

H-France Salon
Volume 13, Issue 19, #7

Build Back Better Empire? French Revolutionary Colonial Projects in Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean

Pascal Firges
National Taiwan Normal University

This short paper is inspired by Pernille Røge's insightful article on "The Directory and the Future of France's Colonial Possessions in Africa, 1795–1802".¹ Røge analyses several proposals sent to the French Ministry of the Navy that envisioned a greater colonial engagement of the revolutionary Republic in Africa.² She uses these colonial projects as sources to reflect on "whether the French Revolution was also an imperial revolution."³ Røge argues that during the Directory, French policy makers sought to encourage the Republic's imperial ambitions. After the collapse of the profits drawn from the Caribbean slave economy, they turned to other places, especially in Africa, with a view to build up new colonial enterprises.⁴

I would like to add to these considerations by presenting another colonial project, proposed by an unknown author to the French foreign ministry in 1795, which suggested the French occupation of the island of Crete in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁵ In this short paper, I will compare this Eastern Mediterranean colonial proposal to the ones presented by Pernille Røge and I will also make reference to some of Damien Tricoire's findings on colonial projects in Madagascar. In a second step I will reflect on the question if and in how far these sources can help us better understand the French Revolution's "imperial nature".⁶

¹ Pernille Røge, "The Directory and the Future of France's Colonial Possessions in Africa, 1795–1802," in Covo; Maruschke *Forum: The French Revolution as an Imperial Revolution*. Attentive readers will have noticed that the article's time frame transcends the period of the Directory and includes much of the Consulate.

² There had also been attempts to develop a plantation economy in Sub-Saharan West Africa in the seventeenth century. See e.g. Benjamin Steiner, *Colberts Afrika: Eine Wissens- und Begegnungsgeschichte in Afrika im Zeitalter Ludwigs XIV* (München: DeGruyter Oldenbourg, 2014), 373.

³ Røge, "The Directory and the Future of France's Colonial Possessions in Africa, 1795–1802," 478.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ "Observations sur notre position en Levant et moyens d'y rétablir notre prépondérance," May 26, 1795, CP Turquie 191, Paris, Archives du Ministère des Affaires étrangères, fol. 127–9.

⁶ On the Age of Revolutions as "imperial in nature," see Jeremy Adelman, "An Age of Imperial Revolutions," *American Historical Review* 113, no. 2 (2008): esp. 320. See also the reflections by Manuel Covo and Megan Maruschke in the introduction of the FHS Forum: Manuel Covo and Megan Maruschke, "The French Revolution as an Imperial Revolution," in Covo; Maruschke *Forum: The French Revolution as an Imperial Revolution*, 372–73.

The concept of “build back better” originally denotes a disaster relief and risk reduction strategy, which recently became a slogan in political campaigning, and is also used for an economic and infrastructure package of the American government. As the meanings of the concept have thus broadened considerably, it is now possible to use this terminology in a figurative sense and to ask to what extent colonial projects of the revolutionary period were the result of a process of reflection on the weaknesses of the colonial system of the Ancien Régime or whether they merely hoped to restore it.

In May 1795, a French merchant whose family was engaged in trading with the Ottoman Empire wrote a memoir to the French foreign ministry entitled “Observations about our position in the Levant and the means to re-establish our preponderance”.⁷ The author himself had lived on the island of Crete for fifteen years.⁸ The proposal features a number of arguments in favor of a new colonial engagement of France which are in line with those analyzed by Røge in her article on African colonial projects.

One of the main reasons the author of the proposal put forward for creating a new colony in the Eastern Mediterranean was that it could serve as a substitute for the lost French colonies in the Caribbean: “Apart from the fertility of its soil, the climate of the island of Crete is so pleasant that the plants of America could be cultivated there profitably and thus compensate for the losses we have made in that hemisphere.” And later the author adds: “[...] I am convinced that there is no place that is more suitable for us to re-establish our trade, as well as to compensate us for the losses we have suffered in America.”⁹ Finding a substitute for the lost commerce in the Caribbean, it seems, was a key justification for new colonial projects of the French Republic, which also came up in several of Pernille Røge’s sources.

