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Overseas France

THE TROUBLES which wracked New Caledonia in the late 1980s, the controversy about French nuclear testing on the atoll of Mururoa in the Pacific, the periodic launching of satellites from French Guiana (Guyane) and even the ‘cod war’ between France and Canada over fishing rights near Saint-Pierre and Miquelon have intermittently brought the existence of the French départements et territoires d'outre-mer (DOM-TOMs), France’s overseas outposts, into a wider focus. The ten DOM-TOMs are strategically scattered around the world in the Atlantic, Caribbean, Pacific and Indian Oceans and in Antarctica. Despite their distance from France, the metropolitan ‘hexagon’, the départements d'outre-mer (DOMs), are legally as much a part of France as Paris or Marseille. The DOMs, at least in theory, have institutions and legal systems that replicate those of the métropole; the territoires d'outre-mer (TOMs), although enjoying greater autonomy and particularistic institutions, are also legally part of the French Republic. Many of the DOM-TOMs have been part of France much longer than Nice and Corsica. The remnants of France’s once vast overseas empires, they account for a population of one and a half million French citizens and cover a land area of over 120,000 square kilometres, even excluding the French region of Antarctica. With the recognition of exclusive economic zones in the Law of the Sea agreements, the DOM-TOMs give France the third-largest maritime area in the world.¹
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Table 1. French Overseas Territories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Territory</th>
<th>Population 1988</th>
<th>Area (sq. kms)</th>
<th>Date of first establishment of French control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DÉPARTEMENTS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French Guiana (Guyane)</td>
<td>90,200</td>
<td>91,000</td>
<td>1630s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guadeloupe and Dependenciesa</td>
<td>337,500</td>
<td>1,780</td>
<td>1630s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martinique</td>
<td>335,100</td>
<td>1,100</td>
<td>1830s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Réunionb</td>
<td>569,600</td>
<td>2,510</td>
<td>1630s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TERRITOIRES</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French Polynesiac</td>
<td>188,814</td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td>1842</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Caledonia and Dependenciesd</td>
<td>164,173 (1989)</td>
<td>19,000</td>
<td>1853</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wallis and Futuna</td>
<td>14,500</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>1887</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAAFb</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>late 1800s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COLLECTIVITÉS TERRITORIALES</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saint-Pierre and Miquelon</td>
<td>6,041 (1982)</td>
<td>242</td>
<td>1763</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayotte</td>
<td>about 72,000</td>
<td>375</td>
<td>1843</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Includes Marie-Galante, La Désirade, Les Saints, Saint-Barthélémy and the French part of Saint-Martin.

b. The Îles Éparses in the Mozambique Channel (the Glorieuses group, Juan de Nova, Europa, Bassas da India) and also the contested Tromelin reef east of Madagascar are administered by the prefect of Réunion.

c. The unoccupied island of Clipperton is administered by the High Commissioner of French Polynesia.

d. The major dependencies of New Caledonia are the Loyalty Islands and the Isle of Pines.

e. The TAAF, the Terres Australes et Antarctiques Françaises, include Terre Adélie, the French part of Antarctica, and the islands of Crozet, Kerguelen, Saint-Paul and Amsterdam in the southern Indian Ocean.

The smallest of the DOM-TOMs in area and population (Table 1) is Saint-Pierre and Miquelon, off the coast of Newfoundland, two small islands which France retained in the 1700s when it lost its formidable North American empire to Britain. In the Caribbean lie the relatively large islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe, as well as much smaller Saint-Barthélémy further north and half of Saint-Martin, the smallest island in the world to be divided between colonial powers, France and the Netherlands. Martinique and Guadeloupe were plantation colonies of the 1600s, and France bought Saint-Barthélémy from Sweden in the 1800s.2 Guyane is an enormous but sparsely populated part of the northeastern coast of South America, which only officially became a French possession in 1816.3 Two French islands lie in the western Indian Ocean: Réunion, also an old sugar colony, like the vieilles colonies of the Caribbean, and Mayotte in the Comoros archipelago.
The three French overseas territories are all in the South Pacific: the five archipelagos dominated by Tahiti, which make up French Polynesia; New Caledonia and its outlying islands; and the small territory of Wallis and Futuna, the last of the three to be claimed, in virtually the final phases of global colonialism in the nineteenth century. The French Austral and Antarctic Territories (TAAF) are composed of several intermittently populated islands off the coast of Antarctica, as well as the French zone of the Antarctic continent. Finally, France also possesses several other uninhabited islands in the Mozambique channel between Madagascar and the African coast, and Clipperton, an island lying off the Pacific coast of Mexico, which, after disputes with Mexico, international arbitration awarded to France in 1931.

