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Manuel Covo, *Entrepôt of Revolutions: Saint-Domingue, Commercial Sovereignty, and the French-American Alliance*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. 320 pp. Notes, references, illustrations, and index. \$110.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780197626382. \$27.99 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9780197626399.

Review Essay by Jesús G. Ruiz, Vanderbilt University

From its very inception in 1791 to its creation of the first-ever fully emancipated nation-state in the Western Hemisphere, the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) has been the subject of rigorous study. Ever since C.L.R. James's *The Black Jacobins* (1938), scholars of the former French colony of Saint-Domingue—what would become Haiti—have centered this small island nation, once known as the Pearl of the Caribbean, in their varied analyses. Yet, Haiti's history was long viewed, at best, as an adjunct to both European and American history and, at worst, an unknown or silenced affair.[1] This was especially the case when considering the American and French Revolutions, which in the context of the so-called Age of Revolutions were seen, correctly or not, as the vanguard of liberalism and modernity. Over the course of the last few decades, however, the history of the Haitian Revolution as *the* paradigm-shifting event in this era has rightfully taken its proper place in the pantheon of Atlantic world revolutionary movements. The political stakes of the Haitian Revolution cannot be overstated: Black liberation, anticolonialism, the full abolition of slavery, heads of state who were once enslaved, and so on. Haiti, not France or the United States, was the true champion of freedom. But if the then colony of Saint-Domingue was at the center of a common wind of liberatory political thought which created the modern revolutionary era, it was also at the core of a transatlantic economic revolution in which the rise of global capitalism, flanked by the newly created French Republic and the burgeoning United States, would not have been possible without Saint-Domingue as the central hinge.[2]

This *entrepôt*, which united France and the United States, is the analytical point of departure for Manuel Covo's stunning *The Entrepôt of Revolutions: Saint-Domingue, Commercial Sovereignty, and the French-American Alliance*. Covo, without minimizing the socio-political culture and legacy of Haiti, shifts our focus and illustrates how a market revolution—a key element of which was the notion of commercial sovereignty—"preceded, accompanied, and promoted a broader geopolitical revolution" (p. 9). Indeed, ideas around the liberty of commerce and commercial sovereignty shaped the contours of the revolutionary debates of the time and, as Covo eruditely shows, it is precisely this focus on Saint-Domingue's political economy that opens a new way of understanding Haiti's centrality in the rise of global capitalism. Of course, placing the history of Haiti and its relationship to France and the United States within broader histories of colonialism and slavery, or extensive explorations on global capitalism from Marxist perspectives, is not entirely new.[3] But where Covo's analysis is truly groundbreaking is in its ability to show that trade between Saint-Domingue and the United States "shaped the French-American relationship, contributed to state and imperial building in these three polities, and defined overlapping but distinct forms of republicanism" (p. 8).

To do so, Covo employs an innovative method of analysis which, in addition to its deeply transnational framing, utilizes what the author calls a *jeu d'échelles*, or a “game of scales” (p. 11). In this way, Covo sketches a deeply complex and layered history, attending to the US-France-Saint-Domingue relationship in a triangular fashion while also situating it within a more broadly interconnected framework of empire and exchange—particularly within the British, Spanish, and Dutch Caribbean worlds. Using a variety of primary sources from France, the United States, and Britain, Covo assembles a source base that is a rich blend of diplomatic, newspaper, commercial, and public and private-facing correspondences, as well as a multitude of “top-down” and “bottom-up” correspondences that include a variety of transimperial actors: heads of state, smugglers, diplomats, merchants, traders, bureaucrats, ship captains, and civil servants. Covo’s fascinating array of characters, their “fluid identities” and “cross-border” solidarities, elucidate not only how they shaped the French-American alliance, but perhaps more importantly, how transnational agents from Saint-Domingue manipulated the set of events that produced “historical consequences” (pp. 9-11). Such a methodology allows Covo to foreground Dominguan merchants as part of interconnected networks that “traversed national and imperial boundaries” and who, Covo argues, were “major stakeholders in the debate over revolutionary commercial sovereignty” (p. 10).

Covo’s *Entrepôt of Revolutions* is broken down into nine chapters that follow a more-or-less chronological order. Covo begins with the revolutionary context of the late 1770s and ends with the formation of Toussaint Louverture’s fiscal and military state of 1801, which preceded the War of Haitian Independence. Instead of focusing on a chapter-by-chapter synopsis of the book, I will split my analysis into two sections: a breakdown of chapters one through four and five through nine. I will highlight how, in my view, each cluster of chapters fits into and advances Covo’s broader arguments. Wherever possible, I try to provide constructive critiques.

