

European Empires in the Atlantic and Indian Ocean World in the First half of the Eighteenth Century: An Introduction

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In 1743, José del Campillo, appointed secretary of the Spanish navy and the Indies in 1736, wrote an unacted-upon manuscript, in which he compared the mighty Spanish Empire to the rapidly developing French and British empires in the Atlantic World. Spain came off badly by comparison with its western European rivals. Indeed, Campillo argued, 'a new method of government' was necessary for Spanish America so that 'such a rich possession should give us advantages.' He noted that the small islands of Barbados and Martinique were more beneficial to Britain and France than all of Spain's great empires. 'Our system of government,' he lamented, 'is totally vitiated.' Spain had neglected economics in favour of 'political government' and its preference for power had led to trade being set aside. Britain and France, by contrast, had been much more economically aggressive and thus more successful. They had recognised the need to give their colonies 'freedom and space, removing the shackles and restrictions oppressing their industry, and first giving them the means to enrich themselves before enriching their mother.'<sup>1</sup>

Campillo had a highly positive view of French and British imperialism in the first half of the eighteenth century, a view which was only sometimes shared by commentators in Britain and France. As Sophus Reinert has argued, every eighteenth-century European empire was engaged in fierce competition about empire, stimulated by what Reinert defines as an ethos of emulation. Political economists, for example, were preoccupied with how trade could be a form of conquest and how political communities could best nurture and encourage

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph del Campillo y Cosío, *Nuevo Sistema del gobierno económica para La América* (Mérida, Venezuela, 1971). Cited in J.H. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492-1830* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 232

their industries against foreign rivals. This emphasis on emulation tended to lead theorists in each nation to overstress the achievements of the imperial policies of other nations and to denigrate the imperial policies of their own nation. They did this, in ways similar to Campillo, though these discussions were usually initiated at a lower level of state bureaucracy than the ministerial level which Campillo had reached. What they wanted was to try and force a discussion about how imperial reform could be achieved. Thus, it was useful to depict other nations as succeeding where your nation was failing as a rhetorical strategy to argue for change in imperial strategies. The aim was to force imperial leaders to copy the ideas and practices of other places in order to move ahead in imperial expansion.<sup>2</sup>

Campillo's treatise fits clearly within this discourse of emulation. J.H. Elliott summarises the position nicely when he notes that 'it was one of the ironies of the 1760s that Spanish ministers should have taken Britain's commercial empire in America as a model for their own at a time when the British themselves were becoming increasingly attracted by the idea of a more centrally controlled empire on the model of the Spanish.'<sup>3</sup> Ideological competition was even fiercer between France and Britain, where each side was convinced of its own moral pre-eminence, especially as nationalism became a more urgent discourse in the second quarter of the eighteenth century, and their greater capacities to wage war and to establish and develop their colonies, at the same time as they envied the imperialists of the other country for what they considered were the superior imperial policies that they had adopted.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Sophus A. Reinert, *Translating Empire: Emulation and the Origins of Political Economy* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World*, 303.

<sup>4</sup> David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001); Stephen Conway, "War and National Identity in the Mid-Eighteenth-Century British Isles," *English Historical Review* 116 (2001), 863-93; Trevor Burnard, *Jamaica in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2020), ch. 2. The politics of imperial competition was well covered in a previous literature. See Richard Pares, *War and*

Britain, for example had a long tradition in which imperial 'fixers' criticised government policy as being unclear, inchoate and contradictory, allowing France, in their opinion, to take advantage of such incompetence by steadily advancing its interests in North America and even more so in the Greater Antilles. In 1721, Martin Bladen, the leading bureaucrat at the Board of Trade between 1717 and 1743, wrote a coruscating report, arguing for a close to complete overhaul of the colonial system in order to counter the French threat to Britain's imperial possessions. Bladen built up France's power until it was an existential threat to British security in the American interior. He argued that France wanted to extend 'the French Dominions' from 'north to south thro' the whole Continent of America.'<sup>5</sup>

He also lamented the weakness of royal authority in British North America, especially in the proprietary colonies, such as Pennsylvania. The colonies, he thought, needed to be brought under a unitary command of a Captain-General, the mechanisms of the fiscal-military state were to be brought into the colonies with taxation considerably increased, and political centralization hugely advanced. As Craig Yirush argues, 'political centralization

