
H-France Salon

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Introduction: The French Revolution, Empire, and Entangled Histories

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When the possibility first emerged for a Salon that would respond to the forum in *French Historical Studies* on “The French Revolution as an Imperial Revolution,” I welcomed the occasion to bring together scholars to reflect on the relationships between revolution and imperialism. The editors of the forum, Manuel Covo and Megan Maruschke, were inspired in part by Jeremy Adelman’s formulations of imperial revolution, taking ideas he developed largely for the Iberian Atlantic and exploring their relevance for the French Atlantic and the French empire more generally.¹ In a thought-provoking and innovative manifesto, they contended that we should see the French Revolution as imperial in many senses. These include interconnections between revolutions within the eighteenth-century French empire; global frameworks of competing empires; and the legacies of revolution in shaping not only nation-states, but also new forms and justifications of empire.

The contributors to that *FHS* forum explored different meanings of an imperial French Revolution from a series of creative vantage points. Manuel Covo analyzed ideas of federalism and federation in Saint-Domingue; Matthieu Ferradou looked at Irish Republicans in France during the radical Revolution; Elizabeth Cross traced shifting commercial and economic relationships between French and British empires through the lens of the *Compagnie des Indes*; Pernille Røge assessed visions of republican imperialism in Senegambia during the Directory; and Megan Maruschke examined the process of remaking French territory through departmentalization to reveal what she considers the “nation-state with imperial extensions.”

In responding to these essays primarily by early career scholars, we looked in part for more established scholars to comment on their interventions. We also looked for those who could both reflect on the substantive issues raised in the original forum and offer innovative perspectives from their own research. The essays in this *H-France Salon* thus adopt quite different approaches. Rahul Markovits begins with a fascinating historical what-if?, imagining what would might have happened had revolution begun first in Saint Domingue in the 1780s. He reflects particularly on the relationships between two overlapping but distinct models of revolution in the era, one characterized by challenges to empire and associated slave-based economies and racial hierarchies, the other by challenges to European monarchical and social structures.

¹ Jeremy Adelman, “An Age of Imperial Revolution,” *American Historical Review* 113 no.2 (2008): 319-40.

David Bell revisits the arguments he made in an influential 2014 article, “Questioning the Global Turn” (also temporarily available as open-access from *French Historical Studies*), which several of the contributors to the *FHS* forum challenged in different ways. Bell agrees that global and imperial contexts were critical for the origins of the French Revolution. But he remains skeptical that colonial developments had more than a limited impact on the course of revolution in metropolitan France after 1789, or in the emergence of new political modalities. Rather than seeing the French Revolution as fundamentally imperial, Bell insists that it was still the model of the nation-state that emerged most powerfully at the end of the eighteenth century.

In contrast, Christian Crouch emphasizes the need to center Haitian history in our understanding of the revolutionary era. This is a perspective raised in several essays in the *FHS* forum and by a growing number of historians of the Caribbean, who see challenges to racial hierarchies and to slavery as one of the most crucial aspects of the age of revolution.² Crouch also calls for historians to grapple with the dynamics of lesser-known parts of the French empire. She emphasizes indigenous voices and experiences, exploring both how Native peoples in North America mattered for the French Revolution and whether the Revolution mattered for Native peoples. A permanently open-access article linked to here, “The French Revolution in Indian Country: Reconsidering the Reach and Place of Atlantic Upheaval,” expands on these themes and extends the conversation.

John Shovlin offers a complementary angle, focusing on big political and economic structures. He situates the French Revolution within a broad crisis of global capitalism unfolding between the 1760s and the 1820s. Shovlin contends that we should see the Revolution tied not just to capitalism, but also to geopolitical contestations between empires seeking to protect trade. He argues innovatively that protective frameworks for capital actually destabilized empires and fostered revolution.

The two remaining essays move us to more specific locales. Pascal Firges traces short-lived projects for imperialism in Crete in 1795. Building on Røge’s investigation into French colonial projects in Senegal, Firges explores how people could imagine imperial empire in the later years of the French Revolution. Finally, Sujit Sivasundaram turns to the Madras Observatory in 1821 and reflects on how time and space could be reworked in the revolutionary era, in ways that were deeply tied to imperialism and that reverberated far beyond the most direct or immediate transformations of the French Revolution.

Indeed, many of these articles, both in the *FHS* forum and in the *Salon*, grapple with both time and space in different ways. In considering the French Revolution as an imperial revolution, their chronological scales both zoom out to look at the *longue durée*—in some cases, emphasizing the role of global geopolitics across the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—and zoom in, focusing on short but transformational windows of time.

² For a few examples, see Alyssa Sepinwall, *Haitian History: New Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2012), and eadem, *Slave Revolt on Screen: The Haitian Revolution in Films and Video Games* (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 2021).

