ENTREPÔT OF REVOLUTIONS

Saint-Domingue, Commercial Sovereignty, and the French-American Alliance

Manuel Covo
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Entrepôt of Revolutions
**Figure 0.2** Saint-Domingue in 1795

On September 11, 1794, Captain Joshua Barney received France’s highest honor. The National Convention, legislative body of the first French Republic, invited him to accompany the new US ambassador, James Monroe, to ceremonially present the union of the French and American flags to the Assembly. The Baltimorean had made a name for himself during the American Revolutionary War, becoming a naval lieutenant at the age of sixteen and, in the seven years he served, capturing British frigates much larger than his own ship. Proud of his achievements for the cause of “liberty,” Barney delivered a much-applauded speech at the Convention advocating a permanent politico-commercial union between France and the United States. The deputies, who viewed Barney as a living symbol of the republican and revolutionary ties binding the two countries, awarded him an accolade fraternelle, and offered him French citizenship to herald the Revolution’s universalism. Finally, the deputies invited the young American to join the French navy as a ranking officer. A few weeks later, on October 11, Barney had a front-row seat when the remains of Jean-Jacques Rousseau were transferred to the Pantheon, the national mausoleum dedicated to distinguished French citizens. Being granted such high honors was no doubt thanks to Barney’s embodiment of the core qualities associated with revolutionary republicanism. He incarnated the intrepid youth of the United States whose very founding aided the regeneration of France. His invitation to revolutionary France expressed a cosmopolitan ambition for universal liberation. The call to join the French navy also reflected ferocious hatred of the common English enemy still closely associated in the United States and France with royalist tyranny.¹

These official ceremonies, however, did not refer to Barney’s true purpose for visiting Paris: to maximize the profits from his business in the French colony of Saint-Domingue (now Haiti). Barney was, first and foremost, an entrepreneur. As a shrewd merchant, he paid little attention to French pomp, being preoccupied with selling a substantial cargo of wheat imported from the United States. In return, Barney received payment promised by the Saint-Domingue authorities for
provisioning the island. Saint-Domingue, whose sugar and coffee production had made it one of the most profitable colonies in the world, was in revolution. A mass uprising led by revolutionaries of African descent had brought about the abolition of slavery on the island on August 29, 1793, a decision validated by the National Convention on February 4, 1794. A friend of the republican commissioner, Léger-Félicité Sonthonax, who had announced the proclamation of “universal liberty” in Saint-Domingue, Barney did not hesitate to conduct business with newly freed Blacks. Yet, earlier in his life, Barney had been a smuggler and slave trader in the Spanish Caribbean, and his support of the French Republic had not deterred him from acquiring the enslaved people he would later take back to his plantation in Kentucky. Barney thus spent the four decades between the American Revolutionary War and the War of 1812 navigating between the United States, the Antilles, and France, alternating between slave trading and supporting the Haitian Revolution, all the while making and losing money. The one constant was his willingness to fight the British at every opportunity. His chaotic journey was not an anomaly; it perfectly embodied the Franco-American relationship in this era of imperial rivalry and revolution, the heart of which was Saint-Domingue, the entrepôt uniting France and the United States.  

*Entrepôt of Revolutions: Saint-Domingue, Commercial Sovereignty, and the French-American Alliance* situates the French Revolution in both the context of the American and the Haitian revolutions and the longer history of colonial capitalism. Rather than examining notions of personal freedom and citizenship as the sole sources of revolutionary upheaval, this book emphasizes the significance of commercial sovereignty as a key concept that both connected revolutions and brought them into conflict. Its focus on the interactions between merchant circulation and the transformation of political entities decenters the core of the French-American relationship from the revolutionary capitals, Paris and Philadelphia, and underscores the centrality of Saint-Domingue as the hub of global capitalism in an age of revolutions.

