

Exchanging Empires: Free Ports, Reform, and Revolution in the Atlantic World, 1750-1784

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During most of the early modern period, British, French, Danish, and Spanish governments forbade their colonial subjects from trading with foreign merchants. By the mid-eighteenth century, however, the Dutch entrepôts of Sint Eustatius and Curaçao emerged as important Caribbean “free ports” where merchants of all flags could conduct business with one another. To compete, the British, French, Danish, and Spanish followed in the 1750s and 1760s, opening specific Caribbean ports to foreign commerce. How did subsequent European economic philosophers react to these free ports? How did such responses to free ports affect these thinkers’ ideas regarding free trade? While some scholarly work has illuminated free ports’ economic effects on the Caribbean, historians have yet to analyze the impact such ports had on free-trade ideologies throughout the Atlantic world.¹ As scholar Corey Tazzara illuminates regarding European and Mediterranean free ports, economists quickly forgot the role free ports played in the genealogy of free trade.² My project (specifically the fifth chapter of my dissertation) contributes to this claim. I posit that observations of Caribbean free ports provided models of free trade in action that helped develop the so-called classical liberal tradition and other economic arguments in favor of liberalized commerce.

Most of the secondary literature concerning prominent eighteenth-century European economic thinkers such as Adam Smith, David Hume, Adam Anderson, Richard Oswald, Josiah Tucker, François Quesnay, Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, and the Marquis de Mirabeau has not yet considered if specific empirical observations influenced their advocacy of economic liberty.³ My research proposes that contemporary experiments with free trade, specifically Dutch and Danish Caribbean free ports, provided both inspiration and evidence for these intellectuals’ beliefs that free trade could promote universal prosperity, cosmopolitanism, and peace (while also promoting relative gains for the home state). These Caribbean locales exhibited fewer tariffs and prohibitions than did British, Spanish, and French free ports and tended to be based around strategic neutrality, mutual understanding, and economic growth rather than aggressive imperial competition. Circulating reports of such prosperous Caribbean free ports, I suggest, contributed to these thinkers’ critiques of governmental interventions in the economy as destructive to amity and overall wealth creation. My work thus demonstrates that these economic philosophers were not working entirely with *a priori* assumptions. Rather, empirical observations of contemporary Caribbean free ports motivated, supported, and conditioned their often-quoted enduring free-trade treatises.

¹ See Frances Armytage, *The Free Port System in the British West Indies: A Study in Commercial Policy, 1766-1822* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1953) and Gregory O’Malley, *Final Passages: The Intercolonial Slave Trade of British America, 1619-1807* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

² Corey Tazzara *The Free Port of Livorno and the Transformation of the Mediterranean World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

³ See, for instance, Johnathan Sheehan, *Invisible Hands: Self-Organization and the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015) and Robert Fredona and Sophus A. Reinert (eds), *New Perspectives on the History of Political Economy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

To research this topic, I will first probe the invaluable lectures, correspondence, and other unpublished works of Adam Smith and David Hume housed in Scotland. The University of Glasgow Special Collections, Edinburgh Library Special Collection, and the National Library of Scotland all contain unpublished correspondence, essays, and lectures that Hume and Smith gave on commercial matters. I will then travel to London to examine South Sea Company records (since Adam Anderson worked for the SSC for forty years) in the British Library, the Parliamentary Archives, and the Senate House Library Archives. I will also examine many of Tucker and Oswald's papers in the National Archives at Kew and the British Library. Finally, I will investigate relatively uncombed correspondence between Quesnay, Turgot, Mirabeau, and colonial officials located in the *Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer* in Aix-en-Provence and the *Archives du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères* in Paris.

The Early-Career Scholars Research fund would support my trip to Scotland, paying for my airfare from New York (\$400), transportation between Edinburgh and Glasgow (\$20), twelve days accommodation in Edinburgh (\$680), and seven days of accommodation in Glasgow (\$400).⁴

To support the research activities mentioned, I will also apply to the Jerrold Seigel Fellowship in Intellectual and Cultural History and the Research Fellowship jointly sponsored by the Folger Institute and Omohundro Institute.

⁴ Exchange Rate GBP-USD on the 24th of November, 2020. Prices for accommodations based on an average of most reasonable Airbnb rates within a 5-mile radius of the respective institutions.