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*Trade in the West Indies, 1739-1763* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936: Ian K. Steele, *The Politics of Colonial Policy: The Board of Trade in Colonial Administration 1696-1720* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968); and Pierre Pluchon, *Histoire de la colonisation française* vol. 1 *le premier empire colonial* (Paris: Fayard 1991). See also James Pritchard, *In Search of Empire: the French in the Americas 1670-1739* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) and Gilles Havard and Cécile Vidal, *Histoire de l'Amérique française* (Paris: Flammarion, 2006). There is no treatment of the British empire that looks at the empire as a whole in the colonial period. Two forthcoming works that are relevant here are Daniel K. Richter, *The Lords Proprietors: Feudal Dreams in English America, 1660-1689* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, forthcoming) and Steven Pincus, *A Global History of the British Empire, ca. 1650-1784* (New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> Martin Bladen, 'Council of Trade and Plantations to the King,' 21 September 1721 in W. Noel Sainsbury, ed., *Calendar of State Papers, Colonial* vol. 32 (172-21) #656, 408-49. See discussions of this report in Steele, *Politics of Colonial Policy*, 167-70 and Craig Yirush, *Settlers, Liberty, and Empire: The Roots of Early American Political Theory, 1675-1725* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 184-87. For the structure of colonial governance in British North America in the 1720s, see James Henretta, *Salutory Neglect: Colonial Administration under the Duke of Newcastle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 3-59.

would allow for a more effective enforcement of the empire's commercial regulations, rendering the colonies economically beneficial to England as well as providing the wherewithal to match the French in the contest for North America.<sup>6</sup> What is key here, however, in this episode was, unlike in the 1760s, when all sorts of imperial schemes were advanced and considered and sometimes implemented, that the report was quietly shelved by imperial statesmen who thought the British empire was not in need of reform, but actually being well-run.<sup>7</sup> French imperial statesmen tended to do the same when receiving such well-intentioned schemes of imperial transformation, at least until a wave of reform swept over the European empires following the Seven Years War.<sup>8</sup>

This set of articles on administrative reforms and the law in the early eighteenth-century French empire; on the evolution of the East India Company as an aggressively expansionist organisation in South Asia; on flexible gender relations in a Jamaica that insisted on following its own instincts when it came to public morality; and to the Atlantic consequences on British American plantation development following the ending of the monopoly of the Royal African Company in 1708 take the side of the statesmen against Campillo and Bladen. Our view is that this period of European imperialism in the first half of the eighteenth century was, on its own terms, a time of considerable achievement, even if much of that achievement, as Burnard argues in discussing how the end of the Royal African Company facilitated the pre-eminence of rich planters and their highly exploitative system of large plantations, was based upon the subordination and mistreatment of others. In this

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<sup>6</sup> Yirush, *Settlers, Liberty, and Empire*, 187.

<sup>7</sup> S. Max Edelson, *The New Map of Empire: How Britain Imagined America before Independence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Francois-Joseph Ruggiu, 'Colonies, monarchy, empire and the French *ancien régime*,' in Robert Aldrich and Cindy McCreery, eds., *Crowns and Colonies: European Monarchies and Overseas Empires* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 194-210. For reforms, see Gabriel B. Paquette, ed. *Enlightened Reform in Southern Europe and Its Atlantic Colonies, c. 1750-1830* (Farnham, 2009).

period, the mistreated 'other' that is dealt with here is the African enslaved person and for Stern, the Indian peasant but it could easily be Native Americans, facing an increasingly difficult world where they were assailed by British and French settlers. It was a period when settler colonialism really took root in French and British America, much to the disadvantage of people who were not settlers.<sup>9</sup>