By placing Saint-Domingue at the core of this history, the book identifies imperial trade as a driving force in the age of revolutions. In the aftermath of the Seven Years’ War, the French government envisioned a new organization for its empire, redesigning the connections between North America and the French Caribbean. This experiment in political economy was supposed to strengthen France’s imperial position in the Atlantic world. However, the creation of the United States, which had vast economic interests in the “Pearl of the Caribbean” through the smuggling of sugar, coffee, flour, and captives, sparked new anxieties and generated intense debate in France about the “liberty of commerce” and the nature of its own imperial sovereignty. Commercial reforms, with their broader moral and political ramifications, were hotly contested by lobbies, deputies, merchants, white planters, free people of color, and administrators. The debate
transformed over the course of the French Revolution with multiple attempts to republicanize sovereignty through commerce and purge colonial trade of its Old Regime, monarchical features. Commercial republicanism was the effort to put trade at the service of a political agenda that aimed to expand citizens’ rights internally and generate more equal relationships with foreign nations externally. Although most of the French revolutionary leaders understood that political sovereignty derived from economic independence, they relentlessly claimed that political goals should prevail. Yet the adaptation of merchant networks and the outbreak of the slave revolution in Saint-Domingue in 1791 transformed the parameters of debate. Within a wider context of rivalry with Britain and Spain, the French colonial system was compelled to remake its commercial infrastructure and invent new forms of political association that called into question the categories “colonial,” “imperial,” and “national.” Entrepôt of Revolutions reveals the multiplicity of imperial and colonial experiments that contemporaries such as Barney envisioned, traversed, influenced, and profited from to various degrees, within and beyond national boundaries in a rapidly globalizing economy.

French Trade in the Imperial Crisis of the Late Eighteenth Century

The French Revolution did not unfold within the framework of a ready-made nation-state but in a colonial empire with origins dating to the beginning of the seventeenth century. Since the French monarchy had claimed sovereignty over Acadia and the St. Lawrence Valley in Canada and the West Indian island of Saint-Kitts, the role of the colonies in the kingdom’s economy had steadily increased. French colonial expansion followed a nonlinear route and generated an uncertain empire that escaped positive definitions of an imperium (supreme power or sphere of control and monopoly). The French Empire emerged from a laborious process involving private entrepreneurs and semi-governmental organizations in the form of charter companies. Louis XIII’s and Louis XIV’s prime ministers Armand Jean Du Plessis de Richelieu and Jean-Baptiste Colbert had made colonies a central element of their geopolitical strategies. Adept at the nascent science of “political economy,” they were convinced that colonies were essential to commerce, and that commerce was the foundation of a formidable navy. If the king of France wanted to challenge the maritime supremacy of the United Provinces (the Netherlands) and, later, Great Britain, he needed to support and facilitate the expansion of French trade across the world. Conquests accompanied or followed the extension of trading networks with Native Americans in North America and Indian merchants in South Asia where France secured a multitude
of commercial outposts. Although fishermen, settlers, missionaries, filibusters, and pirates spearheaded this expansion, the monarchy supported many of these enterprises, contracting charter companies and in some cases affirming its jurisdiction over newly claimed territories. From the focus on mineral resources that characterized much of the early Iberian colonization in the Americas, the French government collaborated with private stakeholders and “rogue colonists” or interlopers to sustain a capitalist agriculture destined to export such products as tobacco and indigo, then sugar, coffee, cocoa, and cotton from the Caribbean and Mascarene islands.3

During the eighteenth century, France emerged as one of the leading slave trading countries in Europe, second only to Britain and Portugal. Merchants in Nantes, Bordeaux, Le Havre, Marseille, La Rochelle, Dunkerque, and a few other smaller ports deported more than 1.1 million captives from Africa to the Greater Caribbean in that century alone. The extreme violence of the slave trade sustained the development of French slave societies in Martinique, Guadeloupe, Tobago, other smaller islands in the Lesser Antilles, Louisiana, Guyane, Ile-de-France (now Mauritius), Bourbon (now Réunion), and, above all, Saint-Domingue. Saint-Domingue’s economy rapidly thrived through extreme forms of brutality against the Black workforce, whose forced sacrifices, often their lives, in turn enriched metropolitan port-cities. Its production levels dwarfed those of any other Atlantic colony, fostering jealousy with the British and Spanish empires. The technical sophistication of the irrigation system and labor organization provided a striking picture of capitalist modernity, described by historian Michael Kwass as the “dark side of globalization.”4

