

H-France Salon

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Forum: The French Revolution as an Imperial Revolution

This salon represents a series of responses to a forum published in *French Historical Studies* in August 2021, “The French Revolution as an Imperial Revolution,” edited by Manuel Covo and Megan Maruschke.

The full forum is temporarily available open-access at <https://read.dukeupress.edu/french-historical-studies/issue/44/3>

Some contributors to the forum and the Salon are also responding directly or implicitly to an earlier FHS article by David Bell, “Questioning the Global Turn,” <https://read.dukeupress.edu/french-historical-studies/article/37/1/1/9757/Questioning-the-Global-Turn-The-Case-of-the-French>.

Abstracts

“The French Revolution as an Imperial Revolution,” MANUEL COVO and MEGAN MARUSCHKE, 371-398

Attempts to reframe the Age of Revolutions as imperial in nature have not fully integrated the French Revolution. Replying to this gap and criticisms of the Revolution’s global turn, this essay positions the Revolution as both a moment of imperial reorganization and a sequence of political reinvention that exceed our current categories of empire and nation-state. These arguments open a forum comprising five contributions set in transimperial contexts that span from the Indian to the Atlantic Ocean. The forum offers some points of reflection regarding the narratives, periodizations, and concepts that guide historians of the French Revolution as they navigate the global turn.

“One and Indivisible? Federation, Federalism, and Colonialism in the Early French and Haitian Revolutions,” MANUEL COVO, 399-428

Histories of the French Revolution usually locate the origins of the “one and indivisible Republic” in a strictly metropolitan context. In contrast, this article argues that the French Revolution’s debates surrounding federation, federalism, and the (re)foundation of the French nation-state were interwoven with colonial and transimperial matters. Between 1776 and 1792 federalism in a French imperial context went from an element of an academic conversation among bureaucrats and economists to a matter of violent struggle in Saint-Domingue that generated new agendas in the metropole. Going beyond the binary language of union and secession, the article examines the contest over federation and federalism in Saint-Domingue between free people of color and white planters who, taking inspiration from both metropolitan and non-French experiences with federalism, sought to alter the colony’s relationship with the

metropole while also maintaining the institution of slavery. Revolutionaries on both sides of the Atlantic, unsure which direction to take and without the benefit of hindsight, used the language of federalism to pursue rival interests despite a seemingly common vocabulary. This entangled history of conflicts, compromises, and misunderstandings blurred ideological delineations but decisively shaped the genesis of the French imperial republic.

Between Scylla and Charybdis? Irish Republicans between the British Empire and the Early French Republic, 1792–1794, MATHIEU FERRADOU, 429-454

In 1792 foreigners flocked to France to participate in the new republican regime, redefining the nation as the conduct of popular sovereignty. A number of American, British, and Irish foreigners formed a club in Paris, the Society of the Friends of the Rights of Man (*Société des Amis des Droits de l'Homme*), among whom Irish republicans were a key component. Eager to “revolutionize” Britain and Ireland, they contributed to the rise in tensions and, ultimately, to the outbreak of war between France and Britain. The author argues that these Irish, because of their colonial experience, were a crucial factor in the redefinition of and opposition between British imperial and French republican models of nation and citizenship. Their defense of a cosmopolitan citizenship ideal was violently rejected in Britain and was severely tested by the “Terror” in France.

India and the Compagnie des Indes in the Age of the French Revolution, ELIZABETH CROSS, 455-476

This article examines the global history of the Age of Revolution through the lens of the *Nouvelle Compagnie des Indes* (1785–94). Established in the aftermath of the American Revolution, the company was not only a commercial entity but also an integral part of a diplomatic strategy for reestablishing the postwar Franco-British relationship. The geopolitical context of the Indian Ocean world forced French political and commercial actors to imagine forms of imperial and commercial power that frequently placed French commercial interests under British protection, often in ways that provoked significant opposition in the metropole. Amid ideologies of competition, Anglophobia, and militarism, the case of the *Nouvelle Compagnie des Indes* reveals how both state and private actors struggled to promote wide-ranging commercial collaboration between France and Britain in the 1780s and 1790s in ways that often anticipated later partnerships between the two empires.

The Directory and the Future of France’s Colonial Possessions in Africa, 1795–1802, PERNILLE RØGE, 477-498

This article examines how French revolutionaries envisioned a republican imperial future in Africa between the decreed abolition of slavery and its restoration under Napoléon. Drawing on proposals within the Ministry of the Marine and the Colonies and analyzing French activities in the Senegambian holdings of Saint-Louis and Gorée, the author argues that, although the French Revolution included numerous creative imperial processes vis-à-vis Africa, they did not amount to an imperial revolution in their own right.

The French Revolution and the New Spatial Format for Empire: A Nation-State with Imperial Extensions, MEGAN MARUSCHKE, 499- 528

Both global history and the new imperial history identify an emerging convergence of spatial formats, practices, and knowledge for organizing societies during the nineteenth century, though each emphasizes different competitive formats: the territorializing nation-state and the enduring empire. Rather than contrasting empire and nation-state, this article takes their combination seriously through the example of the respatialization of the French Empire during the Revolution and the reorganization of domestic territory into departments. The history of departmentalization underscores the emerging and changing interrelationships between nation and empire. The territorialization of metropolitan France, which developed out of imperial and transregional exchanges, was emblematic of the new type of empire that became a prevailing model for societal organization in the nineteenth century: the nation-state with imperial extensions.

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