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Entangled histories of revolution and empire

Rahul Markovits

École normale supérieure, Paris / Institut d'histoire moderne et contemporaine

Since the editors of this rich and stimulating collection of essays invite us to reflect on the “might-have-beens”, let me engage to start with, drawing inspiration freely from a couple of texts quoted in the forum, in a bit of what if history of my own. What if the planters of Saint-Domingue, galvanized by the American colonists’ successful rebellion, weary of the constraints the *Exclusif* imposed upon their right to trade and enraged at new legislation that was aimed at curbing their ruthless exploitation of the slaves, had rebelled sometime in the mid 1780s, just before the “pre-revolution” gathered steam in metropolitan France? What if, in other words, the French Revolution had started, not in Grenoble or on the customs gates of Paris, but in the colonies? This is not a stretch of the imagination. In 1769, Saint-Domingue had been shaken to the core by a powerful uprising led by the west and south provinces. Only with great difficulty had the governor been able to restore order. Fifteen years or so later, the planters’ list of grievances had only grown longer. True, the *Exclusif* had been mitigated, with seven ports opened up to foreign ships for the provisioning of the colony, but new measures implemented in 1784 were actually a step backwards for the colonists. Heavily indebted to the metropolitan merchants who retailed their products, chafing at the bit for the right to freight their own ships, what if the planters had assembled and proclaimed the autonomy of the colony?¹

What would the monarchy’s reaction then have been? The merchant communities of the Atlantic seaboard would undoubtedly have piled pressure on the king for a clampdown on the rebels. The monarchy’s coffers were empty, however, and Louis XVI and his ministers would have been unwilling to send troops overseas. What if the French monarchy had then decided to go with the movement of history and chosen to give in to their claims? As early as 1776, at the start of the American War of Independence, Turgot had foreseen a world free of colonies.² As we know, he

¹ On the 1769 rebellion and general context, see Charles Frostin, *Les révoltes blanches à Saint-Domingue aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles : Haïti avant 1789* (Paris, 1975). On the fact that the measures implemented in 1784 were a tightening of the screw, see Jean Tarrade, “Les colonies et les principes de 1789 : les révolutionnaires face au problème de l’esclavage”, *Outre-Mers. Revue d’histoire* 282-83 (1989), 9-34. On the situation in Saint-Domingue, see also Malick W. Ghachem, *The Old Regime and the Haitian Revolution* (New York, 2012). In 1787, the dissolution of the Conseil supérieur of Cap Français occasioned widespread protest.

² Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, *Mémoire sur les colonies américaines, sur leur relations politiques avec leurs métropoles, et sur la manière dont la France et l’Espagne ont dû envisager*

was right, although the post-colonial world he envisioned was a bit longer in the making than he had anticipated. In 1784, Brissot, taking stock of recent events in India, envisioned a massive and bloody rebellion against the British: those were the great upheavals that the future, seen from the 1770s and 1780s, seemed to hold out.³

What I mean to suggest by tweaking slightly the chronology is that we need to disentangle two distinct phenomena that decades of scholarship have taught us to conflate under the category of “revolution”. The end of the eighteenth-century witnessed, on the one hand, a profound and multifaceted crisis of empire, at once moral, as metropolitan elites confronted the “scandal of empire”; political or constitutional, as colonists strove to shake the yoke of the metropole; and racial, as free people of color and slaves rebelled against discrimination and the murderous plantation system respectively.⁴ On the other hand, starting in 1789, the French monarchy suddenly lost control of the country, as a new political class seized power and launched into a series of wide-ranging reforms aimed at overturning the privileges of the aristocracy and clergy. Are these two phenomena in fact one and the same? Robert Palmer’s notion of an Atlantic-wide “democratic revolution” which equated the American and French Revolutions, taught us to believe so.⁵ Conversely, French historian Pierre Serna has recently suggested that “every revolution is a war of independence” and that the French Revolution was about the French provinces trying to break free from Versailles just as the American colonists had broken free from London - a bold but perhaps slightly desperate move to maintain the historical preeminence of the French Revolution in the face of a mounting wave of scholarship that has hinted at the world-historical significance of the Haitian Revolution.⁶

The title of the forum refers to Jeremy Adelman’s essay on the age of revolutions as an “age of imperial revolutions”. Though Adelman did not give a clear-cut definition of what an “imperial revolution” is, he suggested the primacy of the issue of sovereignty and the general notion that the age of revolutions did not witness the demise of empires and the inevitable rise of the nation-

les suites de l'indépendance des Etats-Unis de l'Amérique. Par feu M. Turgot, ministre d'État (Paris, 1791).

³ Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville, *Tableau de la situation actuelle des Anglois dans les Indes Orientales, et de l'état de l'Inde en général* (Paris, 1784), quoted by Jonathan Israël, *Democratic enlightenment: philosophy, revolution, and human rights 1750-1790* (New York, 2011), 608.

⁴ Nicholas B. Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006), according to whom the scandal of empire as epitomized by the impeachment trial of Warren Hastings (1787-1795) was in fact but a whitewashing of the imperial project. Exploring the French empire through the lens of scandal might perhaps yield new insights.

⁵ Robert R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760-1800*, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ, 1959-64).

⁶ Pierre Serna, “Every Revolution Is a War of Independence”, in Suzanne Desan, Lynn Hunt, and William Max Nelson, eds., *The French Revolution in Global Perspective* (Ithaca, NY, 2013), 165-82.

state; rather, empires demonstrated their “elasticity” and their capacity to adapt.⁷ The forum therefore, its title notwithstanding, does not so much claim that the French Revolution was an “imperial revolution” as endeavour to examine “how imperial actors have considered the place of the empire in the Revolution and the role of the Revolution in the empire” – a project akin to entangled histories or what the French call *histoire croisée*. “Entanglement” is indeed the key word here.⁸ Once we have recognized the distinct nature of the imperial crisis and the political upheavals that engulfed metropolitan France or, to quote Manuel Covo, that there were “many ways in which the Saint-Domingue/Haitian Revolution was not the French Revolution and vice versa” and that there is consequently no point in attempting to fuse them together, it becomes a matter of understanding the very complex interactions between these two sets of events. The effects of this move are unsettling. There is no overarching framework to hold together a sometimes dizzying array of “entangled but distinct revolts that led to political and legal illegibility”, as overlapping and intersecting revolts blur the line between the “inside” and the “outside” and the distinction between “what is and is not French history”.

So was the French empire elastic too? Did the French Revolution succeed in forging a new imperial model? And what was the empire’s impact on the course of the French Revolution? We first need to recognize with the editors that there *was* indeed a French empire in those years. Though they are but small dots on world maps, the French colonies were nodes strategically situated on the main routes of global trade. If anything, after the loss of Canada in 1763, the French empire had become more coherent, now exclusively rooted in the plantation complex. Saint-Domingue was the richest colony in the world, the labor of about 500 000 slaves supplying almost half of the world’s sugar and coffee. Yet, the colonies’ prosperity was entirely dependent upon an ever-expanding slave trade and thus highly vulnerable – to British naval power, but also to new moral concerns as expressed in the notion of universal human rights. (That is why C.R.L. James famously conflated both threats when he suggested that the abolitionist movement in France was encouraged by Britain to weaken the French empire).⁹

The forum suggests that empire was at once a geographical space and a political project, a category wielded by the actors and a notion used by historians. Most importantly, perhaps, the contributors demonstrate that the very meaning of “empire” was contested and in flux. Manuel Covo’s article shows how uncertain Saint-Domingue’s status was. Was it a colony in the old mercantilist sense, destined to serve the metropole, or was it a province like Brittany or Dauphiné? If it was the latter, how then to reconcile this claim to inclusion with the specific commercial and racial regimes that characterized the colony? Though the National Assembly decided early to recognize the legal specificity of the colonies, it did not go so far as to establish a federalist-type regime. This opened the door for various groups on the ground in Saint-

⁷ Jeremy Adelman, “An Age of Imperial Revolutions”, *The American Historical Review* 113, no. 2 (2008): 319-40.

⁸ For an early use of the term in imperial history, Eliga H. Gould, “Entangled Histories, Entangled Worlds: The English-Speaking Atlantic as a Spanish Periphery”, *The American Historical Review* 112, no. 3 (2007): 764-86.

⁹ C.R.L. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York, 1963).