Colonies, however, remained vulnerable to imperial warfare, natural disasters, epidemics, and revolts, exposing the volatility and fragility of capitalism. Distance created vast problems in communication and control: crossing the ocean from Europe could take between thirty and seventy days, depending on the prevalence of hurricanes and other unforeseen incidents. In the face of such challenges and despite uncertainties about colonial profitability, the monarchy’s ongoing concern was to sustain an enduring source of income through a favorable “balance of commerce,” feeding off and channeling the greed of colonists. The Code Noir of 1685 was an unsuccessful judicial project to assert metropolitan sovereignty while legalizing and encouraging slavery. To counter a potential invasion by European rivals, the monarchy financed the building of shipyards and arsenals, extended premiums to merchants, and encouraged an increase in trained sailors to be drafted in future wars. The resources of the French fiscal-military state partly depended on colonial income but also involved costly expenses in naval protection. The wealth extracted from the colonies and their financial burden were critical factors in an ever-shifting set of international alliances and enmities. For France, the many wars of the eighteenth century took place largely in the
colonies and at sea, and the treaties ending each of these conflicts dealt prominently with commercial matters, from Utrecht in 1713 to Versailles in 1783. To a certain extent, France was enmeshed in a second “Hundred Years’ War” with Britain for global hegemony, yet wartime was interspersed with inter-imperial cooperation “from above” and “from below.” The French Empire was entangled in other European imperial formations and indigenous polities, generating gaps and loopholes.

Control over trade was central to the French king’s claim of imperial sovereignty and would remain crucial for revolutionary republics. Mimicking the policy of Oliver Cromwell in the Act of Navigation (1651) and responding to Dutch commercial power, the French government established the principle of colonial monopoly: the *exclusif*. Under pressure from metropolitan merchants, the monarchical government under Colbert produced a set of regulations later formalized in the laws of 1717 and 1727 (*lettres patentes*), through which French merchants not only monopolized colonial produce on the kingdom’s markets but also reexported these commodities to other European countries (the “carrying trade”) and provisioned the colonies with foodstuffs and goods from the metropole. In the *Encyclopedia*, economist François Véron Duverger de Forbonnais clarified the purpose of such legislation. “These colonies being established only for the utility of the metropolis, it follows: 1 °. That they must be under its immediate dependence, and therefore under its protection. 2 °. That the trade must be exclusive to the founders.” In many ways, the colonial *exclusif* was just one item on an endless list of privileges that made up the Old Regime legal system, based on exceptions, tariffs, franchises, and a set of *libertés*. The *exclusif* coexisted with charter companies claiming to monopolize markets in Senegal and the “East Indies.”

Just as metropolitan regulations were contested, the *exclusif* did not go unchallenged. From the outset, colonial societies flouted, ignored, and resisted regulations crafted by European powers. In the Americas, rampant smuggling was almost universal, and colonial officials were often complicit in a trade regarded as both essential and “natural.” The extreme agricultural specialization of several Caribbean colonies, which often developed economies of scale based on single commercial crops, was sustained by imports of foodstuffs from far-flung territories. The results led to precarious economic arrangements on the ground. In the seventeenth century, French colonies in the Antilles were only able to grow, expand, and thrive due to a flourishing Dutch trade, officially prohibited by the Crown but actually tolerated and even covertly encouraged. Over time, the French colonies became increasingly reliant on imports of cod and timber from New England, while the rum distilleries of Massachusetts depended on molasses from Martinique, Saint-Domingue, and Guadeloupe. Mules from Tierra Firme, essential for functioning plantations, were imported into many islands.
via Curaçao. The Spanish piaster of Mexican silver was the common currency in non-Spanish colonies. Connections fostered by dense networks of traders and sailors produced what historian Ernesto Bassi has termed an “aqueous territory” spanning the greater Caribbean, incorporating the Antilles, the shores of New Granada (Colombia and Venezuela), and the spaces bordering the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic seaboard of North America. The entrenchment of intercolonial and inter-imperial connections engendered an interdependent economy that refuted the monopolistic rhetoric of European monarchies and exposed the gap between rhetoric and reality.7