Another issue that colonial proposals usually dealt with was the question of how the French Republic would come into the possession of new territories. Here, the suggestions differed considerably according to the pre-existing local power structures. What they had in common was the desire to give the imperial land grabbing a legitimate appearance. In the case of the colonial projects in West Africa, the authors usually suggested the purchase of land from local powerholders.¹⁰ In the case of Madagascar, it was at one point argued that the local populations had already accepted French overlordship since the seventeenth century and therefore negotiations for the acquisition of land were unnecessary.¹¹ In the case of Crete, the

⁷ “Observations sur notre position en Levant et moyens d’y rétablir notre prépondérance,” fol. 127–9.

⁸ The author mentions that his brother was living in the Ottoman Empire. See *ibid.*, fol. 130. Damien Tricoire makes the interesting observation that many of the authors of such proposals were in financial or other difficulties at the time they submitted these projects. The case of Joseph Philippe Bournet and Charles Alexandre Modeste Marquis in Pernille Røge’s article would be a good example for this observation. See Damien Tricoire, *Der koloniale Traum: Imperiales Wissen und die französisch-madagassischen Begegnungen im Zeitalter der Aufklärung* (Köln: Böhlau, 2018), 327; Røge, “The Directory and the Future of France’s Colonial Possessions in Africa, 1795–1802,” 490.

⁹ “Observations sur notre position en Levant et moyens d’y rétablir notre prépondérance,” fol. 130.

¹⁰ See e.g. Røge, “The Directory and the Future of France’s Colonial Possessions in Africa, 1795–1802,” 485.

¹¹ See Damien Tricoire, “The French Revolution as a Period of Territorialization of the Colonial Empire? A Southern Indian Ocean Perspective,” in *The French Revolution as a*

proposal's author suggested deriving the control over the Island from an alliance treaty with the Ottoman Empire. One secret stipulation of this treaty, according to the author, should be that in case of war, the Ottoman Empire should cede one of its ports to serve as an assembly point for French troops, who would then be deployed to protect the Ottoman Empire against its enemies. This port should be on the island of Crete "the largest, the most beautiful, and the richest of all the islands of the Aegean, as well as the most advantageous one, by its position."¹² Of course, so the author "once we were the masters [of the island], we would think of ways to keep it."¹³

Once a territory was taken into possession, the question arose who could cultivate the land so that it would yield profits. For West Africa and Madagascar, the authors of colonial projects suggested the option of installing a penal colony or using local labor which could be acquired through "redemption".¹⁴ In both cases, recourse to unfree forms of labor was not completely abandoned, even though the authors usually paid lip service to the condemnation of slavery. Indeed, the redemption system, which depended on buying enslaved people to free them on the condition that they would enter into an indentured labor contract, would effectively keep both the slave trade and the bonded form of labor alive in the colonies.

Nevertheless, some authors argued that over time, locals would attach themselves to the colonies out of their free will, because the French had abolished slavery and would therefore bring liberty to their colonial subjects.¹⁵ A similar argument was also made for Crete. Here, the author expected that the island should be cultivated by Greeks, who would also be attracted to the French colony by the promise of liberty and religious tolerance: "[The population of Crete] is not adequate to its size, but it would soon be repopulated, if the Greeks ceased to be persecuted there, and if they were allowed the free exercise of their religion and the restoration of their churches. There is no doubt that tolerance would bring to Crete a large number of people from the Aegean and from the mainland, which would make this island one of the most flourishing places in the world."¹⁶

Unlike in the proposals for African colonies, the project for Crete does not mention the employment of unfree labor, whether in the form of a penal colony or in the form of indenture. Here, the author supposed that the appeal of liberty, prosperity, and religious tolerance alone would suffice to attract a sufficient labor force to the colony to make it profitable.