Domingue to have recourse to a federate or confederate political grammar. In 1790, the General Assembly of Saint-Marc, composed of white colonists, proclaimed a “constitutional basis”, redefining the colonial bond as a “union between two federalized states.” It was soon emulated by groups of white colonists in the south. The following year, free people of color in Croix-des-Bouquets in western Saint-Domingue in turn adopted the federalist repertoire, this time in order to oppose white supremacy. Though the colonial lobby managed to insulate the colonies from the reach of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and then the Constitution, the eventual abolition of the slave trade in 1794 called for a complete overhaul of the French imperial model. In Pernille Røge’s words, the abolition “heightened the stakes” of imperial innovation, a process that she examines from the vantage point of Senegal, where French administrators during the Directory tried to find alternative ways to mobilize labor. Two options were considered: recruiting free or redeemed “cultivators” for the Caribbean plantations or transporting Europeans to West Africa to launch cash crop cultivation locally. Yet the very same French administrators who looked for substitutes to slavery continued to participate in the slave trade, which continued unabated, powered by transimperial demand impervious to the National Convention’s decrees.

Indeed, the contributions stress that the French empire was not defined in a vacuum. Britain, most notably, provided either a model or a foil. In 1790, a creole from Saint-Domingue called on the National Assembly to model its policy vis-à-vis Saint-Domingue on Britain’s vis-à-vis Ireland, whose Parliament had been granted autonomy in the wake of the 1782 rebellion.¹⁰ Conversely, the Irishmen studied by Mathieu Ferradou who, along with other patriots from the British isles and America, founded the Société des Amis des Droits de l’Homme in Paris in 1792, embraced the French Republic and its inclusiveness as an antidote to a British regime they viewed as tyrannical because it did not grant political rights to Catholics. Though the French had been more or less evicted from India following their crushing defeat in the Seven Years’ War, they hoped to regain access to Indian piece-goods by striking a deal with the East India Company. As demonstrated by Elizabeth Cross, the creation of a *Nouvelle Compagnie des Indes* in 1785 after the historic Company’s privilege had been suspended in 1769 was a step back for liberal-minded *économistes* and a testimony to the pervasive appeal of the Company model for trade with the East Indies – even though it also foreshadowed the joint-venture Franco-British imperialism of the nineteenth century.

The forum ranges widely across the French Empire, with the welcome inclusion of Senegal, but is still predominantly concerned with the Atlantic (Cross’s paper is focused on the metropolitan context rather than on the Compagnie’s operations on the ground in Asia), thus pointing to future avenues of research. Of particular interest would be the Mascarenes, which need to be brought into the picture so as to provide us with a more comprehensive view of the French empire. Recent work on the ubiquitous Monneron family suggests that French capital was slowly moving away from a saturated Atlantic to the Indian Ocean.¹¹ Three Monneron brothers were part of the National Assembly, where they played an active role representing the East Indies, sometimes

¹⁰ Charles de Chabanon, *Précis historique sur la révolution d’Irlande, suivi d’inductions relatives à celle qui s’opère à St Domingue* (Paris, 1790).

¹¹ Oliver Cussen, “The Lives of Merchant Capital: The Frères Monneron and the Legacy of Old Regime Empire”, *French History* 34, no. 3 (2020), 294-316.

opposing their counterparts from Saint-Domingue. Louis Monneron thus defended vigorously granting rights to the free people of color. This suggests the existence of fractures inside the colonial lobby, which call for further study.

Another connection worth making would probably be that with the European context. Indeed, it could be argued that although the colonial empire more or less collapsed in the end, with the loss of Saint-Domingue, France did experiment with a new imperial model during the Revolution, albeit a continental one. Though the divide between European history and colonial history tends to obscure the fact, there were many continuities between the repertoires and the practices of imperialism in Europe and overseas, as is evidenced by the *mission civilisatrice* discourse Pernille Røge identifies in Senegal, which is very similar to that wielded by the French throughout occupied Europe.¹² Megan Maruschke draws attention to the spatial dimension of incorporation by showing that departmentalization, a process associated with the consolidation of the nation-state, was also deployed in the colonies, albeit briefly, in the short time span between the constitution of 1795 and that of 1799, as well as in Europe from 1792 onwards. France thus became the first “nation-state with imperial extensions”, a “spatial format” that would end up becoming the norm in nineteenth-century Europe. Another way to measure the continuity between the European and overseas context would be a study of personnel. A number of French administrators started their careers in the colonies during the Old Regime before being posted on the continent (consider the case of the Martinique-born Louis-Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry, the famous compiler of the *Description* of Saint-Domingue, who served as general administrator of the former duchy of Parma in the early 1800s), while a handful of younger Napoleonic administrators ended up in Algeria after 1830. Their careers considered in the long run and beyond the divide between Europe and the overseas could provide interesting insights into the French imperial experience as a whole.¹³

