France, this disagreement did not produce a rift within the movement, but it does highlight the contradictions between Enlightenment theory and colonial practice that Dupont’s essay sought to reason away.

Lacking a theory of labor productivity or of value added to commodities through the process of their production, and without direct experience in the economics of plantation societies, Dupont approached the question of colonial labor in an abstract way, disconnected from colonial realities, focusing primarily on access to land and motivation to cultivate it. He did not take into account the very labor-intensive, multi-stage process by which raw sugar cane is converted to molasses and then to crystalized sugar, a system of production that, in the words of Sidney Mintz, united “field and factory,” with labor and technological inputs contributing significant added value to the raw product of the land. While he was surely correct to observe that the slave, who does not share in the product of his labor, would have less incentive to work productively than would the free laborer, Dupont failed to recognize that the planters had ample means of coercion to ensure compliance, and that such coercion could be exercised to a far greater degree over a population whose rights as human beings were scarcely acknowledged in law, with even the modest protections of the Code Noir routinely flouted in practice. Few scholars today would argue that enslaved labor was less profitable or productive than free labor, although a lively scholarly debate remains as to why this was so.

The economic revolution that Dupont advocated in the close of his review essay—with sugar cultivation displaced to free black farmers on the West African coast, and the Caribbean colonies transitioning to the cultivation of cereals and

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34 Mintz quoted in McClellan, Colonialism and Science, 64.
other foodstuffs by free white yeoman farmers—was driven by moral rather than financial considerations. It was entirely consistent with Physiocratic principles, which insisted, despite growing evidence to the contrary, that in a providentially ordered universe, economic utility and morality could not be in conflict with one another. The Physiocratic project enjoyed official favor for a time, as it coincided with the desire of statesmen such as Choiseul for colonies of white settlement that could serve as military bastions in a future war against Great Britain. Ultimately, however, this project failed to leave a lasting mark on colonial policy because it ignored the economic realities of a highly profitable and increasingly influential plantation complex. Robert-Jacques Turgot, Dupont’s friend and mentor, responded to the young Physiocrat, “I very much wish that you were right to assert that slavery is not beneficial to anyone, for it is an abominable and barbaric injustice.”

Turgot nonetheless expressed his doubts of Dupont’s thesis that slavery was also economically detrimental, remarking, “humanity is not sufficiently happy that injustice is always punished immediately.” Turgot suggested that slavery might be economically detrimental to society as a whole, yet beneficial to the slaveholding planter elite, and later elaborated, “I have read your piece about the Nègres, and I find that you have not addressed the question. I am upset, because others will respond to you, and unfortunately they will be correct in doing so.”

Finally, as both Vardi and Riskin have argued, Physiocracy rested on very reductionist assumptions of human nature, assuming natural inclinations toward justice and enlightened self-interest, and discounting the role of “the passions.” These shortcomings are especially apparent in the work of Dupont, whom Mack Thompson has faulted for “a habit of squandering his energy on impractical and ephemeral projects and a tendency to confuse the world of his desire with the world as it really was.” Dupont wrote that “the man who is not depraved cannot help but love that which is useful to his peers and to himself… there is no man who can fully understand justice and refuse to submit to it, who can deeply feel nature and not adore its laws. The evil man is but a more or less ignorant fool.”

The Physiocrat’s unshakeable confidence that a simple demonstration of the economic

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39 Turgot letter to Dupont, cited in Seeber, 103.
41 Dupont, 164-166.
folly of slavery would suffice to bring about its abolition is evidence of his generous but naïve optimism. The planters, merchants, and officials who dominated the plantation colonies and enjoyed both the material and symbolic aspects of mastery would not be so easily moved by appeals to the better angels of their nature. Dupont’s contemporary Jean-Jacques Rousseau recognized the limitations of a theory based on human beings as purely rational actors, writing in a 1767 letter to Mirabeau, “Gentlemen, permit me to inform you that you give too much weight to your calculations and not enough to the inclinations of the human heart and to the play of the passions. Your system is excellent for the residents of Utopia, but will not do for the sons of Adam.”

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42 Letter of July 26, 1767 from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to the marquis de Mirabeau, quoted in Vardi, 144.