European political economists were divided on the relevance and usefulness of colonial monopolies for a variety of reasons. Thinkers on both sides of the Channel and the Atlantic engaged with political, diplomatic, fiscal, and legal issues, beyond what today would narrowly be defined as economics. Arguments deployed a variety of understandings associated with the “liberty of commerce,” which cannot be reduced to a contest between mercantilism and free trade. One of the most contentious topics concerned the dialectical tensions posed by commerce between “cosmopolitanism” and “patriotism.” In the books of philosophers such as Gabriel Bonnot de Mably, Denis Diderot, Voltaire, and Rousseau, a merchant’s “cosmopolitanism” was at times regarded as a vector of peace and intercultural encounter, at others as a symptom of harmful, greedy, and selfish passions. Commerce facilitated connections between diverse peoples of the world and offered an alternative to conquest, laying the groundwork for what economist Victor Riquetti Marquis de Mirabeau labeled the “universal fraternity of commerce.” But many commentators also pointed out that desire for profit could become the basis of exploitation, corruption, predation, and domination, the most pernicious manifestation of which was colonialism. The profitability of enslaved labor versus free labor was debated, as was how to regulate trade so that private interests could contribute to public interest, both on a national and global level. Whether an absolute monarchy could successfully rule a commercial society was another crucial source of political tension in eighteenth-century France.8

The Seven Years’ War (1756–1763) sparked a reorientation of French colonial policy using a new language of patriotism that mirrored global transformations and was entangled with British, Spanish, Portuguese, and Danish reforms. This new direction in political economy was integral to what historian Christopher Bayly termed the “imperial crisis.” In the context of British expansion in India, the increasing inter-imperial trade in the Americas clashed with a growing metropolitan centralization and concrete assertions of state power beyond the empty rhetoric of sovereignty and the practice of colonial neglect. The French defeat in 1763, prompting the loss of Canada to Britain and the cession of Western Louisiana to Spain, was a catalyst. On the one hand, Britain tightened restrictions
on North American trade and reformed the Navigation Act, increasing taxation on the thirteen colonies and contributing to political unrest. On the other, it implemented a system of “free ports” in the Caribbean, which circumscribed and taxed the flows of “foreign” goods and vessels into Jamaica, Barbados, and other British West Indies. While such commercial hubs were far from new, in the Americas these had previously been confined to tiny islands claimed by less powerful empires, such as Dutch Saint-Eustatius and Curacao, and Danish Saint-Thomas. Opting to recover Guadeloupe and Martinique by abandoning Canada in 1763, the French monarchy embraced a broader program of experimentation toward non-territorial forms of empire based on maritime expansion. In 1767, after much controversy, the French designed an exclusif mitigé that legalized the import of specific goods into controlled entrepôts while reasserting a French monopoly over shipping and trade of the most lucrative goods. Under this new policy, the French colony of Saint-Domingue, which had become the uncontested engine of French colonialism, was granted one such entrepôt at Môle Saint-Nicolas, a remote outpost of the colony.

Because of the immense territorial amputation of 1763, many scholars have narrated the history of the early modern French colonial empire up to Haitian independence in 1804 as one of decline. French imperial crumbling was compounded by the country’s geopolitical fragility on the European continent. The expansion of Russia and Prussia in Eastern Europe, the worrying vulnerability of France’s Austrian and Spanish allies, and the enduring strength of the British navy positioned France as a beleaguered player in Europe’s political system. The period between the Seven Years’ War and the French Revolution is therefore generally viewed by historians as a time of “collapse.” Within this narrative, France’s participation in the American Revolution is often presented as a peripheral event, a phony victory driven by a fruitless appetite for revenge ending in the financial disarray that engulfed a monarchy in chaos. The ever-shrinking territory of the French colonial “assemblage” has led historians to doubt the very idea that France was an empire at all. This perspective often aligns with an assumption that the French Revolution was an economic disaster happening in a backward agricultural country, another capitalist failure accelerating the British rise to global hegemony via the industrial revolution. This historiographical legacy partially explains why the French Revolution is rarely discussed as an important factor by proponents of the “new history of capitalism.”

Although this book positions French-British colonial rivalry as an important feature of the revolutionary Atlantic and explores the entanglement of imperial formations, it also challenges this British-centric teleology. Rather than making the case for a successful French Empire or presenting a new genealogy of French industrialization, it aims to reconnect Saint-Domingue’s plantation complex with an imperial history of France and a broader debate over free trade
that a fascination with the “rise of Britain” has concealed. Historian Guillaume Daudin has shown that “the largest trading power in Europe at the end of the 1780s was France,” not Britain, and its main support was “the plantation system.” As will be demonstrated, the devaluation of the power and scope of the French commercial empire leads to biased interpretations: first, it minimizes the significance of the Haitian Revolution and the wealth that France derived from Saint-Domingue; second, it overlooks the fact that the political economy of the French Empire interacted with the nonlinear construction of the French nation-state. Not unlike the Spanish “polycentric polity,” France underwent a phase of imperial revolution characterized by many short-lived experiments and unacknowledged continuities. The features of the French-American alliance set the stage for a French free-trade imperialism in the nineteenth century with old regime roots, as well as the “new colonization” centered on Africa and based on wage labor. Regarding Saint-Domingue as an entrepôt makes the connections between trade, revolutions, imperial formation, and nation building visible.11