Most of the French population take little notice of the DOM-TOMs, except when a dramatic or controversial development, such as the political discord in New Caledonia in the 1980s, brings them to the front pages of daily newspapers, and most textbooks on French history, geography and politics wholly ignore them. Wallis and Futuna, Saint-Pierre and Miquelon, Mayotte and the TAAF, in particular, are little known to the French public. Guyane is known only for the space station, its vast jungle, the history of the penal colony, popularly if erroneously known as 'Devil’s Island', gold-mining and Cayenne pepper. Martinique, Guadeloupe and Réunion are better known because of the presence of numerous migrants from these islands in metropolitan France and because Martinique and Guadeloupe, along with Tahiti, enjoy a reputation as pleasant vacation spots.

In fact, the most common image of the French tropical islands is that of sun and sea, exoticism and holidays. Tourist brochures promote the image, such as the one which says of the Antilles:

Martinique and Guadeloupe welcome you to an exotic world with a magical name: the Caribbean. They are a tropical carnival. The scenery: majestic volcanoes, tropical forests, shimmering lagoons and grand plantations. The participants: the people and the infectious joie de vivre, dances and music. And you, come to the carnival . . . Let us show you paradise . . . Be tempted. Each island is an adventure.¹

Such advertising promotes the idea of the DOM-TOMs as places for play and relaxation, with warm climates and pretty beaches, exotic foods and music, but familiar French language and customs.

Other observers create different images for the DOM-TOMs. Political activists in France, and beyond, consider them either the vestiges of an outdated and rapacious colonialism or, conversely, trump cards which France can play to maintain its diverse political, economic,
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strategic and cultural influence in world affairs. For legal scholars the DOM-TOMs provide interesting cases of sometimes contested overseas sovereignty. For other researchers they provide domains for study of such topics as economic development and dependency, the mix of ethnic and racial groups, and international relations. Above all the mere presence of the DOM-TOMs seems an extraordinary anomaly after decades of decolonisation which have seen most colonial powers rid themselves of their overseas possessions.

A fundamental question which the existence of the DOM-TOMs poses for most observers is why France has held on to these small, scattered and expensive possessions while other colonial powers have granted similar colonies independence. Of all France’s colonies, the four vieilles colonies of Guadeloupe, Martinique, Guyane and Réunion are the oldest, the possessions through which France demonstrated its early imperial powers. For centuries they were almost indistinguishable from other nearby colonies, all of which have now become independent. The later acquisitions are also surrounded by other states which gained independence from their colonial masters, and in some of the DOM-TOMs pro-independence groups unsuccessfully campaigned for a similar status. The answer to continued dependent status lies in a complicated set of constitutional, socioeconomic, political and strategic considerations which are often part of more general questions about France’s history and politics. Analysis of these issues points the way towards understanding whether the DOM-TOMs represent the failure of French decolonisation, a refusal to decolonise, or a different sort of decolonisation, centred on integration with the métropole. Are the DOM-TOMs unique, are they similar to the overseas territories of other colonial powers which have retained their links with the centre, or are they like the independent island micro-states?

Traditional analysts have usually interpreted events in the DOM-TOMs largely in terms of their relations with France, often either to condemn or to justify the continuation of that relationship. But there also exists an internal dynamic in each of the DOM-TOMs, a particular structure of politics, economics and society which is influenced by the duration of attachment to France, the mix of different populations, cultures and resources, and disparities between the standard of living in the French islands and neighbouring states. The diversity of the DOM-TOMs hinders simple explanations of the relationships between colonialism and development, or the lack of development. Beyond their particular histories, and the international issues which they illuminate, the DOM-TOMs are also relevant to contemporary French politics. In the past few years they have episodically become a topic of animated debate in French public life, an electoral stake, a platform for the
espousal of various theories and programmes. The use (and abuse) of the DOM-TOMs by French politicians is suggestive of political currents in France and forms another of the ties that bind the overseas frontier to the mother country.

Despite their diversity, several general characteristics link the DOM-TOMs. The first is their constitutional attachment to France. The départements d'outre-mer, Martinique, Guadeloupe, Réunion and Guyane, have the same status as the départements, the principal administrative divisions, of metropolitan France. The territoires d'outre-mer, French Polynesia, New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna and the TAAF, are not so totally assimilated into the metropolitan administrative structure; each has a separate legal statute and a certain degree of autonomy. (The TAAF, without a permanent population, and recently New Caledonia, which Paris briefly ruled directly, are special cases.) The third group, the collectivités territoriales, composed of Saint-Pierre and Miquelon and Mayotte, are intermediate between a département and a territoire, with Saint-Pierre resembling the former and Mayotte the latter. But in the case of both DOMs and TOMs, the parliament in Paris is the ultimate source of legislation: Paris controls many areas of policy and appoints a representative to carry out its orders (a prefect in the DOMs, a High Commissioner or other administrator in the TOMs). The French law code and administrative structure in the DOMs is almost identical to that of the métropole and very similar in the TOMs. The DOMs, Saint-Pierre and Mayotte all use French currency, and the French Pacific franc used in the Pacific territories is freely convertible at a fixed exchange rate with the metropolitan franc. The systems of education are likewise generally identical for DOMs, TOMs and the métropole. France provides lavish financial support for the infrastructure and bureaucracy of each of the DOM-TOMs. All areas of political and commercial life in France and the overseas regions are closely linked. Obvious disparities do occur, as popular images suggest; the majority of the population of Mayotte is Muslim and enjoys the right to polygamy, the three customary chiefs (or ‘kings’) of Wallis and Futuna retain an important role and the Catholic religion is a key element in primary school education there — but overseas France otherwise provides a mirror, albeit sometimes grossly distorted, of the mother country.

