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**Review of Covo, M. (2022) Entrepôt of revolutions:
Saint-Domingue, commercial sovereignty, and the
French-American alliance**

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liminal conceptual frameworks, such as Michael Pearson's littoral history, Isaac Land's 'paramaritime' and Alison Bashford's 'terraqeous histories'.²

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Manuel Covo, *Entrepôt of Revolutions: Saint-Domingue, Commercial Sovereignty, and the French-American Alliance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. 320 pp., illustrations, maps, notes, index. ISBN 978-0-1976-2638-2, £74 (hbk).

It is a daunting task to subject well-known, exalted and in some ways beloved narratives to a dose of nuance and reality. In *Entrepôt of Revolutions*, Manuel Covo has taken on the Age of Revolutions, successively deconstructing and reconstructing the American, French and Haitian revolutions through the lens of (mostly French) political economy. Covo sets out to demonstrate how Saint-Domingue (modern-day Haiti) was a significant node in these upheavals, whether it be in real commercial terms or in terms of how political, social and economic phenomena were being understood on both sides of the Atlantic by France and its enigmatic new ally, the United States. Taking on Jacques Revel's *Jeux d'échelles* ('Game of Scales') as a descriptive and rhetorical device,¹ the book features a wide range of historical actors, geographies and sources in an elegant and effective mix of top-down and bottom-up perspectives. The result of this complexity is a ravishing portrait of historical reality and a deep reflection on the human experience of living through a historic moment.

Although Covo extensively lays out that Atlantic empires in the long eighteenth century were by definition porous, interrelated and even interdependent, his narrative principally departs from the French Atlantic. By successfully situating the Age of Revolutions in this particular space, he achieves his central aim of diverting from traditional British-centric, teleological or Whiggish accounts, which, in their examination of the commercial developments of the time, centre on the connection between the rise of free trade and 'the rise of Britain' (7). This is symptomatic of the traditional overemphasis on British contributions to liberal economic thought at the expense of eighteenth-century French economic philosophers. This work adds to recent historiographical reappraisals of early French proponents of economic liberalism, such as Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, the significance and influence of whose work 'has been in part overshadowed by Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*' (21). This is just one of

2. M. N. Pearson, 'Littoral Society: The Case for the Coast', *The Great Circle*, 7, No. 1 (1985), 1–8; M. N. Pearson, 'Littoral Society: The Concept and the Problems', *Journal of World History*, 17, No. 4 (2006), 353–73; Isaac Land, 'Port Towns and the "Paramaritime"', in Claire Jowitt, Craig Lambert and Steve Mentz, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Marine and Maritime Worlds 1400–1800* (Abingdon, 2020), 177–201; Alison Bashford, 'Terraqueous Histories', *The Historical Journal*, 60, No. 2 (2017), 253–72.
1. Jacques Revel, ed., *Jeux d'échelles: La micro-analyse à l'expérience* (Paris, 1996).

the many examples of how the broader 'French' Age of Revolutions retains common historiographical tropes – such as the free trade debate – yet adds to a wider understanding of intrinsically broad historical developments.

Yet such broader historiographical understandings are only to be gained via meticulous study and scrutiny of the source records. This work is a delightful reflection of this. Not only has a broad range been consulted, but the deployment of the sources in relation to the central arguments and perspectives is also well-harmonized. For example, the narrative of the book throughout is dynamic, grounded in contemporary realities and anti-teleological, ultimately demonstrating how revolutionary developments were constantly *in the making* as opposed to *made*. To accurately reflect this, Covo has chosen to consult ministerial memorandums – unpolished, full of annotations and corrections – as opposed to ministerial reports. Just as these memorandums were quite literally reports in the making, they simultaneously reflect how history itself was in the making. It reflects the difficulty of (colonial) policymaking at a time of great uncertainty, where path dependency was loose at best and *imagining*, as opposed to accurately anticipating the future course of history, was the best one could do.