This view of the first half of the eighteenth century as a distinct period in European imperialism – what Stern wittily calls antemeridian in echo of C.A. Bayly's famous 'imperial meridian' interpretation of the British empire between 1780 and 1830<sup>10</sup> - is what this special issue is about. It concentrates on a specific temporal span, a period when European imperialism was especially effective in implementing European ambitions in far-distant countries, either through the mechanism of the state, as Houlemare describes, or through private companies, as Stern and Burnard argue, or through the agency of settlers themselves, as in Walker's essay. It is important to remember that empires are seldom monolithic. They are fragmented and pluralistic enterprises. One reason why two of our articles, by Burnard and Stern, focus on quasi-state corporate bodies, the Royal African Company and the East India Company, is that one way of examining empire as inherently pluralistic is showing how these institutions were not merely agents of a cohesive state with a coherent and adhered to imperial policy but agents of imperialism in their own right, participating in networks of commerce and governance that were producing at both state and private level an interconnected world system.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Charles Prior, "Beyond Settler Colonialism: State Sovereignty in Early America," *Journal of Early American History* 9 (2019), 93-117; Agnès Delahaye, 'Jeremy Belknap's 'History of New Hampshire' in context: settler colonialism and the historiography of New England. *Journal of Early American History* 8 (2018), 60-91.

<sup>10</sup> C.A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780-1830* (London: Longman, 1989).

<sup>11</sup> Brilliantly outlined in David Hancock, *Oceans of Wine: Madeira and the Emergence of American Trade and Taste* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

Our interpretation runs counter to some customary views of this period, even if it matches scholarship that is currently being done, such as that by Francois-Joseph Ruggiu for the French empire and by Steven Pincus and James Robinson for the British empire.<sup>12</sup> Usually it is thought of as a period devoid of imperial achievement, which may be one reason why French and British imperialism is so understudied, and when it is studied is seldom considered from the perspective of studying imperialism as a distinct analytical category. Steven Pincus, Tiraana Bains and A. Zuercher Reichardt lament in a recent article on the British Empire in this period that ‘the historiography of the British Empire before the eighteenth century lies in pieces. It is hopelessly fractured and therefore frequently misunderstood.’ They note, as does Marie Houlemare in this special issue in regard to the French empire, that imperial history suffers from being ‘mercilessly sliced apart into a variety of national histories,’ with empires, they argue, ‘studied only for reference to the nation-states that emerged out of them.’ Moreover, they assert, that while resistance in empire is frequently studied, ‘the imperial state itself is rarely the subject of analysis.’<sup>13</sup>

This state of affairs may be changing, especially as the recent work of one of the rare theorists working outside the parameters of early modern history whom these historians pay attention to, the political scientist James C. Scott, has moved away from studying resistance

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<sup>12</sup> François-Joseph Ruggiu, “Des nouvelles France aux colonies – Une approche comparée de l’histoire impériale de la France de l’époque moderne”, *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos*, <http://journals.openedition.org/nuevomundo/72123>; Steve Pincus and James Robinson, ‘Wars and State-Making Reconsidered: The Rise of the Developmental State,’ *Annales, Histoire et Sciences Sociales* 71 (2016), 7-35.

<sup>13</sup> Steven Pincus, Tiraana Bains and A. Zuercher Reichardt, ‘Thinking the Empire Whole,’ *History Australia* 16 (2019), 610-11. For another view of the colonial state in which resistance is more positively treated, see Kathleen Wilson, ‘Rethinking the Colonial State: Family, Gender, and Governmentality in Eighteenth-Century British Frontiers,’ *American Historical Review* 116 (2011), 1294-322. For works on French imperialism that take a wider perspective, see Kenneth J. Banks, *Chasing Empire across the Sea, Communications and the State in the French Atlantic, 1713-1763* (Montréal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002) and Christopher Hodson and Brett Rushforth, “Absolutely Atlantic: Colonialism and the Early Modern French State in Recent Historiography”, *History Compass* 8 (2010), 101-117.

to evaluating governance and the evolution over the *longue durée* of the state.<sup>14</sup> In addition, the long-standing topic of the fiscal-military state, a theme essential to the study of early modern European history, and which is touched on, if indirectly, in essays by Stern, Houlemare and Burnard, has recently begun to be extended to the study of European's overseas' empires.<sup>15</sup>

The question of the 'state' and how it functioned is central to all four essays in this special issue. Houlemare examines how the extension of legal frameworks developed in France helped to united the French empire together in both the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds.<sup>16</sup> Stern looks at the pre-Plassey history of the East India Company as part of his ongoing investigations of how the company operated as a state before it was hijacked by the actual British state in the late eighteenth century. He sees the state as an evolving form of a political and even a colonial institution in its own right embedded in various forms of networks in the Indian Ocean world.<sup>17</sup> Burnard sees the development of a particular and pernicious form of plantation agriculture in early eighteenth-century Jamaica as arising out of a bitter contest between different stakeholders in the British government about the proper role

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<sup>14</sup> James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980); idem, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); idem, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest Agrarian States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017). For a stimulating article that takes Scott's work on the state as a starting point for re-evaluating one aspect of early eighteenth-century British life, the application of the 'bloody code' in distant regions away from London, see Peter King and Richard Ward, "Rethinking the Bloody Code in Eighteenth-Century Britain: Capital Punishment at the Centre and on the Periphery," *Past & Present* 228 (2018), 159-205.

