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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 Robert D. Taber, Fayetteville State University

The early French state accepted and promoted the colonization of the Caribbean to have an outpost “at the gates of Peru.”[1] Tobacco and, later, sugar, coffee, and indigo production fueled French trade with Europe, especially for needed naval stores from Scandinavia. Planners of this early colonial empire, however, kept longing for two additions to this system: a refuge for poorer white men forced out by sugar cultivation but who could serve as needed in colonial militias and a regular source of grain for the Caribbean.

England famously stumbled into a system that was balanced enough for its purposes. Barbados fostered the creation of (South) Carolina to provide rice to the starved island, while New England provided timber and naval stores for that monarchy’s growing navy. The middle colonies of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, and to a lesser extent Delaware and Maryland supplied additional grain and timber. These systems were never as hermetically sealed against colonial rivals as the metropolitan governments liked, and the *asiento* right to deliver enslaved captives (and manufactured goods and commodities) to Spanish America’s viceroalties elicited frenzied speculation.

Merchants from British North America, however, also discovered a ready market in French Saint-Domingue for their grain. Thanks to government investments in irrigation and several other factors, these merchants could purchase molasses, a byproduct of the sugar refining process, more cheaply in Saint-Domingue than they could in Jamaica or Barbados.[2] Backlash to the British Parliament’s efforts to quash this trade was not the sole or even the primary cause of the U.S. War of Independence, but it was a factor and part of the explanation for why only half of Britain’s colonies in the Americas rebelled in the 1770s.[3] When the U.S. gained its independence and organized itself enough to start keeping and preserving detailed export records, the French Caribbean made up fifteen percent of its overseas market, and flour to the French Caribbean was five percent of the United States’s overall exports.[4]

Historians of the United States have long debated the thesis of a merchants’ revolution and, as Manuel Covo argues in *Entrepôt of Revolution*, this ongoing trade between the eastern seaboard of North America and French Saint-Domingue is an important lens for comprehending the middle years of the Age of Atlantic Revolutions. The trade happened, it was transformed but not ended by the Saint-Domingue slave revolt and the Haitian War of Independence, and it was a central question of the U.S.-French alliance, including how writers in each country comprehended the Age of Revolutions and their respective places in it. Ideas such as “the liberty of the seas” (p. 16), the United States as the “fort and granary of Saint-Domingue” (p. 19), and

whether France and the United States would be able to achieve a “union of interests” (p. 20) were key parts of ideological fermentation of the 1780s and 1790s.

Covo also provides important correctives and insight on the role of smuggling and trade with the United States within Saint-Domingue before and during the Haitian Revolution. The liberalization of commerce from the United States to France’s colonial possessions created legal ambiguities that merchants and local officials happily expanded and exploited. The book’s main narrative concludes in 1801 with American merchants thanking Toussaint Louverture for suppressing a revolt that threatened their interests (p. 235). In the epilogue, Covo observes the steps Leclerc took to disrupt trade between the United States and Saint-Domingue, a key part of his efforts to remove Louverture from power and, presumably, re-establish slavery in Saint-Domingue.

Much of the book focuses on trade statistics and pamphlets, letters, and reports arguing about the implication and future of trade statistics. But as evidenced in chapter two’s section “Who were the smugglers?” Covo also highlights the importance of moving beyond ledgers and printed primary sources. French consular officials, upset at the prospect of the Franco-U.S. alliance leading to American merchants siphoning off French colonial trade, assumed that smugglers were creole, foreign, and/or Jewish “adventurers.” Covo walks through the makeup of the companies to find that many were bi-national or extensions of French merchant families, and only two firms were from the Judeo-Portuguese community. His examples of legal and illicit cargo traveling between Saint-Domingue and the United States in the same ship provide important reminders that even French-Dominguan merchants could be slippery, particularly if they had close family members, such as Stephen Girard, ready to help them in the United States.