Insularity is a second characteristic of the DOM-TOMs. All are archipelagos or islands, except for the French section of Antarctica and Guyane. Guyane, however, composed of a long coastal band of settlement on the edge of the vast Amazonian forest, displays a marked insularity of its own. So too does French Antarctica and the nearby islands. Insularity implies a degree of isolation, distance from the
métropole, and sometimes inhospitable landscapes. The coral atolls and volcanic islands of the Pacific, the wind-swept Austral Islands, semi-arid Mayotte and Saint-Pierre are unpropitious for most forms of contemporary economic development. The Pacific territories are literally on the other side of the world from France, 18,000 kilometres distant. The archipelagos of French Polynesia cover a sea area as large as Europe, and even communications within the country are sometimes difficult. Futuna is often isolated from Wallis. Saint-Pierre can be reached from France only by changing planes in Canada, Mayotte only by going via Réunion or the Comoros — and it costs as much to fly from Réunion to Mayotte, or from Papeete to the Marquesas, as from Paris to New York. Jet travel, international communications systems and other advances of technology have diminished the isolation of the French DOM-TOMs, but insularity — perhaps psychological and cultural, as much as physical — has posed its own problems.

Insularity and small size especially have contributed to the economic dependency which also characterises the DOM-TOMs. In most of the DOM-TOMs, exports cover only about 15 per cent of imports. The DOM-TOMs consume French and foreign goods yet produce very little. The nickel of New Caledonia, the rum and exotic fruits of the tropical islands, timber from Guyane and the cod of Saint-Pierre make up a limited range of exportable commodities, and several DOM-TOMs sell their sun and sea to eager tourists, but all are economically dependent on the metropole. They have become transfer economies or consumer colonies. This situation is, in some respects, little different from that of a number of recently independent states which rely overwhelmingly on aid payments from international organisations or national donors. However, the links between the DOM-TOMs and France make possible the high standard of living which the residents of the DOM-TOMs enjoy by comparison with their neighbours and reinforce a perceived need to maintain those links, notwithstanding their ‘colonial’ nature.

Another general characteristic of the DOM-TOMs, with the minor exception of such small islands as Saint-Pierre, Saint-Barthélemy, and to some extent, Mayotte and Wallis and Futuna, is their multicultural nature. In the Antilles, Réunion and French Polynesia, intermarriage between different ethnic groups has produced a large group of residents with a mixed racial background, groups which now hold the reins of political power in those regions. In most of the DOM-TOMs there are long-established European settlers. The most obvious settler colony, and the only one in the island Pacific, is New Caledonia, where some settler families have lived for as long as six or more generations. In the West Indies and Réunion, the co-called Békés formed a powerful
white caste from as early as the 1600s. Other contemporary French residents are a mixture of descendants of the penal colonies in Guyane and New Caledonia and long-established metropolitan public servants. In the Pacific, the indigenous Melanesians and Polynesians remain dominant ethnic groups, though there has been a large immigration of Indonesians, Vietnamese and Chinese. In Guyane the indigenous population, like the Melanesians of New Caledonia, have become a minority in their own land. The Caribbean islands and Réunion were unpopulated when France annexed them, except for a population of Indians in the Antilles (who were quickly eliminated), so they have a non-native population based largely on African stock. The various racial and cultural groups of the DOM-TOMs do not always cohabit harmoniously and, in New Caledonia at least, racial questions have marked political debates.