This brings us to the issue of the global. In their introduction, Covo and Megan Maruschke take issue with David Bell’s critique of the global turn’s value for studying the French Revolution.¹⁴ Yet, their stance towards global history is ambiguous. On the one hand, Maruschke’s contribution takes its cue from the particular brand of spatial global history developed in Leipzig.¹⁵ On the other, they are themselves critical vis-à-vis the global, a notion which according to them is too all-encompassing and vague in comparison with the imperial, a more specific frame of action. Bell’s critique of the global is on a different plane, leveled at a very

¹² See Michael Broers, *The Napoleonic empire in Italy, 1796-1814: cultural imperialism in a European context?* (Houdmills, 2005).

¹³ For the careers of imperial administrators, see Aurélien Lignereux, *Les impériaux: administrer et habiter l’Europe de Napoléon* (Paris, 2019).

¹⁴ David A. Bell, “Questioning the Global Turn: The Case of the French Revolution”, *French Historical Studies* 37, no. 1 (2014): 1-24.

¹⁵ For this brand of global history laying stress on processes of de- and re-territorialization, see Matthias Middell and Katja Naumann, “Global history and the spatial turn: from the impact of area studies to the study of critical junctures of globalization”, *Journal of Global History* 5, no. 1 (2010), 149-70.

postcolonial version of global history, one that would make radical claims for the primacy of “traffic with the non-European world” in explaining the “European cultural tradition”.¹⁶

Yet, there is a case to be made for a global history approach to the French Revolution that would draw on the field’s strengths. In *Imperial meridian*, Chris Bayly set the ascendancy of the British Empire in the context of the “world crisis” that triggered, from 1780 to 1820, a “general and critical disruption of economic systems, patterns of kinship and popular mentalities” the world over.¹⁷ Though mobilizing a truly global framework is admittedly harder to achieve for the French Empire considering its more restricted ambit, French diplomatic and commercial networks reached into the Ottoman Empire, China or Mozambique, beyond the boundaries of the formal empire. One of the more fruitful pursuits of global history in recent years has been the study of commodities, used as lenses through which to observe the dynamics of globalization and capitalism.¹⁸ Among the commodities that played an important role during the Revolution, sugar, the high prices of which occasioned riots in Paris in 1792, springs to mind first, but we need studies of coffee, tobacco, cotton or gum, among others, that would help us understand French revolutionaries’ stance towards early-modern globalization, providing a counterpart to Paul Cheney’s book on the French monarchy’s vision of commerce.¹⁹ As war against Britain disrupted well-established trade routes, the French economy faced what we today would call a phase of deglobalization and had to adapt, turning inwards, which entailed a reconfiguration of the underground economy as well. Even as French officials and armies were systematically clothed in blue, indigo supply was severely hit by events in Saint-Domingue, for example.²⁰ Another interesting example is saltpeter. A crucial component of gunpowder, it was indispensable to the French war-machine, but the main supplier of saltpeter before the Revolution was India. When war broke out, the French had to scramble to produce it locally, mobilizing the whole population to gather saltpeter from walls and subsurfaces throughout the country.

Apart from commodities, a global history approach could also draw on the insights provided by connected histories to help us understand how non-European actors interacted with or responded to the Revolution in different locales worldwide. Røge alludes to the Fuuta Tooro Revolution the French were confronted with in Senegambia, as local leader Abdul Kader Kan refused to sell them Muslim slaves. However, she might have engaged with the work of Paul Lovejoy, who

¹⁶ Peter Hulme, “Subversive Archipelagos: Colonial Discourse and the Break-up of Continental Theory,” *Dispositio/n: American Journal of Cultural Histories and Theories* 14, nos. 36–38 (1989): 3, quoted by Bell, “Questioning the Global Turn”, 3.

¹⁷ Christopher A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: the British Empire and the World, 1780-1830* (London, 1989), 165.

¹⁸ See, among others, Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: a Global History* (New York, 2014).

¹⁹ Paul B. Cheney, *Revolutionary Commerce: Globalization and the French Monarchy* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010).