<sup>15</sup> Patrick A. Walsh, "The Fiscal State in Ireland, 1691-1769," *Historical Journal* 56 (2013), 629-56; Aaron Graham and Walsh, *The British Fiscal-Military States, 1660-1783* (Farnham: Taylor and Francis, 2016), Trevor Burnard and Graham, "A Workable System: Security, Taxation and the State in Jamaica 1721-1782," *Early American Studies* 18 (2020), and Erica Charters, "The Caring Fiscal-Military State during the Seven Years War, 1756-1763," *Historical Journal* 52 (2009), 921-41.

<sup>16</sup> See also Marie Houlemare, 'Seeing the Empire Through Lists and Charts: French Colonial Records in the Eighteenth Century,' *Journal of Modern History* 22 (2008), 371-91.

<sup>17</sup> This article builds upon Philip J. Stern, *The Company-State: Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundations of the British Empire in India* (New York: Oxford, 2011).

of the state in controlling and regulating the Atlantic slave trade. Walker contrasts how the state regulated family and marriage in Britain with how public morality was governed in Jamaica, showing that the free Jamaican community had a relaxed attitude about 'irregular' relationships between men and women that reflected the particular conditions in this tropical society. She notes that Jamaicans had a laissez-faire attitude towards people cohabiting and having children outside marriage. This laissez-faire attitude resembled, as is apparent from Burnard's article, the posture adopted by Britain and Jamaicans towards the buying and selling of Africans in Jamaican slave markets.<sup>18</sup>

Pincus, Bains and Reichardt call for a new history of the British empire in which the empire is studied not in relation to the nation-states that emerged out of that empire.<sup>19</sup> They advise scholars to avoid the temptation to 'rip the history of the British [and French] empire into a kaleidoscope of separate proto-national stories.'<sup>20</sup> This special issue re-envisioned European empires in the first half of the eighteenth-century as places where there was a sometimes combative, sometimes creative tension between imperial dictates and local autonomy. On the whole, we argue, that tension was managed remarkably successfully. It did so because the people who ran the imperial state in France and Britain always understood, in ways that their predecessors and successors did less well, that a strong imperial state, as Britain and France were surely becoming, could not compel one part of the empire to act like another part of the empire. Imperial uniformity was more successfully achieved in France than in Britain, as Houllémare notes in surveying how the development of common legal

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<sup>18</sup> For an extended treatment, see Christine Walker, *Jamaica Ladies: Female Slaveholders and the Creation of Britain's Atlantic Empire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

<sup>19</sup> For an exemplary example of how to treat the empire as an integrated whole from the Seven Years War until the French Revolution, see P.J. Marshall, *The Making and Unmaking of Empires: Britain, India and America, c. 1750-1783* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) and idem, *Remaking the British Atlantic: The United States and the British Empire after American Independence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>20</sup> Pincus, Bains and Reichardt, 'Thinking the Empire Whole,' 613.



procedures in the empire, especially during the regency period between 1715 and 1723 and again in the 1740s, helped integrate the various colonies into a single administrative framework. Nevertheless, as Houlemare also insists, legal practices were never uniform in this period, either in France or in its colonies, allowing local elites considerable room to manoeuvre.<sup>21</sup> In the British empire, local autonomy was more pronounced, reflecting its enduring importance, even as the fiscal-military state became more powerful.<sup>22</sup> The French and British imperial states were powerful beasts, contrary to a previous historiography that mistook the importance of voluntary, non-governmental factors in imperial matters as a sign that the state was weak.<sup>23</sup> Rather, it was powerful but did not always choose to exercise that power, as Stern brings out to dramatic effect in his account of how the East India Company responded to constantly shifting political circumstances in India. It did so with a mix of anxiety and opportunism that generally had the implicit and sometimes the explicit support of the British state. Burnard and Walker show how crucial the role of local elites was in translating imperial decrees in Jamaica and, in the case of the abolition of the Royal African Company, combating strong counter-currents from an institution that previously had been the personal instrument of a powerful if hated monarch.<sup>24</sup>

