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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 Mary Dewhurst Lewis, Harvard University

Entrepôt: 1732—A port, city, or other centre to which goods are brought for import and export, and for collection and distribution, spec. one where goods are exempt from particular customs duties; a centre of commerce; a storehouse for the temporary deposit of goods and provisions. Also figurative. – Oxford English Dictionary

Born of mercantilist imperial economies, which in theory required colonies to trade only with their metropole, entrepôts were the exceptions, the ports where trade with foreign nations could take place, often with discounted customs duties. France had none until the Age of Revolutions. Then it had seven, with three in its most lucrative colony, the “pearl of the Antilles,” Saint-Domingue, which itself became a kind of entrepôt between France and the United States—before slave rebellion became a revolution, and Haiti declared its independence in 1804. Manuel Covo’s *Entrepôt of Revolutions: Saint-Domingue, Commercial Sovereignty, and the French-American Alliance* traces the complex relationship between political and commercial revolutions as the American, French, and Haitian Revolutions unfolded. Using the concept of entrepôt both literally and figuratively, Covo illuminates the set of relationships between France, the United States, Saint-Domingue (Haiti) and sometimes Great Britain that produced and were produced by the Atlantic Revolutions. Literally, Covo examines the day-to-day affairs of commerce between a dazzling array of ports to underscore just how important political revolutions were to commerce and, conversely, how pivotal commerce was to revolution. But he also extends the metaphor: this is a book about intersections of people, trade routes, and ideas. It convincingly shows that the fate of Saint-Domingue/Haiti was not just a matter between metropole and colony but instead was inexorably tied up in the birth of the United States, its relationship to its former metropole Great Britain, and the role that commerce played in pretensions to and exercises of sovereignty. And it makes a convincing case for the role of trade, and especially trade with Saint-Domingue, in all three revolutions.

This remarkable book is at once a social history, a history of ideas, and a history of political economy. Deeply researched in U.S., French, and British official records, plus scores of personal and business papers of traders and merchants in the United States and France who did business with Saint-Domingue/Haiti (some of whom had fled from Saint-Domingue during the upheaval), as well as relevant local newspapers, *Entrepôt of Revolutions* makes an important and original contribution to our understanding of the Age of Revolutions and Atlantic History more generally. It is a rare author who is equally comfortable in treatises of political economy and customs duties receipts, but Covo’s seamless move between such varied sources makes his argument deeply compelling.

The book opens with a point so seemingly obvious that it is remarkable that few have made it before (and indeed some have resisted looking for it): the French Revolution, so often associated with the birth of modern citizenship, occurred in an empire.[1] As were all eighteenth-century commercial empires to varying degrees, the French empire was premised on mercantilism: the idea, never perfectly implemented anywhere, that the economy should produce wealth for the home state at the expense of its rivals. In their ideal form, then, mercantilist economies were closed systems. Only the nation's ships could trade with its colonies, and the goods had to be returned to metropolitan ports before they could be sold to any foreigners. There were, in reality, always exceptions, both licit (wartime permissions to trade with neutral powers, for instance, or free ports that facilitated international commerce beyond the metropole-colony dyad) and illicit (smuggling).

In France and its colonies, the rules governing these relationships were known as the *exclusif*, which, as its name suggests, meant that there were supposed to be exclusive relationships that kept foreign traders out. As Covo demonstrates, however, multiple challenges were mounted to the *exclusif* system during the eighteenth century, many of which were triggered by war. During wartime, imperial governments often made legal exceptions to exclusive rules to provision colonies with necessary foodstuffs, building supplies, and other essential goods that the metropole could not safely deliver due to blockades or the risk of capture. There were also divergent interests between colonists, who generally wanted to trade their cash crops for the best price, and merchants back home, who relied on the exclusive laws to guarantee their share of the market to the detriment of their foreign rivals. In France, the re-export trade was hugely important to port-city economies and to France's balance of payments. A full two-thirds of the colonial goods shipped to French ports, Covo informs us, were re-exported elsewhere in Europe. This era was also one of financial crisis for many imperial centers—war, after all, was expensive—which meant that taxes and duties, and the ability to control them, were ever more important. Contraband, the illegal skirting of the exclusive system and state monopolies on the trade of products like tobacco, was ever more common and threatened to siphon away revenue in lost customs duties from the state, a situation that, as Michael Kwass has argued, helped set the stage for the fiscal crisis that triggered the French Revolution.[2] It was with these events and debates as the real-world backdrop that government officials and intellectuals proposed reforms to what came to be called political economy: the study of what the relationship between economy and state ought to be. This was the era of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* but also, as Covo reminds us, of people such as the French general controller (i.e., finance minister) Anne-Robert Turgot (1774-76) who, like Smith, was a partisan of lifting restrictions on trade.