In chapters one through four, Covo blends primary sources such as the *Affiches Américaines*, the official newspaper of Saint-Domingue, with literature and art. For instance, Covo introduces us to the poetry of Jean-Baptiste Coeuilhe, as well as to the rich paintings of Auguste Louis de Rossel and Louis Roger. Covo paints a vivid portrait of how the principle of *mare liberum*—or, liberty of the seas and liberty of commerce—led to a “collision between colonial law and neutral rights” (p. 23). Through these works, Covo establishes important foundational principles that will echo throughout the book: namely, the natural right of navigation and the civilizing virtues of commerce, all of which are a prelude to the key concept of global regeneration. Covo stays true to his claim that he “rejects a Eurocentric retelling of the Age of Revolution” (p. 8). One of the most important sections of the book is the sharp analysis of Hilliard d’Auberteuil, Dubuisson, and the Abbé Raynal. It is crucial because it elucidates not only the critical connections between France, the United States, and Saint-Domingue, but also points to the importance in understanding the history of the American Revolution, or of the hemisphere for that matter, through a Caribbean (see: transnational) prism. In Covo’s own words, “free-trade cosmopolitanism, rooted in contractual legalism, was therefore at the core of a Saint-Dominguan identity steeped in ‘commercial patriotism’” (pp. 29-30). This sets the stage for later chapters that delve more deeply into the role that commercial republicanism will play. Indeed, Covo lays bare the productive tension between two concepts at the core of his book: mercantile interests and political generation.

Covo's first chapters blur binary understandings so central to Eurocentric productions of colonialism and power: a metropolitan core versus a colonial periphery. In other words, Covo is not merely interested in explicating how Saint-Domingue should be centered in debates around the liberty of the seas, he's in fact upsetting the often rigid, both literal and conceptual, geographical epistemologies of European empire in the Americas. Yet, I am a bit apprehensive about Covo's statement that economic power "was all that mattered" (p. 30), in part because Covo's book demonstrates otherwise. He highlights the nuances between commercial praxis and shifting political ideas. One of the ways he does this is by putting eighteenth-century writers and physiocrats like the Count of Vergennes, Jacques Turgot, and d'Auberteuil in conversation with each other. Covo shows that to men like d'Auberteuil, Saint-Domingue was "the real center of decision-making" (p. 30). Cultivators in Saint-Domingue were not always in direct juxtaposition to business interests. In fact, many colonists were duplicitous: they denounced the tyranny of the *exclusif* (the principle of French colonial monopoly on trade), on the one hand, and equated their cause with that of the American revolutionary patriots, on the other. Covo's reading of Diderot leads him to make the case that colonists "had completely lost their humanity as extreme capitalist agents" (p. 31).

Smuggling became an integral part of this moment. But to what degree were smugglers different from wealthy merchants? This is part of what Covo does so well; there is no clear demarcation between the two. Indeed, a merchant could have started out a trade or a sea captain. Important examples include the captain of the ship *Bien-aimé*, who deceived Madame Robert Coëls and took her to Boston instead of Nantes in June 1786, and men like Mallenon who shrewdly used the law and differences between France and the United States to their advantage. On this latter point, this reviewer was left wanting a bit more of an extensive explanation.

In chapters three and four, the question of slavery and abolition, particularly through the contentious question of the *exclusif*, take central stage. Covo does well to make critical connections between these issues, but also with those surrounding the rights of free people of color. In doing so, Covo shows an effective way through which to understand not only the Franco-American alliance, but also the ways that it challenged national identity. The reviewer wonders if Covo's incisive analysis could have done well to also think about identity fluctuations and constructions with Saint-Domingue's neighbor to the east, Spanish Santo Domingo? Briefly mentioning prominent free people of color like Vincent Ogé and Julien Raimond, Covo illuminates how between 1788 and 1790 free trade was a consistent motivating force. Still, even in the context of a political explosion in 1789 and the slave insurrection in Saint-Domingue of 1791, Covo maintains his narrative through-line. He demonstrates how, "although the slave insurrection was threatening the entire plantation system, colonists were spending a great deal of their time debating the abolition of the *exclusif*" (p. 109). And perhaps this was why it was so "shocking," to use Covo's word, that the white planters of Saint-Domingue suddenly turned into "monopolists" (p. 110). Black insurgency and revolt indeed changed the local circumstances and by extension, ideas about republicanism and the granting of political rights to free people of color.