One contention that animates all of the essays in this special issue is one that often arises from comparative studies – comparison being rarer in this field than it should be, as Houlemare notes in her introduction to her essay, and as Wim Klooster and Gert Oostindie argue, commenting also that the comparisons tend to be between Spanish and British

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<sup>21</sup> André Rigaudière, “Un rêve royal français: l’unification du droit”, *Comptes-rendus des séances de l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 148 (2004), 1553-1567.

<sup>22</sup> Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer, *The Great Arch: English State Formation as Cultural Revolution* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985); Julian Hoppit, *Britain’s Political Economies: Parliament and Economic Life, 1660-1720* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017)

<sup>23</sup> A point made forcefully in Pincus and Robinson, ‘War and State-making reconsidered.’

<sup>24</sup> William A. Pettigrew, ‘Corporate Constitutionalism and the Dialogue between the Global and Local in Seventeenth-Century English History,’ *Itinerario* 39 (2016), 487-525

empires.<sup>25</sup> We tend to stress similarities more than we do differences. That was a problem for eighteenth-century statesmen who, like Bladen, were keen on political centralisation, if only for ease of administration. But these statesmen were more skilled than we usually recognise in balancing their desire for standardisation, rationalisation, and centralisation with a recognition that each imperial place had its own history and its own distinctiveness that needed be acknowledged.<sup>26</sup>

We concentrate in this special issue on the French and British empires. To make this special issue truly comparative, we would need articles on at least the Spanish, Portuguese and Dutch empires. That wider comparative perspective is something that we hope people reading this special issue will begin to work towards. Studies of these empires would have led to some modification of our themes. Take the second Dutch empire, 1680-1800, for example, which was a lesser beast than the first Dutch empire but significant nonetheless, even if its history in the eighteenth century is devoid of the conquests and offensive wars that were

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<sup>25</sup> Wim Klooster and Gert Oostindie, *Realm Between Empires: The Second Dutch Atlantic 1680-1815* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 258. Eliga H. Gould has argued that the eighteenth-century Anglo-American world was intrinsically tied into the Spanish world through a process he calls 'entanglement.' Gould, 'Entangled Histories, Entangled Worlds: The English-Speaking Atlantic as a Spanish Periphery,' *American Historical Review* 112 (2007), 764-86. For comparisons between the Spanish and British Empires in the period see Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World*; Jorge Canizares-Esguerra, ed., *Entangled Empires: The Anglo-Iberian Atlantic, 1500-1830* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018); and Adrian Finucane, *The Temptations of Trade: Britain, Spain, and the Struggle for Empire* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2016). For other imperial comparisons see Wim Klooster, 'Atlantic and Caribbean Perspectives: Analyzing a Hybrid and Entangled World,' in Peter N. Miller, ed., *Peoples & the Sea: Thalassography and Historiography in the Twenty-First Century* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 60-83; Trevor Burnard and John Garrigus, *The Plantation Machine: Atlantic Capitalism in French Saint Domingue and British Jamaica* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2016); Ada Ferrer, *Freedom's Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>26</sup> For recent and divergent statements about how imperial governance was done in the British empire in the 1740s, see Amy Watson, "The New York Patriot Movement: Partisanship, the Free Press, and Britain's Imperial Constitution, 1731-39," *William and Mary Quarterly* 77 (2020), 33-64 and Daniel Robinson, "Giving Peace to Europe: European Geopolitics, Colonial Political Culture, and the Hanoverian Monarchy in British North America, ca. 1740-1763," *William and Mary Quarterly* 73 (2016), 291-332