A Triangular Relationship

Focusing on the implications of US-Saint-Domingue trade, Entrepôt of Revolutions places political economy at the center of the revolutionary narrative yet rejects a Eurocentric retelling of the Age of Revolution. This book engages with the notion of Atlantic revolution that historians Robert Palmer and Jacques Godechot conceptualized as a transatlantic democratic wave. It also draws from the more recent scholarship that has exposed the mutual influences of the French and Haitian revolutions and illuminated the multiple and contrary ramifications of events in the Caribbean and the United States. The book expands on this rich, layered work by showing that US trade with Saint-Domingue shaped the French-American relationship, contributed to state and imperial building in these three polities, and defined overlapping but distinct forms of republicanism.12

It argues that commercial tensions around colonialism were integral to revolutionary sovereignty. The liberty of commerce did not necessarily align with personal freedom, and commercial sovereignty could negate human rights. The meaning of commercial sovereignty remained contested throughout the revolutionary era; it was defined not only by ideas deployed by white thinkers in Europe or the desires of metropolitan consumers, but it was also shaped in the United States by a variety of elite and non-elite players. The new country and its 4 million inhabitants, partially isolated by European powers, coexisting with powerful Indian polities, and deprived of a standing navy, was a weak player compared to France, a global superpower. In fact, the French government ordinarily viewed the United States as peripheral to its colonial interests. Yet the
founders challenged this subordination from the outset, envisioning the United States as a universal *entrepôt* and breaking down the boundaries drawn by European colonial empires. A market revolution preceded, accompanied, and promoted a broader geopolitical revolution. Moreover, the existence of the new country disrupted the metropole-colony binary, as John Adams, the first representative of the US confederation at Versailles, explained:

> The Commerce of the West India Islands is a Part of the American System of Commerce. They can do Neither without Us nor We without them. The Creator has placed us upon the Globe in Such a situation, that We have Occasion for each other, We have the means of assisting each other, and Politicians and Artificial Contrivances cannot separate Us.

Adams was not only making a lofty statement about natural law and the commercial ambitions of the nascent power he represented but was also accurately calculating that the West Indies, and Saint-Domingue above all, were the nation’s principal non-British market. France needed the United States to supply its colonies, but the US government and many ship owners also believed they needed Saint-Domingue to sever their commercial subservience to the former metropole.\(^ {13} \)

While many white American elites, farmers, and migrants on the borderlands from the Great Lakes to the Floridas looked toward western expansion, powerful groups of traders in Atlantic port-cities advocated for and implemented an aggressive commercial policy, notably, albeit not exclusively, toward the French West Indies and the French Mascarene Islands. Under the US flag, ships from New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Salem, Charleston, and Baltimore flocked to harbors in Martinique, Ile-de-France, and Saint-Louis in Senegal. Saint-Domingue was by far the most significant French colonial market for the new country, and access to the Pearl of the Caribbean became integral to establishing the United States on the global stage. The enforcement of customs regulations, in parallel and in conjunction with settler colonialism and Native dispossession, was a major building block on the transition from a confederal state into a more centralized federal polity. Saint-Domingue was one of the sites where the co-construction of French and US republican empires intersected for revolutionary state formation and nation building.\(^ {14} \)

While the colony’s production enriched French and American capitalists and catered to consumer needs on both sides of the Atlantic, Saint-Domingue’s society did not remain a passive object of imperial scheming and commercial profiteering, and an array of actors from the colony shaped the French-American relationship. Although this was most visible during the tenure of general
Toussaint Louverture between 1797 and 1801, the colony’s commanding influence had been unfolding since the birth of the United States. Caribbean players were active participants within a multi-centered, Atlantic framework. Le Cap-François, Port-au-Prince, and, to a lesser extent, Les Cayes Saint-Louis, were cosmopolitan hubs importing foodstuff and timber from distant lands and exporting colonial commodities. They were connected with West Africa through the slave trade. These port cities were also part of a Caribbean network of trade, having long-standing connections with Jamaica, Cuba, Curaçao, the Danish West Indies, Martinique, Guadeloupe, North American ports, and, at its border, the Spanish part of the island. This commercial landscape contextualizes Saint-Domingue’s “layered sovereignty” within French imperial formation and the emergence of the Haitian state.15