²⁰ Marguerite Martin, “Teindre en bleu après 1789. La reconfiguration des circuits d’approvisionnement en indigo en France, 1789-1820”, *Hypothèses* 17 (2014), 101-14.

suggests integrating such episodes of Sufi-inspired jihād in a global history of the age of revolutions which usually tends to bypass Africa.²¹

What about the consequences of colonial events on the course of the French Revolution? Were revolutionary debates about the colonies “above all significant for the colonies themselves, not for the course of events in the metropole”, as suggested by David Bell?²² The jury, it seems to me, is still out, but the forum makes a good case for probing further. Covo, for example, demonstrates the wider significance of the debates on the status of the colonies. The violent attacks Brissot leveled at Barnave for his stance on colonial issues is a spectacular example of the colonial question’s influence on revolutionary politics.²³ The *affaire de la Compagnie des Indes* which erupted in 1793 and was instrumental in bringing down the Dantonistes is another case in point, revealing how the new republican political culture clashed with the legacy of court capitalism. Before we can reach a verdict, it would be useful to know more about the concrete modalities of the presence of the colonies on the metropolitan scene. Two items in particular seem to warrant further study. The first is lobbying. Lobbying was at the core of the functioning of the Bourbon state, as provinces and cities negotiated their status and fiscal exemptions in the antechambers of Versailles. From 1789, the National Assembly became the focus of this lobbying activity. How did the colonial lobby known as the club Massiac manage to impose its agenda? (The fact that the colonial question was perhaps comparatively infrequently debated at the bar of the Assembly, put forward by Bell to question the significance of the colonial issue, might as well be a reflection of the colonial lobby’s successful suppression of the issue and control of the parliamentary agenda through the Comité colonial).²⁴ This brings us to the second issue, information. In what measure did the colonial lobby control information from the colonies? Did they manipulate it? Did legislators have their own sources of information? Did the press cover events in the colonies, and how? It would be useful, in other words, to gain a better understanding of how the communication circuits that linked the colonies to the centers of power worked.

“I venture to say that he who has seen no other country and who studies only France will never understand the French Revolution”, wrote Alexis de Tocqueville in *The Ancien Regime and the French Revolution*.²⁵ Though the sentence concludes a chapter where Tocqueville explored in a comparative vein the legacy of feudalism in Britain, Germany and France before the Revolution,

²¹ Paul E. Lovejoy, *Jihād in West Africa during the Age of Revolutions* (Athens, OH, 2016).

²² Bell, “Questioning the Global Turn”, 16.

²³ Jeremy Popkin, *A New World Begins: The History of the French Revolution* (New York, 2019).

²⁴ On the club Massiac, see Gabriel Debien, *Les colons de Saint-Domingue et la Révolution ; essai sur le club Massiac (août 1789 – août 1792)* (Paris, 1953) and Déborah Liébart, « Un groupe de pression contre-révolutionnaire : le club Massiac sous la Constituante », *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 354 (2008), 29-50. A first important step towards an integrated study of colonial lobbying is Manuel Covo, “Le Comité des colonies. Une institution au service de la « famille coloniale » ? (1789-1793)”, *La Révolution française* 3 (2012), doi.org/10.4000/lrf.692.

²⁵ Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Regime and the French Revolution*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York, 2011), 25.

it could serve well today as an endorsement for the transnational / imperial / global turn in the study of the Revolution. If classic accounts of the revolution laid stress on the religious schism or the fate of the monarchy, it was because of their paramount importance, no doubt, but also because they reflected the concerns of a French society still racked by these issues as the revolution continued deep into the nineteenth-century. It is therefore only natural that empire and the colonies should come to the fore in today's context when public debate in France has become rife with anxieties about the legacy of colonialism, as the introduction to the forum rightly points out. The contradiction between the proclamation of the Rights of Man and the fact that the revolutionaries opted to preserve the plantation complex and the economic wealth it produced before finally abolishing slavery in 1794 is surely a defining storyline of revolutionary politics for our own times. Recognizing this doesn't mean that the imperial or global should become the dominant and exclusive paradigm for making sense of the Revolution. A lot more primary research needs to be done, that may or may not yield new insights. This collection of essays is a valuable testimony to what historians may gain at reframing the French Revolution from an imperial perspective, in dialogue with other approaches.

Rahul Markovits

École normale supérieure, Paris / Institut d'histoire moderne et contemporaine

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