common in the seventeenth century.<sup>27</sup> But it was an important empire of commerce. Dutch traders were present everywhere in the Atlantic world. Their presence 'confirms the interconnectedness of the Atlantic world, in which the Dutch frequently served as intermediaries between subjects of other empires.' The story of the Dutch Atlantic is one of entanglement and inter-imperial connectivity – a connectivity often ignited by the movement of slaves within and across empires.<sup>28</sup> Imperial 'entanglement' is an important theme in the history of European imperialism in the eighteenth century. In this special issue, the theme of slavery is a source of entanglement, as Burnard, Houlemare and to an extent Walker show. So was law, Houlemare insists, and the standardisation of legal regimes.<sup>29</sup> Trade was an area where different empires were involved in fierce competition and sometimes collaboration, as Stern indicates in outlining how France and Britain moved from uneasy watchfulness of each other in the first quarter of the eighteenth century to open conflict in the 1740s.<sup>30</sup> Stern shows the multidirectional nature of imperial interactions in India in this time span. Both Europeans and Indians were 'actors' in the affairs of the other. In particular, it is wrong to view Indians as merely victims of oppression. They played crucial roles in shaping the European conflicts that occurred in India. As P.J. Marshall notes, 'the uneasy coexistence between the needs and ambitions of a vigorous British commerce and those of the rulers of some of the successor

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<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Scott, *How the Old World Ended: The Anglo-Dutch Revolution, 1500-1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

<sup>28</sup> Klooster and Oostindie, *Realm between Empires*, ; Alison F. Gomes, 'Conclusion: A Dutch Moment in Atlantic Historiography,' in Oostindie and Jessica Vance Roitman, eds., *Dutch Atlantic Connections 1680-1800: Linking Empires, Bridging Borders* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 359; Emily Berquist Soule, 'From Africa to the Ocean Sea: Slavery in the Origins of the Spanish Empire,' *Atlantic Studies* 15 (2018), 16-39.

<sup>29</sup> For law, see Lauren Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Laurie Wood, *Archipelago of Justice: Law in France's Early Modern Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>30</sup> Holden Furber, *Rival Empires of Trade in the Orient, 1600-1800* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976).

states and the Mughals was breaking down at mid-century,' encouraging all participants 'to try and impose new patterns of relations.'<sup>31</sup>

There are good reasons why we should concentrate mainly on France and Britain when evaluating interplay between the imperial centre and colonial subjects in the first half of the eighteenth century. In the sixteenth century, the Spanish empire was dominant, with the Portuguese empire playing a secondary role. The Dutch were prominent in the seventeenth century. But in the eighteenth-century competition and emulation between empires was most evident between the British and French, nations that engaged in repeated imperial wars, often also including the Spanish. The most important of these wars was the Seven Years War, an event which looms large in Stern's article. The result of that war confirmed the trajectory of European power in South Asia for the next two centuries and was the central event in the making of the East India Company as a quasi-state in southern India. Yet, as Stern also argues, we should look backwards from the Seven Years War in regard to the character of European imperialism in India as the British Empire in India is best understood through its continuities than its ruptures. The period between 1707 and 1759 in India is an important period in its own right, where many major features of British imperialism were established. He insists that this period was neither an aftermath nor a prelude but an imperial meridian, similar to other meridians in later periods of European imperialism.<sup>32</sup>

That the Seven Years War marked a culmination rather than a beginning is clear in regard to the French empire. French defeat in that conflict was close to total, causing an ongoing financial crisis for the French state that eventually contributed to the French

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<sup>31</sup> Marshall, *Making and Unmaking of Empires*, 56.

<sup>32</sup> For another example of meridian, see David Todd, 'A French Imperial Meridian, 1814-1870,' *Past & Present* 20 (2011), 155-86.

Revolution.<sup>33</sup> The totality of that defeat masks how successful the French empire was between 1715 and 1757. Houllémare shows how effectively France knitted together a diverse set of imperial places in the 1710s and the 1720s. A common legal culture, she argues, meant there was a common French empire. By the 1740s, the French were able to challenge British encroachments in the *pays d'en haut* around the Great Lakes in North America and could consolidate their growing wealth in Saint Domingue and New Orleans.<sup>34</sup> The British empire was successful too, as Stern, Walker and Burnard show. It was not a pretty process: neither the East India Company nor the separate traders who replaced the Royal African Company acted admirably. And while we might today approve of the liberal sexual and marriage culture in early eighteenth-century Jamaica, we need to note, as Walker reminds us, that such liberalism resulted from a malign demography in a culture suffused by slavery in which the ability to possess and control others could outweigh even people's gendered and racialised position.