This book follows the story of US-Saint-Domingue traffics and flows from a variety of angles. It examines the competing ideas that defined the legal framework of this trade, their intellectual sources, and their strategic use by individuals, rival factions, and pressure groups. The debate intersected with but was distinct from the history of abolitionism. Beyond concerns regarding taxation and monopolies, the nature of the relationship among Saint-Domingue and France and the United States was at stake and, in turn, raised broader questions about the national and imperial nature of the new composite polities emerging from revolutionary situations. Being a crossroad and a patchwork of overlapping sovereignties until the Haitian war of independence began in 1802, the status of the colony remained unclear: was it a département, a French-US entrepôt, or a new, unacknowledged polity? Examining the entangled commercial regulations illuminates the rise of a Haitian state connected with but autonomous from metropolitan, US, British, and Spanish designs. This ambiguity was foundational to a new French imperial republic.16

Entrepôt of Revolutions provides the first detailed study of the Saint-Domingue merchants whose networks traversed national and imperial boundaries and argues that they were major stakeholders in the debate over revolutionary commercial sovereignty. Although businessmen have always been prominent characters in narratives of the American Revolution, traders and sea captains have never been acknowledged as significant players in the Haitian Revolution. There are many reasons for this lack of recognition. The first relates to sources. While plantation records have made it possible to recount the fate of habitations (plantations in French colonies), and while ample business correspondence from French merchants has shed light on commercial matters in metropolitan ports, comparable sources for traders based in the colony are sparse and scattered in depositories outside Haiti. Much of this archival material has also been lost through fire and warfare. Most traders were continually moving from one port-city to another, and as transnational agents, they did not easily fit
within traditional historical narratives. For example, Guadeloupe’s privateers, immortalized by Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier, have obscured similar characters in Saint-Domingue, whose role was deemed peripheral to the Haitian Revolution. Put bluntly, these merchants were for the most part unsavory characters. Unlike Black sailors, they were not radical forces spreading revolt, and, far from challenging the plantation system, they generally contributed to keeping it afloat. The vast majority of traders who had access to and specialized in the US market were young white men like Barney. Unlike the more diverse world of planters and the urban middle classes, traders formed a racially exclusive milieu and social class clearly separated from that of modest retailers. Beyond this specific group, informal traffics took place between Black insurrectionists and American sea captains. However, the lack of archival material on informal trading makes it impossible to measure its volume.17

A current of Atlantic history has tended to depict transnational commercial networks as self-organized and self-regulated, existing beyond state oversight. Yet merchants did take state-sponsored regulations into account and jostled to infiltrate state institutions to strengthen their credit and reputation. The meaning of this activity amid revolutions, when the nature, function, boundaries, and definition of the state were in turmoil, remains unclear. Merchants strived to profit from ever-changing environments and negotiated with local public officials to facilitate trade. These individuals with fluid identities were able to manipulate how they were categorized, transforming themselves from French to American, from privateer captain to diplomat or smuggler. In so doing they also contributed to the transformation of polities. Maintaining cross-border solidarity, trans-imperial actors created links that alternately strengthened and contradicted the projects defined in the metropole. These informal links on the fringes of empire caused friction, distorted colonial dreams, and reinvented metropolitan rules. Merchants also attempted to occupy leading roles within political entities where influence was there for the taking. They organized rings and cartels, did battle in the name of merchants’ interests, and fought each other for the control of specific trades. In a context of entangled crises, the divide between the market and the state was constantly under negotiation.18