Discontent with the structure of administrative control from Paris, economic dependence on France and ethnic conflict have fuelled political movements in each of the DOM-TOMs (with the partial exceptions of Saint-Pierre and Wallis and Futuna) calling for a change in status. Groups ranging across the political and ideological spectrum have demanded redress of various grievances and recognition of cultural identity, producing variants of ‘nationalism’ from the Caribbean to Polynesia. In most of the DOM-TOMs, politicians have claimed greater autonomy, administrative decentralisation and sometimes outright independence. For both advocates and opponents, the possibility of independence provides a challenge for the DOM-TOMs, and this has inflamed passions and served as a constant debating point in political campaigns. Nowhere is this more true than New Caledonia, where the demand for an independent Kanaky has been particularly strident and has fostered episodes of violence. Elsewhere the ‘Caledonian contagion’ has been generally feared or less frequently welcomed. Defusing, accommodating or opposing autonomist and pro-independence groups has been a central aim in Paris’ policy in the DOM-TOMs. Yet independence is certainly not inevitable and, indeed, is probably unlikely for any of the DOM-TOMs, at least in the foreseeable future.

For their promotors, the importance of the DOM-TOMs is almost unbounded. For Jean Maran, a centrist député from Martinique, the DOM-TOMs represent a not insignificant market of more than a million people. France exports its primary produce and manufactured goods according to local needs, and this is not without implications for French commerce and industry. Furthermore, France imports raw materials and agricultural and manufac-
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tured products . . . Finally, the expanses of seas and oceans surrounding the DOM-TOMs present considerable economic prospects.

Maran also sees a political significance in the DOM-TOMs:

The DOM-TOMs not only . . . provide an appreciable number of votes for various elected governments. France has begun a new experiment that is an example for many other countries; France is the only global power to have granted full citizenship in these former colonies, by giving them the status of départements and territoires and according full constitutional rights there.

Furthermore, the DOM-TOMs have a great value in spreading French cultural influence:

These départements and territoires at the gates of America, Africa and the Pacific provide France with bases from which it can certainly spread its political influence, but also demonstrate its economic, artistic, intellectual and technological achievements.

The DOM-TOMs are also important militarily:

The location of the DOM-TOMs gives France a great strategic advantage. They enable it to be present on the great world trade and communication routes. They provide a much envied space centre in Guyane, a nuclear testing site in French Polynesia, and commercial and naval ports in Martinique, Guadeloupe and Réunion.5

Many of Maran's colleagues in the French parliament agree. Senator Albert Ramassamy of Réunion sees the basic force of the DOM-TOMs as 'centres for the diffusion of French culture', while for Senator Paul Moreau of Réunion, the DOM-TOMs 'assure the nation a more than symbolic presence in all of the world's regions and particularly in the most strategic ocean areas.' For Senator Marcel Henry of Mayotte the DOM-TOMs 'show France's real face as a multi-racial society, fraternal and generous', while 'the ability of our country to maintain and reinforce its ties with the most distant populations demonstrates the power of the French idea of nationality'.6

By contrast those who favour independence view attachment to France as no more than an unfortunate accident of history, a brief colonial era that must be left behind to enable genuine aspirations to surface and national development to be achieved. Nationalist movements in the DOM-TOMs have been constructed around the need to
rediscover and enact traditions and culture, restore land rights (especially in New Caledonia) and combine the virtues of the old ways with the best of modern developments to forge new nations. Jean-Marie Tjibaou, the late leader of the New Caledonian independence movement, the Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS), for example, sought to restructure colonial society completely:

When we speak of Kanak Socialist independence we want institutions which reflect the Melanesian approach to their heritage, their property and their resources. Equally there is a Melanesian approach to the management of their patrimony, to small or medium-sized enterprises, and there is a Melanesian way of viewing the distribution of work, welfare, social services and the environment so that the country may have a soul which comes from itself and not elsewhere.7

Yet even there the FLNKS has not sought to break off all ties with France; language and religion are culturally entrenched and economic autarky is impossible. In the vieilles colonies especially, ties to the métropole have become so pervasive that nationalist movements have taken quite different forms.

The statements of politicians such as Ramassamy and Maran, convinced of the virtues of continued ties with France, provide some answers to the question of why France has maintained its sovereignty in the DOM-TOMs. By contrast critics such as Jean-Marie Tjibaou charge that these characterisations represent the structure of absolute colonialism, not merely a more gentle, benevolent colonialism in new clothes. The commitment with which both advocates and opponents of the continued status of the DOM-TOMs voice their sentiments indicates how the French départements et territoires d’outre-mer provide extraordinarily rich case studies of the manner in which decolonisation and dependency remain crucial issues in large parts of the world. In some respects the DOM-TOMs are ‘little Frances’ across the seas, microcosms of the post-industrial, multiracial society that is emerging in France itself. In other respects they are quite different worlds, each unique, with a sense of identity and interest that often challenges the ties that bind France to these remote corners of the world. From being forgotten corners of the empire, the DOM-TOMs have emerged onto centre stage. The tumult in New Caledonia, the dreams of vast oceanic mineral resources, the increasing importance of such regions as the South Pacific and the Indian Ocean, in the eyes of advocates and opponents of French control, point to the significance of the DOM-TOMs. Such events have shaken them out of a tropical torpor, away