Chapters five through nine make important interventions with regard to how local trading practices "reshaped the politics of the French-American alliance more significantly than the lawmaking of the National Assembly in Paris" (p. 117). In particular, Covo's take on merchants'

adaptability in the wake of the 1791 slave insurrection in the northern plains of Saint-Domingue is critical because it offers a problematization to a long-held belief that after 1791 the devastation of the plantations resulted in “econocide” (p. 117). Characters like Bertrand Barère, Jean-Baptiste Belley, and Louis Pierre Dufay turned towards the United States instead of France, in part because of their vulnerability to British geopolitical actors. And in the United States, Thomas Jefferson’s Empire of Liberty was based on the union of free peoples and on a republican political economy that sought to construct a more cosmopolitan world. But abolition was looming, and Covo brilliantly shows us how “despite his ‘proslavery’ policy, his racial thinking, and his opposition to immediate abolition, Jefferson played a reluctant part in this world historic event” (p. 160). February 4, 1794, marked the abolition of slavery throughout the French Empire; nevertheless, commercial republicanism in the Atlantic world was not “solidified” and instead of uniting republicans, Covo shows that there was a “diversity of republics” (p. 165).

Covo’s last chapters cover the period stretching from the abolition of slavery to Toussaint Louverture’s consolidation of power on the island of Hispaniola, a subject perhaps not as overlooked as Covo suggests.[4] Regardless, Covo’s intervention is novel in that he does a formidable job of analyzing the roles of various major actors—André Rigaud, Sonthonax, Hédouville—through their various clashes and dealings with Louverture. In effect, Covo aptly uncovers the ways in which Louverture propped up his fiscal and military state within the French Empire. At the heart of this were political and commercial transformations mediated by the liberty of commerce. Yet, as Covo suggests, on the ground in Saint-Domingue this created a paradox: “on the one hand, liberal republicans claimed to educate and instill capitalist qualities into the newly free; on the other hand, they restricted, controlled, and monopolized their trade to ensure the survival of the colony” (p. 187). Through the stories of merchants like Samuel Smith and Stephen Girard, Covo demonstrates that the “relationship between political orientation and economic choice was not straightforward” (p. 188). These men traded with the British and saw no contradiction with their support for the republican cause. Covo’s shrewd analysis of the March 1797 forged sea letters from Girard is brilliant in that it illuminates how merchants went about circumventing potential French privateers. Meanwhile, Louverture was building a new “political entity” (p. 213). Driven by domestic politics around consumption, Louverture consolidated already extant policies and structures. Moreover, he built off of US models of political economy, but made them his own, “adapting to local circumstances” (p. 229). In sum, works that have focused on Louverture do not give enough weight to the “sophistication of his political economy and his contributions to the Atlantic debate over the exclusif, free trade and statecraft” (p. 236).

Covo has produced a truly remarkable transnational history of Saint-Domingue, the United States, and France during the era of Atlantic revolutions. One is left wondering, though, whether the work leans a bit more towards a history from above than below, as well as the degree to which the Spanish Empire, especially Saint-Domingue’s relationship to Spanish Santo Domingo, may have been foregrounded as much as the persistent and undoubtedly important specter of Britain throughout the work. These minor quibbles aside, Covo has constructed a phenomenal and convincing study that forces the reader to grapple with the fact that, indeed, commercial sovereignty, trade, and economic policy were major driving forces in the Age of Revolutions.

NOTES

[1] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

[2] Julius Scott, *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution* (London: Verso, 2018).

[3] Here, Covo engages with the works of Jean Jaurès, Anna J. Cooper, and C.L.R. James, but also with members of the so-called Jacobin School, such as Georges Lefebvre and Albert Soboul. See: Jean Jaurès, *Histoire socialiste de la Révolution française* (Paris: Éditions sociales, 1968-1972); Anna Julia Cooper, *L'attitude de la France à l'égard de l'esclavage pendant la Révolution* (Paris: Imprimerie de la Cour d'Appel, 1925); Albert Soboul, *Les sans-culottes parisiens en l'an II, mouvement populaire et gouvernement révolutionnaire, 2 juin 1793-9 thermidor an II* (Paris: Librairie Clavreuil, 1958); and Georges Lefebvre, *Les Paysans du Nord pendant la Révolution Française* (Bari: Laterza, 1959) and *The Coming of the French Revolution, 1789*. Translated by R.R. Palmer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947).

[4] Thinking most recently here of Charlton Yingling's important new book. See: Charles Yingling, *Siblings of Soil: Dominicans and Haitians in the Age of Revolution* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2022), specifically chapters four and five, which deal extensively with Louverture's consolidation of power between 1794/1795 and 1801. Other works include recent biographies of Louverture: Philippe Girard, *Toussaint Louverture: A Revolutionary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2016) and Sudhir Hazareesingh, *Black Spartacus: The Epic Life of Toussaint Louverture* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

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