The Jeux d’échelle of Entangled Revolutionary Crises

Entrepôt of Revolutions contributes to efforts to globalize the French Revolution with the tools of “connected history.” Rather than settling on one scale of analysis, I practice what historian Jacques Revel calls a jeu d’échelles (game of scales): it examines the triangular relationship between Saint-Domingue, France, and the
United States, on an Atlantic, imperial, regional, local, and even individual level. The use of various scales is not only a descriptive and rhetorical device; it also sheds light on the collision of forces, parameters, and circumstances that have produced historical consequences. Although people, money, ideas, and goods circulated, commercial sovereignty provoked countless clashes on multiple scales of analysis. The French–US–Saint-Domingue relationship was part of a greater global framework of trade and empires, but it also materialized in the smallest of settings. It was fashioned by and intersected with the British and Spanish Atlantic worlds and was embedded in its Caribbean environment. Imperial centers such as Versailles, Paris, and London were also sites that defined the meaning of this trade. At times a central concern, at others a vague unarticulated afterthought, commercial sovereignty had very different meanings when viewed from a small port in Saint-Domingue, the National Assembly in Paris, a political club in New York, or a merchant house in Curacao.19

This study crosses traditional boundaries between political, social, and economic history by employing an abundance of widely dispersed primary sources from France, the United States, and Britain. Published reports, memos, and newspapers open a window on debates in the public sphere; handwritten notes, letters, and drafts reveal behind-the-scene discussions in Versailles, London, Philadelphia, and Le Cap-Français. Administrative correspondence between metropolitan authorities and colonial officials in Saint-Domingue show that implementation of commercial regulations remained a central concern in the last decades of the eighteenth century. Boxes from the DXXV series at the Archives nationales in Paris, a major source for writing the history of the Haitian Revolution, also offered a wealth of information on trade and financial transactions. Customs documents from US National Archives provided data on the flow of ships and goods between Saint-Domingue and New York, Baltimore, and Philadelphia.

Relying solely on public archives creates biases and risks overstating the power of governmental authorities as well as the consistency of their policies. Centering attention on traders provides a different picture. In addition to consular correspondence, repatriated archives from French consulates in US port-cities provide information on the commercial and political world underpinning this trade. Furthermore, Saint-Domingue’s notarial records detail the trajectories of commercial firms. Records from the High Court of Admiralty at the British National Archives contained papers providing new insights on US trade. Business letters, diaries and autobiographies, scattered in a great number of depositories, described the intricate commercial worlds from a personal perspective.

Although the layout of this book is largely chronological, the constant shifting of scales and a multi-centered framework produce a narrative that resists linearity.
The first chapter places diplomatic discussions at Versailles in their Atlantic context, examines the French-American alliance of 1778, and suggests that Louis XVI entered the war for colonial and economic reasons that entailed a global reappraisal of the French Empire. The creation of the United States sparked heated transatlantic debate on free trade, colonial relations, and diplomacy. The immediate consequences of the French-American alliance are explored in chapter 2, which also reveals the multi-faceted world of smuggling that linked US ports to Saint Domingue in the aftermath of the American Revolutionary War. Benefiting from cheap resources imported from North America, the Pearl of the Caribbean’s economy developed at an unprecedented rate. Although Saint-Domingue’s expanding plantation complex relied on US complicity, this development did not unfold seamlessly in the metropole, prompting concerns about “looting” of the nation.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine the contrast between conflicting perceptions of trade and merchants’ actual commercial practices, which created a politically explosive climate and set the stage for the imperial crisis triggered by the French Revolution. Far more than a dispute over doctrine, the struggle over the “liberty of commerce” revealed competition between colonial pressure groups at a time of democratic creativity entangled with slavery and race politics. With the creation of the French Republic in 1792, new concerns about colonial loyalty, national allegiances, and commercial connections surfaced and combined to create a shaky French-American “empire of liberty.” Decisions in Paris had consequences on the other side of the Atlantic—but not those expected by legislators, as white colonists weaponized commercial rules to attack free people of color and attempted to create new diplomatic connections with the United States. Chapter 5 exposes the contradictions between supposed high politics and merchants’ attitudes to events in Saint-Domingue and on the imperial level. Many traders in the Americas understood the slave insurrection as a potential boon and a way to eliminate French metropolitan competition. While some seized the opportunity to start intercolonial slave trading, others pulled strings to secure monopolistic contracts in the guise of “free trade.” At the same time, Black revolutionaries took advantage of the French-American crisis to abolish slavery on the island. These critical events exploded the fantasies associated with commercial republicanism.