This period was an imperial meridian that ended with the Seven Years War. It ended with the British and French empires greatly advanced. In addition, as authors in this special issue insist, the empires of France and Britain gained a distinctive character in this period, with slavery, gender, law and trade as essential components. Fundamental features of European imperialism were a strong commitment to slavery and to settler colonialism which were not negated in the next period of imperialism, between 1763 and 1804. This time span encompassed the age of revolutions and featured crises of imperial integration and disintegration. It seems to the authors of this special issue that that period should not have

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<sup>33</sup> James C. Riley, *The Seven Years War and the Old Regime in France: The Economic and Financial Toll* (Princeton, N J: Princeton University Press, 1986); Joël Felix, *Finances et politique au siècle des Lumières: le ministère L'Averdy, 1763-1768* (Paris, 1999).

<sup>34</sup> Michael A. McDonnell, *Masters of Empire: Great Lake's Indians and the Making of America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2015); Cécile Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans: Empire, Race, and the Making of a Slave Society* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

such a gravitational pull in studies of imperialism.<sup>35</sup> Bayly acknowledges that the global changes he sees emerging after 1780 had roots in the *ancien regime* studied here. He sees this period as one of “crisis and reorganization” across the Mughal, Safavid, and Ottoman empires that “triggered the creation of a whole range of new states throughout Eurasia” and combined with the rise of seaborne empires in the Americas set in train some very dynamic and transforming historical processes.<sup>36</sup>

Stern’s insistence that we consider imperial history as punctuated by a number of imperial meridians motivates the investigations in this special issue. And some of our results are surprising. Walker’s careful and empirically rich study of non-marital relationships in Jamaica, for example, turns an existing historiography on its head. She shows that Jamaica was a refuge in the eighteenth century for women like the remarkable Teresia Phillips who desired a more tolerant approach towards female sexuality than was possible in Britain where women faced increasingly harsh repercussions for engaging in nonmarital sex. Ironically, Jamaica, which Burnard argues had become an island where the treatment of enslaved peoples was at the nadir of the entire Anglo-American slave experience, was a place where a few relatively privileged women enjoyed a measure of financial and sexual freedom unmatched anywhere else in the Atlantic world, except perhaps in the neighbouring island of Saint-Domingue and possibly in the social circles of the mid-eighteenth-century East India Company. It was only after mid-century, Walker argues, contrary to an established literature, that the imperial and colonial state tried to govern women’s sexual activities as a sign of imperial civility.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Jeremy Adelman, ‘Empire, Nations, and Revolutions,’ *Journal of the History of Ideas* 79 (2018), 73-88.

<sup>36</sup> Bayly, *Imperial Meridian*, 36, 42.

<sup>37</sup> For Saint Domingue, see Paul Cheney, *Cul de Sac: Patrimony, Capitalism and Slavery in French Saint Domingue* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017). For the domestic

Existing scholarship has neglected and sometimes disparaged this period of imperialism as unimportant. By stating it is important, however, we do not want to advance the period we study unreasonably and diminish other periods. Hannah Arendt famously declared that the American Revolution was 'an event of little more than local importance.'<sup>38</sup> Such a statement seems unduly dismissive of an event usually thought of as having global significance. We don't want to argue that our period is necessarily more important than other periods of imperialism. That would be unlikely. Our point is that we might want to recognise how imperialism was not continuous but was composed of distinct periods that while they can be studied for what they tell us about what happened earlier or later also have a vitality that makes them worthy of study in their own right.

But we need to also acknowledge that dismissal of the importance of the first half of the eighteenth century is common, making studies as presented here worthwhile. Stephen Foster and Evan Haefeli, for example, consider that European empires in this period were 'such various and composite arrangements that it is possible to characterise them according to any one of a wide variety of rubrics.' This diversity made eighteenth-century empires in the Atlantic world 'so many states of mind.' Foster thinks them worthy of study despite being about 'how Europeans got into serious conflicts whenever they came up against other peoples because analysis of empires calls 'the phoenix-like tendency to explain America entirely in terms of internal developments.'<sup>39</sup> It is not worth studying for any other reason. Similarly, Kenneth Banks describes the French empire of this period as more an ambition than a reality due to the problem the state had in mobilizing colonial elites.<sup>40</sup> Foster and Haefeli are

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relations of the East India Company, see Margot Finn and Kate Smith, eds. *The East India Company at Home* (London: UCL Press, 2018).