This, then, is also the greatest strength of the book as a whole. It extensively invites us to reflect on the meandering nature of history, on the experience of historical contemporaneity and on the meaning of historical reality. It is a cautionary tale against teleological history: Covo situates his actors right in the middle of the confusion and uncertainty that come with living through a historic moment of successive revolutions. Politicians, merchants, sailors, the enslaved and all those in between in every corner of the (French) Atlantic had to come to grips with a repeatedly changing reality: the uprooting of bastions of social, economic and political philosophy; the accompanying disintegration of the political economies that framed global commerce as one knew it; and the associated shifts of personal identities and institutional designations – free or unfree, subject or citizen, monarchical or republican. What did it mean to live in this historic moment and to make decisions in this world?

Covo makes it clear that, for historical actors such as merchants, having to adjust their commercial strategies to new circumstances, and living and making decisions for the day after, was a gamble (196) – a calculated one, but a gamble nevertheless. He demonstrates that the future thinking of the time, unlike our present-day grand narrative, went in all directions: 'The idea that France could lose Saint-Domingue forever remained unthinkable to the majority of merchants, who faithfully believed trade would flourish once again' (239). Covo ties the confusion that many groups of actors experienced on a day-to-day basis to policymakers, who struggled to make sense of 'the proliferation of decrees and proclamations in response to changing circumstances, contradictory motivations, and an unstable political landscape that made France's policy virtually illegible' (155). It is revealing that historians (purport to) have had more success in interpreting these historical policies than the very historical actors who produced them, having the benefit of 200 years of hindsight in their corner.

Central to the uncertainty and disagreements (not only between but also *within* interest groups) in the 'French' Age of Revolutions is a constant tension between what was *natural*, what was *ideal* and what was *realistic* in the governance of the revolutionary French Atlantic. This was a complex triad of considerations. Often they were closely


interrelated but they were never quite the same; additionally, the lines between these dimensions tended to shift and blur in response to changing political, social or economic circumstances. This predicament forms a common thread throughout the book. Sometimes, the historical actors explicitly reflected on it: arguments were fought over ‘natural law’ versus ‘prohibitive law’ (84) or ‘the principle of reality’ versus the ‘immutable laws of nature’ (158) in redesigning the role and governance of the colonies in shifting circumstances. Yet the historical conjectures as described in the book also reveal this tension – for example, in how the pursuit of liberal commerce tended to result in exploitative capitalism, a liberalizing ideal that, in practice, resulted in less or no liberty at all for many individuals, particularly the enslaved. Looming over and exemplifying these contrasts is the historical and historiographical legacy of the *exclusif*, France’s protectionist system of commercial law for its colonies at the time, the survival of which was central to revolutionary debates. This is neatly summed up by Covo in a heading titled ‘Theoretical *Exclusif* and de Facto *Exclusif*’ (215) – essentially, the contrast between Jean Tarrade’s paradigmatic but more institutionally oriented 1972 study on the *exclusif* and numerous, more practical case studies since then, emphasizing the difficulty of imposing protectionist systems on geographic spaces, such as the (French) Caribbean and Saint-Domingue, which are ‘naturally’ suited to interactive trading/smuggling.²

This divergence between the natural, the ideal and the realistic had been simmering from the very beginning of European colonial expansion, and Covo’s case study masterfully demonstrates how the fire of revolution caused political economies to boil over. For the historical actors caught in the midst, the result was a contested past, a highly confusing present and a frustratingly uncertain future. Therewith, Covo presents us with a healthy and artfully crafted reminder that living through one of the major grand narratives of western historiography was, in all, not always a grand experience.

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Jennifer L. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021. 312 pp., illustrations, bibliography, index. ISBN 978-1-4780-1414-0, \$28.95 (pbk).

In *Reckoning with Slavery*, Jennifer Morgan has made a contribution to the history of the early Black Atlantic that has long been missing as she centres enslaved women and their children in discussions around the rise of slavery and capitalism in the Atlantic. Morgan takes Eric Williams’ *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944) as a starting point and Cedric

2. Jean Tarrade, *Le commerce colonial de la France à la fin de l’Ancien Régime: L’évolution du régime de l’Exclusif de 1763 à 1789* (2 vols., Paris, 1972).