What role can these colonial proposals play in analyzing the "imperial nature" of the French Revolution? What relevance do they have? Neither the colonial projects for West Africa nor

Moment of Respatialization, ed. Matthias Middell and Megan Maruschke (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 56.

¹² "Observations sur notre position en Levant et moyens d'y rétablir notre prépondérance," fol. 129.

¹³ *ibid.*, fol. 130.

¹⁴ Røge, "The Directory and the Future of France's Colonial Possessions in Africa, 1795–1802," 481, 487; Tricoire, *Der koloniale Traum*, 191–93; Tricoire, "The French Revolution as a Period of Territorialization of the Colonial Empire?," 56.

¹⁵ Røge, "The Directory and the Future of France's Colonial Possessions in Africa, 1795–1802," 482.

¹⁶ "Observations sur notre position en Levant et moyens d'y rétablir notre prépondérance," fol. 130.

the project for Crete were ever put into practice. One could therefore easily dismiss them as wishful thinking of people who thought to gain from a colonial expansion of the French Republic, which for many reasons was doomed to end up in the archives without ever producing any real-life outcomes. However, Napoleon's Egyptian Expedition, which was based on similar proposals, shows that, especially in the era of the French Revolution, even very daring plans could become concrete imperial projects, with drastic consequences for all concerned.¹⁷

Can the colonial proposals be interpreted as an indication that the Revolution represented a "build back better"-process for the French colonial empire, in which the actors thought about fundamental changes with the aim of a more sustainable colonial future? Of course, the mere fact that these proposals suggested a colonial re-orientation and the development of new colonies after the imperial collapse of the early 1790s would point in this direction. Thus, Pernille Røge argues that the Revolution was a moment of rethinking the French "path to empire".¹⁸ A profound rethinking of colonial practices could be inferred from the fact that a new colonial regime would have to do without slavery. The plans of minister Eustache Bruix for importing free labor and having the Republic represented by a company of free black soldiers from the Caribbean particularly seem to point into the direction of considering new paths to empire.¹⁹ Moreover, as the entire political discourse had radically changed since the early days of the Revolution, proposals for new colonial enterprises necessarily had to adapt to the new language and the argumentations of the new regime. Nevertheless, the ways in which the issue of slavery was addressed often suggests that the integration of French revolutionary ideology into the colonial discourse was often quite uncomfortable. The drive towards launching "a colonial empire compatible with the ethos of the French Revolution"²⁰ necessarily created ambiguities between the emancipating demands of the Revolution and the hierarchical logic of colonialism, which was based on the colonial powerholders' superiority.²¹ The attempts to resolve this contradiction seem to have been primarily aimed at achieving voluntary subordination of the people to be colonized through the "paternal benevolence" of the colonizers. Although this argument gets a specifically French revolutionary spin in the projects under consideration, the self-styling of colonial overlords as well-meaning fatherly figures while the colonial populations are relegated to the position of children, is not that innovative at all.²²

¹⁷ On the many projects for the invasion in Egypt, see e.g. François Charles-Roux, *Les origines de l'Expédition d'Égypte* (Paris, 1910); for the broader contemporary intellectual context, see Henry Laurens, *Les origines intellectuelles de l'Expédition d'Égypte: L'orientalisme islamisant en France (1698–1798)* (Istanbul: Isis, 1987).

¹⁸ Røge, "The Directory and the Future of France's Colonial Possessions in Africa, 1795–1802," 494.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, 487.

²⁰ *ibid.*, 478.

²¹ Jeremy Adelman has made a similar observation, arguing that successor regimes that emerged out of imperial revolutions (particularly in the Americas) "may have reconstituted political orders with new elements, but they hardly did away with many of the underlying ambiguities of sovereignty". See Adelman, "An Age of Imperial Revolutions," 339.