Covo makes a crucial contribution by covering the partisan and political nature of trade statistics, particularly estimates of illicit commerce. He shows, for example, how Ambroise Arnould, as head of the Bureau of Commerce, ignored or dismissed contraband in his 1791 report because the French Naval Ministry wanted to prove to the Chamber of Commerce that the limited lawful trade between the United States and Saint-Domingue was not the cause of French merchants’ woes. In contrast, Claude-Corentin Tanguy de la Boissière, working for the French ambassador in Philadelphia in the mid-1790s, manipulated data to argue that the United States had failed to be sufficiently grateful to its ally and U.S. merchants were robbing France. Covo points out that Tanguy classified French West Indian imports of flour between 1789 and 1792 as illicit despite France lifting that portion of the *Exclusif*.

France opening the French West Indies’ flour markets to U.S. merchants was, in fact, economically significant. The official statistics, which Covo admits probably only represented “half or a quarter of total cargoes” (p. 118), indicate that flour imports from the United States were equivalent to what the French Caribbean had received from Bordeaux in the 1780s. Along with the flour came a majority of the United States’s legal exports of beef, pork, and fish. The French West Indies also provided over half of the United States’s sugar and coffee importance and four-fifths of its molasses. By 1793, the French West Indies made up one-fifth of the total value of U.S. exports. As the Saint-Domingue slave revolt wore on, official contracts to provide the colonial government with foodstuffs proved lucrative. It is notable that the decision of many of Cap Français’ French merchants to back dismissed Governor François-Thomas Galbaud in

June 1793 against Sonthonax and Polverel came after the latter two fined the merchants for failing to provide U.S. traders in the city with the colonial commodities they had already sold to the traders.

Covo provides an important intervention in the historiography of the Haitian Revolution by illuminating the financial crunch Sonthonax and Polverel found themselves in during the summer and autumn of 1793. In need of food and provisions for soldiers and pay for freed men and women in the French Republic's employ, they had to obtain sugar, coffee, and related items with which to pay traders from the United States. While continuing cash crop production would be important to secure and maintain the ratification of abolition in France, the various efforts by the colonial state to maintain the plantation economy, proposals to redistribute land, and encouragements to grow food locally emerged from this crunch. When Louverture came to power, he inherited the decisions made before him, including a now-robust tradition of leaders of Saint-Domingue making mercantile policy decisions that were more autonomous than the French metropolitan government liked.

This book adds needed depth to how Saint-Domingue and then Haiti became a site of inter-imperial tussling between France, Great Britain, Spain, and the United States. It highlights the stakes for the various colonial governments, from Blanchechard's through Louverture's, in directing what Covo calls the functioning of a "quasi-state" as "the subverted hub of commercial republicanism" (p. 14). And it shows that the demand for grain and other foodstuffs played a crucial role in driving the colonial government's policy throughout the Haitian Revolution.

NOTES

[1] "Commission donnée par le Cardinal de Richelieu aux Sieurs d'Enambuc & de Rossey, pour établir une Colonie dans les Antilles de l'Amérique" in M.L.E. Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Loix et Constitutions des colonies françoises de l'Amérique sous le vent*, vol. 1 (Paris: n.p., 1784-1790), pp. 20-22.

[2] John D. Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), chapters one and two.

[3] Andrew Jackson O'Shaungessy, *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), pp. 65-67.

[4] Alexander Hamilton, "Exports for the Year Ending September 30, 1790." <https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llsp&fileName=014/llsp014.db&Page=34> Accessed 29 November 2023.

[5] A good introduction the historiography of the US War of Independence/American Revolution is Michael D. Hattem, "The Historiography of the American Revolution," *Journal of the American Revolution*, 27 August 2013. <https://allthingsliberty.com/2013/08/historiography-of-american-revolution/> Accessed 29 November 2023.

[6] General Rochambeau continued the policy of isolation after Leclerc's death in November 1802, pressuring Dutch/Batavian "free ports" in the Caribbean to turn away Dominguan/Haitian ships and goods. See Julia Gaffield, *Haitian Connections in the Atlantic World: Recognition After Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), introduction. The U.S. policy toward trade with Haiti would vary between tacit acceptance and interdiction in the decades before its own recognition of Haiti in 1862. See Gaffield, *Haitian Connections*, chapter four.

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