After 1763, when France ceded New France to Great Britain in exchange for retaining its Antillean colonies at the end of the Seven Years War, Saint-Domingue became increasingly dependent on trade in foodstuffs and timber from North America, but this now violated the *exclusif*. The shrinking of France's colonial territory occurred in tandem with the astronomical expansion of the plantation complex in the Antilles and especially in Saint-Domingue. Between 1783 and 1789, the Saint-Domingue plantation complex expanded dramatically with the importation of nearly 200,000 additional slaves, meaning that a colony roughly the size of Massachusetts accounted for a stunning 36 percent of the entire Atlantic slave trade. Enslaved labor in Saint-Domingue made possible the unprecedented wealth of the colony, the trade of

which was valued at a staggering 230 million *livres* by 1789. Covo convincingly argues that the thirteen colonies and the early United States were partly responsible for the hugely profitable enterprise that was the Saint-Domingue cash crop economy in the 1770s and 1780s. “Without U.S. logistical support and food supplies, it would have been impossible to accommodate the rapidly increasing labor force of enslaved Africans” (p. 71).

The commercial relationship between Saint-Domingue and the thirteen colonies was solidified during the American war of independence. Not only did the French monarchy aid the patriots but these rebels, cut off from Britain, were themselves dependent on French trade. Louis XVI’s choice to intervene is often viewed as primarily geopolitical, but Covo reminds us it was also about markets. The thirteen colonies were vitally important in provisioning Saint-Domingue in foodstuffs, timber, and clothes, and were also a huge market for Saint-Dominguan products, especially molasses, coffee, and cotton. In this context, a Franco-American alliance was full of potential for an alternative future. The hope was that France would become the “metropole of adoption” (p. 39). But while Americans wanted to trade with French colonies, they were also accustomed to British products and remained consumers of them. Meanwhile, French merchants reliant on exclusivity had a hard time with “an arrangement in which the only rule was the rule of competition” (p. 39). In the end, France failed to make the United States subordinate to it as a kind of quasi-colony, and its leaders were shocked that the United States would become so deeply imbricated commercially with its former metropole. While Saint-Domingue was for several years second only to the British former metropole in the volume of its trade with the early U.S. republic, the hope that the United States, France, and the French Antilles could become a “free trade zone” (p. 36) based on “commercial republicanism” (pp. 30, 43) was shattered.

Covo analyzes the vicissitudes of the Franco-Haitian-U.S. relationship as first the news of the French Revolution then the slave rebellion of 1791 and emancipation decrees in 1793 and 1794 turned the erstwhile most lucrative colony in the world’s plantation economy seemingly upside down. Here, Covo carefully reconstructs the tumultuous relations that emerged as numerous factions cropped up on the island (white planter assemblies, free Blacks, new federations, republican enclaves, and British-occupied areas), in France (advocates of free trade and those wishing to continue colonial monopolies), and in the young United States (disputes between the democratic republicans and their rivals), showing how this volatile situation impacted trade and provisioning of the colony and eventually led to new conflict. Once France became a republic and went to war with nearly all of Europe, its *de facto* executive, the Committee of Public Safety, expected the United States to provision Saint-Domingue and serve as a “hinterland for French privateers” (p. 156). White colonists sought British aid, and Black rebels traded with American merchants. Meanwhile, a desperate French colonial government aimed to requisition property and maintain a plantation economy without slaves, offering huge contracts to American merchants, but was unable to produce enough commodities to pay for the food and supplies they needed to run the colony, or for that matter, to feed and clothe their own troops. Later, white colonists seeking refuge in the United States would become players in U.S. trade with the rebel colony.

One of the many interesting conclusions Covo arrives at by looking at this complex intersection of interests is that when Napoleon Bonaparte sent his brother-in-law Charles Leclerc on a military expedition to oust and capture Toussaint Louverture—the former slave turned general

who had proclaimed himself governor for life in 1801—in a failed effort to return the colony to greater metropolitan control, it was also a “punitive enterprise against the United States, whose commercial ambition threatened European colonization and had facilitated the rise of Toussaint Louverture” (p. 240). This sentence gets to the nuance of the period and problem Covo has studied. France had needed the United States to provision its colony; but its experiment in encouraging American independence not only helped the thirteen colonies wrestle free from Britain, it also unwittingly set in motion some of the dynamics that later undermined its own imperial authority over Saint-Domingue. The short epilogue on Napoleonic reaction whetted my appetite for more on the aftermath. It is perhaps too much to ask of an already incredibly comprehensive book, but I found myself wanting to know more of what came next. We learn, from Julia Gaffield, that U.S. and British trade with Haiti continued, but also, from Johnhenry Gonzalez, that Haitians “changed the terms of their relationship” to the “world capitalist market,” turning to subsistence farming and “strategic economic autarky.”[3] I would have loved to have had Covo’s perspective on the world bequeathed by upheaval for the erstwhile entrepôt of revolutions.

NOTES

[1] For a longer elaboration of his argument on this point, see his essay with Megan Maruschke, “The French Revolution as an Imperial Revolution,” *French Historical Studies* 44, 3 (2021): 371-397.

[2] Michael Kwass, *Contraband: Louis Mandrin and the Making of a Global Underground* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2014).

[3] Julia Gaffield, *Haitian Connections in the Atlantic World: Recognition after Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Johnhenry Gonzalez, *Maroon Nation: A History of Revolutionary Haiti* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2019), pp. 205, 202.

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