<sup>38</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York, 1965), 56.

<sup>39</sup> Stephen Foster, 'Introduction: The What and Why of this Volume' and Evan Haefeli, 'British North America in the Empire: An Overview,' in Foster, ed., *British North America in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 9, 18.

<sup>40</sup> Banks, *Chasing Empire*, 8-9.

especially dismissive of British imperialism. They consider it on the one hand as so weak that it was easily overthrown in the American Revolution and that 'it did not take very long to do so,' quickly 'collapsing in on itself' after the Seven Years War. On the other hand, they argue that the British Empire was intrinsically flawed, even when it exerted some power, so that it was bound to disintegrate because 'its winding sheet was woven in its womb.'<sup>41</sup>

This dismissive view held by Foster and Haefeli reflects contemporary views held in the second half of the eighteenth century, as the British empire fell into crisis in one part of the empire (not, it is important to note, in the areas of the British empire studied in this special issue). These views emanated from very famous figures. Benjamin Franklin, for example, one of the most fervent supporters of the British empire before 1765, calling it 'a fine and noble china vase,' had become so disenchanted by that empire by the late 1760s that he declared that 'empires, by pride and folly and extravagance ruin themselves like individuals.' Adam Smith, famously thought that empires were not real but phantoms. Britain possessed, he believed, 'not an empire but the project of an empire, not a gold mine but the project of a gold mine.' Anne-Robert Jacques Turgot, a leading French minister under Louis XV, became so worried about American opposition to British imperialism before 1776 and thought empire so fragile a concept that he advised his monarch that if America became independent then France may as well give up its colonies as independence would become inevitable: 'wise and happy will be the nation that bends its politics to the new circumstances, who will convince itself to see nothing but allied provinces and not dependents on the metropole.'<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Foster and Haefeli, 'British North America,' 63.

<sup>42</sup> Franklin, Smith and Turgot cited in Justin du Rivage, *Revolution against Empire: Taxes, Politics, and the Origins of American Independence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 2-3.



The articles in this issue suggest that Turgot was panicking and that his argument was weakly grounded. As readers of this journal know, and as an increasing literature indicates, empire is an enduring concept and colonialism and post-colonialism at least as important as the study of the nation-state in shaping lasting historical social and political development.<sup>43</sup> Belonging to an empire connected French and British people with their country people overseas and heightened their sense of superiority against people defined as 'others.' British and French colonists and *colons* saw in imperial ambitions new possibilities. They celebrated being members of great and growing empires, especially in the dynamic years covered in this special issue. The radical Bostonian, James Otis, for example, argued in 1766 that he wanted to see 'a thorough beneficial union of those colonies to the realm, or mother country so that all the powers of the empire might be compacted and consolidated.'<sup>44</sup>

If even Otis could be satisfied with empire in 1766, while protesting against the Stamp Act of 1765, it suggests that imperial statesmen had been previously successful in balancing tensions between imperial centralization, differences between imperial regions, and the autonomy of local elites to make decisions for their own regions. The essays in this special issue broadly support such a conclusion. We don't want to be, of course, a shill for empire. This was a period when there was an unchallenged commitment to slavery and a determination to exploit Native Americans and South Asians that makes it clear how and who suffered for the achievements of settler colonialism. That two of our essays deal with the East India Company and the Royal African Companies, both highly problematic institutions,

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<sup>43</sup> For differing perspectives, see Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Charles Maier, *Among Empire: American Ascendancy and its Predecessors* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006); Krishan Kumar, *Visions of Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); and Priyamvada Gopal, *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent* (London: Verso, 2019).

<sup>44</sup> Cited in Peter N. Miller, *Defining the Common Good: Empire, Religion and Philosophy in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 231.

tempers any tendency to think of this period as one of great achievement. What we show here is that an imperial perspective on this 'imperial meridian' of France and Britain in the first half of the eighteenth century allows us to examine the existence and management of cultural and political diversity as opposed to nation-state homogeneity. At bottom, empires are about managing diversity. The following essays provide us with deep insights into how this management of diversity operated.