Several ask us to reconsider what colonialism and imperialism meant in the later 1790s. This was obviously a moment of transition and experimentation within metropolitan France, as revolutionaries sought to figure out viable political and social order after the radical revolution and the height of the “Terror.” It was also a moment of global reconfiguration, following the revolution of enslaved people in Haiti and the official abolition of slavery throughout the French empire (even if that abolition remained limited in practice in many places). International warfare continued, but Napoleon Bonaparte had not yet made massive conquests in the European continent or reimposed slavery everywhere in France’s colonies except Haiti. Often overshadowed by the drama of earlier transformations, the period deserves further exploration as a potential pivot point in re-imagining and instituting empire.

Cumulatively, these essays also push us to consider the particularities of the age of revolution and of eighteenth-century empire. If we are defining a revolution as imperial, on what are we focusing most—its origins, course, or legacies? There have been many attempts to theorize relationships between empires and nation states in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries.³ These works implicitly, or explicitly, question how applicable these analyses are to earlier periods. Does labelling the French revolution as imperial rely on, or mobilize, the same definitions that we use for later contexts?

Contributors similarly shift between local and global settings. Covo and Maruschke note that while musing on global movements and structures, many of the authors of the forum actually focus on small spaces, from the French *comptoirs* of Senegal to the parishes of Saint-Domingue. Several authors in the *Salon* concentrate on other specific locales, like Crete and Madras. Others call attention to “colonial” presences in the metropole, from Irish activists during the radical revolution to the lasting traces of Native peoples in French archives. Here these essays intersect with recent other work, including on Black people and people of color in metropolitan France, and on the surprisingly outsized influence of Muslims and references to Islam in the French Revolution.⁴ To some extent, assessing the French Revolution as an “imperial revolution” depends in part on what we consider historically significant; how much attention do we pay to apparently remote colonial outposts or small groups of “foreigners,” immigrants, or colonial refugees in the metropole? More generally, how and when do we assess impact and influence—and for whom?

If these contributors zoom in, others zoom out to consider relationships between empires, particularly the French and British (other empires still play a more peripheral role in most of

³ A few examples include Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism Between the Two World Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Martin Thomas et al., *The Crises of Empire: Decolonization and Europe’s Imperial Nation States, 1918-1975* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2008), and Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945-1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

⁴ See especially Ian Coller, *Muslims and Citizens: Islam, Politics, and the French Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).

these accounts). The British empire serves as the most common foil and referent for the French Empire. Authors call our attention to the ways these empires competed, economically and militarily, sometimes co-operated in unexpected ways, and perhaps indirectly shaped respective notions and practices of citizenship, sovereignty, and imperial power. However we classify the French Revolution itself, it cannot be seen in isolation.

Essays also raise the relationships between the "global" and "imperial." How do we widen our global frameworks and grapple seriously with empire, without simply duplicating the map of French colonial conquests, or limiting ourselves to the archives those conquests produced? How do we look at individuals who moved both within and between empires during an age of revolution? Conversely, how do we take seriously the drama and complexity of events within metropolitan France—and of historical actors who may have had little direct awareness or concern with global politics—while still retaining global perspectives? How do we shift our frames most productively?

To that at end, one of the recurrent general theoretical frameworks in both the original forum and the essays in this *Salon* is "entanglement." Indeed, ideas of tangling and untangling bookend this *Salon*, from Rahul Markovits's "Entangled Histories of Revolution and Empire" to Sujit Sivasundaram's "Untangling the Global in The Age of Revolutions." The term entanglement seems to have emerged as one of our current historiographical lodestones; it occupies a similarly frequent place in the titles of many historical works that "imagining," "inventing" and "creating" did in the 1990s and early 2000s. As a conceptual framework, it allows us to move beyond diffusionist models of revolution, or fixed oppositions between centers and periphery and to think about intertwined aspects of identities, lives, and histories.

Yet, as Markovits notes, invoking entanglement can also be unsettling. It can also challenge some of the ways we present history. It can be difficult to tell compelling stories while insisting on tangled threads. It is perhaps particularly challenging for revolutions, which, despite their power struggles, contingencies, and inherent messiness, still tempt us to recount exceptionally dramatic and coherent narratives.

Finally, both the original *FHS* forum and the *Salon* suggest avenues for further research, whether by turning to specific moments and locales, or by using innovative methodologies and theoretical approaches, adopting tools that, as Christian Crouch puts it, allow us to "move beyond traditional approaches to archives that we rely on to narrate and parse these pasts." We invite readers to reflect further on which aspects of reframing the French Revolution as an imperial revolution they find most useful, and what might be gained by using these frameworks.

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