²² To mention just one example from an entirely different colonial context: In his study on seventeenth-century colonial Taiwan, Tonio Andrade remarks how the Dutch styled the relationship between the colonial governor and the local inhabitants as a father-child relationship. See Tonio Andrade, *How Taiwan Became Chinese: Dutch, Spanish, and Han Colonization in the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2008), esp.

In the proposals that suggested the development of West African colonies, it was apparently necessary to address the consequences of the abolition of slavery. This fact alone already makes projects of the Revolutionary years distinguishable from those of the Ancien Régime. In the case of the colonial project for Crete, there is little that could distinguish it from an old regime proposal, as the thematic of slavery was not addressed. And in fact, the author of the proposal even stated that he had already made a similar suggestion to the Ministry of the Navy ten years earlier.²³

Thus, the French Revolution does neither seem to have caused a complete break, nor a thorough rethinking of France's imperial claims, but merely a partial adaptation to circumstances and to the ideology that now prevailed. The imperialist language of these proposals remained unchanged as did the expansionist mindset behind it. The competition with other European empires (especially Britain) remained a central justification for the drive to subjugate other parts of the world.²⁴

The analysis of proposals for new colonial projects during the French Revolution seems to support the hypothesis of extensive continuities between the first and the second French Empire. While the revolutionary Republic only held a small fraction of the mid-eighteenth-century colonial possessions of the monarchy, the imperial mindset and the agents willing to construe and to engage themselves in new colonial projects were not gone, but alive and well. Therefore, while the willingness to reconstruct a colonial empire existed throughout the Revolution, the proposals made for such a reconstruction raise doubts about the extent to which they were based on a fundamental critical reflection on the previous colonial practices of the Ancien Régime with the aim of building back a better colonial system that would be more in line with the new political culture of the French Republic.²⁵

Thus, while the analysis of colonial proposals can contribute to Manuel Covo's and Megan Maruschke's call to critically review the interpretation of the French Revolution as an "unambiguous moment of colonial liberation",²⁶ they might be less convincing in challenging the interpretation of the French Revolution as a predominantly national French event.²⁷ For this latter endeavor, other sources pertaining to the reception and adoption of the revolutionary political culture in the colonies and other communities outside of France might prove more productive.²⁸

Chapter 9. Outside the colonial context, the notion of the father-child relationship was also applied to the relationship between the king and his subjects in early modern monarchies.

²³ "Observations sur notre position en Levant et moyens d'y rétablir notre prépondérance," fol. 130.

²⁴ As Jeremy Adelman observed in relation to the imperial revolutions in the Americas: "the legacies of empire and colonialism endured through, or were reproduced by, the very revolutions that were said to have brought about their ends." Adelman, "An Age of Imperial Revolutions," 339.

²⁵ Of course, it remains questionable if Empire and the political ideals of the French Revolution were compatible at all.

²⁶ Covo and Maruschke, "The French Revolution as an Imperial Revolution," 372.

²⁷ See e.g. David A. Bell, "Questioning the Global Turn: The Case of the French Revolution," *French Historical Studies* 37, no. 1 (2014).

²⁸ See e.g. Ian Coller's work on the centrality of "Muslims" as an argument in French revolutionary political discourse and my own research on the adoption of the revolutionary

Pascal Firges
National Taiwan Normal University

H-France Salon
ISSN 2150-4873
Copyright © 2021 by the H-France, all rights reserved.

political culture in the French expatriate communities in the Ottoman Empire: Ian Coller, *Muslims and Citizens: Islam, Politics, and the French Revolution* (Yale Univ. Press, 2020); Pascal Firges, *French Revolutionaries in the Ottoman Empire: Political Culture, Diplomacy, and the Limiting of Universal Revolution, 1792–1798* (Oxford, 2017), esp. Chapters 7–9; Pascal Firges, “Experiencing the French Revolution in the Ottoman Empire: The Practice of Revolutionary Political Culture in the French Expatriate Community of Istanbul (1792–1795),” *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* no 3 (2019), 151–70.