The sixth chapter situates the emergence of the French commercial republic in the context of a new global war with Britain and US neutrality. While debate on the “liberty of commerce” mostly preoccupied a small minority of experts in Paris and London, it provoked a major democratic crisis in the United States and contributed to the embryonic bipolarization of party politics. French commercial republicanism failed in Philadelphia. Chapter 7 discusses how the breakdown of the colonial system almost entirely isolated Saint-Domingue from the
French metropole. Increasingly dependent on the United States for provisions, the colony suffered fragmentation and foreign occupations. The “newly free” practiced an informal free trade, which the government claimed to favor but hastened to regulate. Chapter 8 describes how new patterns of commercial circulation in a Caribbean at war challenged and generated political identities in the new revolutionary polities. Merchants played scales, shifting positions and crossing imperial/national boundaries in their own self-redefinitions, prompting state efforts to strengthen regulations and refine national definitions. Chapter 9 follows the formation of Toussaint-Louverture’s quasi-state as the subverted hub of commercial republicanism. This apotheosis was also the final episode in a series of economic and political experiments that concluded in French counter-revolution, the end of the special relationship between France and the United States, and the War of Haitian Independence.
“Who could say that the happiness of the human kind is no motive for the alliance between the French and the Americans?” It was with great optimism that Thomas Paine contemplated the likely consequences of the French-American treaty of amity and commerce of 1778. Paine, who in 1776 had heralded the beginning of the American Revolution with his best-selling pamphlet *Common Sense*, thought that this new connection would spark a cosmopolitan realignment and a diplomatic revolution. He had no doubt that the liberty of commerce between the early American republic and the French kingdom would shatter the grounds of national jealousies. The world would only become increasingly open thanks to the shared *entrepôt* of America and the civilizing virtues of trade. Therefore, the new economic union would inevitably destroy the basis of the European colonial system. Paine’s prophetic vision was all the more powerful as this pamphlet specifically targeted the *abbé* Raynal, whose controversial *Histoire des deux Indes* had been one of the bestselling and most translated books of the time. Yet Raynal, distancing himself from his radical reputation, had not shown any enthusiasm for the 1778 treaty. In the *abbé*’s opinion, the alliance was just another by-product of an old-style diplomacy that inexorably weakened the British “natural enemy” by taking revenge after the 1762–1763 agreement that stripped France of Canada and Louisiana. Raynal was quite certain that the young nation’s aspirations would rapidly collide with the colonial interests of European powers—including France—putting an end to the commercial and political revolution that Paine had imagined.¹

This exchange between two of the most read authors of the late eighteenth century revealed the uncertainties that surrounded the emergence of the United States. The disagreement between Paine and Raynal should not,
however, detract from the common premises on which they based their views—particularly the colonial lens through which they understood the events. Both of them knew that the birth of a new state in the Americas occurred in a world where political communities were organized as colonial empires, not as nation-states. The United States was tentatively emerging out of a diverse coalition of British colonies whereas France was centering its empire on the slave colony of Saint-Domingue. What was really at stake in the alliance was not the question of whether the United States would be allowed to trade with European metropoles but the question of whether it would have access to colonial markets, and the political consequences of this access for European politics more broadly. What would the alliance mean for the French Empire, its relationships with other empires, and its internal links between the metropole and the colonies?2

These questions unleashed a series of anxieties about the national boundaries of France and America. The possible institutionalization of commercial ties threatened to sever the international and colonial borders that had been established in the previous decades. The thriving “science of commerce” and discourse of political economy had already been shaping a number of reforms in the French Empire since the Seven Years’ War. In the 1770s and the 1780s, the colonial stakes of the French-American alliance galvanized the public sphere. It was not just ministers, diplomats, and economists but also merchants, planters, and public officials whose ideas circulated across the English Channel and the Atlantic Ocean in brochures, pamphlets, and encyclopedia articles. If most of the themes had been elaborated before, US independence would make those new ideas concrete and their actualization more likely. French officials extended a rethinking of empire already under way, taking the concrete existence of a new political entity into account. The controversy produced the conceptual categories with which the French-American connection would be examined during the revolutionary era. By looking at what happened as Franco-American diplomacy met the colonial history of the French Caribbean, this chapter reframes the origins, evolution, outcomes, and significance of the 1778 treaty.

A War in the Name of Colonies?
Vergennes Against Turgot

The terms of the debate over the fate of the French West Indies during the British imperial crisis emerged from the crucible of a conflict between members of the French state council. On one side of the debate was Charles Gravier, Count of Vergennes and secretary of state for foreign affairs, who fully backed an overt war with Britain. On the other side was Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, who as general