



Wim Klooster, Gert Oostindie. *Realm between Empires: The Second Dutch Atlantic, 1680-1815*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018. 348 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5017-0526-7.

Reviewed by Timo McGregor

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Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

Wim Klooster and Gert Oostindie's *Realm between Empires* follows hot on the heels of Klooster's sweeping account of seventeenth-century Dutch Atlantic colonizing. In *The Dutch Moment: War, Trade, and Settlement in the Seventeenth-Century Atlantic World* (2016), Klooster described the rise and fall of the Dutch Atlantic empire as a classic tale of military conquest followed by overextension and collapse—a violent imperial spasm that reshaped the Atlantic world in less than half a century. What, then, came after the fall? Klooster and Oostindie pick up the story in the 1680s, where they identify the beginnings of a new and distinct period of Dutch Atlantic activity. In this second Dutch Atlantic, the remaining shreds of empire were restitched into an “institutional patchwork” of settlements characterized by their deep entanglements with other European colonies (p. 9). Economic soft power replaced military expansion. As “quintessential intermediaries,” Dutch colonists and merchants operated in imperial interstices, facilitating the cross-imperial networks necessary to keep larger mercantilist systems functioning smoothly (p. 56). Institutionally, this decentralized “realm” lacked the “unbridled imperial ambition” of earlier Dutch ventures and could not compete with the territorially expansive empires of other European powers. But as economic actors, Klooster and Oostindie argue,

the Dutch “continued to play crucial roles” in shaping the eighteenth-century Atlantic world (p. 5).

If *The Dutch Moment* staked a bold claim to Dutch importance in the seventeenth century, *Realm between Empires* is slightly more circumspect in its argument (a difference also reflected in a considerably shorter note apparatus). Klooster and Oostindie are broadly supportive of recent efforts to revise a long-standing consensus on the “persistent failure” of the Dutch Atlantic (p. 4). This reevaluation is based on upward adjustments of older quantitative studies and efforts to foreground the importance of the Dutch as intermediaries in interimperial Atlantic networks. But they remain cautious about overstating Dutch importance, framing their contribution as one of historiographical affirmation rather than transformation. Thus, the Dutch case “illustrates” the vital importance of transnational circulations, “offers further proof” of the weakness of metropolitan states in the Atlantic world, and “strongly support[s] the present emphasis” on interconnectedness in the wider field of Atlantic history (pp. 3, 18, 258).

Klooster and Oostindie face a methodological and conceptual challenge in attempting to tell this story about transnational networks and processes through the national lens of a Dutch Atlantic.

Oostindie has previously argued, together with Jessica Vance Roitman, for a focus on “nodal points” as a method for studying how the institutions of the nation-state intersected with inter-imperial networks.[1] The organizational structure of *Realm between Empires* seems to riff on this idea by alternating between broadly thematic and geographically defined chapters. The former survey the transatlantic networks, institutions, and geopolitical shifts that structured Dutch colonizing, while the latter zoom in on the specific socioeconomic and cultural dynamics of settlements in West Africa, the Guianas, and the Caribbean. The result is an ambitious synthesis that manages to combine broad chronological scope with local specificity, but it sometimes feels like a book of two halves that are pulling in different directions.

The opening chapters offer a big-picture survey of the Dutch Atlantic in the long eighteenth century, focusing on the central themes of inter-imperial entanglement and institutional diversity. Entanglement here primarily means cross-polity economic exchanges, which the Dutch attempted to cultivate through a policy of studied neutrality in the imperial competition between Britain, France, and Spain. The Caribbean entrepôts of Curaçao and St. Eustatius offer the clearest examples of this model, but Klooster and Oostindie also emphasize the equally significant ties between British colonies and the Dutch Guianas—particularly Suriname, where an astonishing 90 percent of shipping between 1667 and 1795 was linked to British North America (p. 38). If this commercial entanglement was generated at the periphery, Klooster and Oostindie see slightly more metropolitan influence in the political and financial institutions of Dutch colonies. In their view, the “remarkably heterogeneous” systems of colonial governance—spanning proprietary, corporate, and public-private arrangements—reflected the equally fragmented politics of the Dutch Republic and the lack of centralized authority in the slimmed-

down 1674 reboot of the West India Company (WIC) (p. 61).

The political and economic weakness of the second WIC has led historians to downplay the size and impact of Dutch Atlantic ventures. Klooster and Oostindie agree that the WIC was a “financial fiasco” (p. 59). But they follow recent revisionist accounts that look beyond the unprofitable company to the “multiplicity of small firms” and private interests that used the WIC as “institutional cover” (pp. 68, 96). Even as the company struggled, private merchants thrived in the Caribbean entrepôts and a mid-century credit bubble turbocharged the plantation economies of the Dutch Guianas. Dutch capital also found outlets beyond the Dutch Atlantic, particularly in the Danish Caribbean and British North America, while New World goods flowed into the United Provinces from both Dutch and non-Dutch colonies, boosting local shipping and processing industries. In line with the recent literature, Klooster and Oostindie conclude that the Dutch Atlantic saw substantial economic growth over the eighteenth century, with the volume of Atlantic commerce outstripping trade with Asia by the end of the century. But they remain cautious about overstating the importance of this Dutch Atlantic economy, pointing to the larger volumes of British, French, and Spanish Atlantic trade. Despite their focus on private actors and transnational networks, they thus ultimately return to a geopolitical framework of national comparison.

Slavery was central to Dutch Atlantic ambitions from the start. Dutch participation in the transatlantic slave trade remained at a consistent level (in absolute terms) through most of the eighteenth century. Current estimates suggest that Dutch firms transported around six hundred thousand Africans to the New World, the majority between 1650 and 1775 (p. 80). Here too, new scholarship has adopted broader analytical frameworks to push back against older schools of thought that saw the slave trade as marginal to

the Dutch economy. Karwan Fatah-Black and Matthias van Rossum, for instance, have argued that focusing on gross margins rather than net profits better captures the scale of economic activity, including ancillary industries, generated by the trade in enslaved humans.[2] Klooster and Oostindie sketch this debate but operate their own policy of studied neutrality, pointing to the “serious debate about the methodology” involved. Though they concede that the local impact in key port cities was likely significant, they conclude that the overall contribution of the slave trade to the Dutch economy was likely “limited” (p. 89).

Chapters 3-5 take a closer look at regional and local dynamics of Dutch colonization in West Africa, the Guianas, and the Caribbean. The emphasis here shifts from economic data and institutions to the social and cultural structures of daily life—a growing area of research in the previously more conservative and economics-heavy Dutch historiography. Cultural creolization and heterogeneity are the underlying themes of these chapters. Creole languages and cultures, new social and political institutions, and patterns of maroonage and resistance to Dutch rule formed in response to local ecological, demographic, and economic conditions. On the Gold Coast, Dutch forts became sites of multiethnic communities founded on “pragmatic coexistence” and an “entente of mutual interest” between African and European leaders (p. 114). The Guiana settlements developed slave societies very similar to other European plantation colonies, though Klooster and Oostindie consider high levels of European diversity and a relative lack of mercantilist restrictions to be distinguishing features. Dutch Caribbean colonies did not “fit the mold” of other Caribbean islands (p. 172). Their entrepôt economies generated political structures dominated by merchants rather than planters, while uneven patterns of religious tolerance resulted from the need to cater to highly diverse populations. In all these colonies, local and interimperial conditions over-

rode any “transmission of Dutchness” in the formation of social and cultural institutions (p. 252).

These chapters trace themes across an impressive range of literatures, revealing promising areas for future research. One issue that crops up repeatedly is food dependence. In many Dutch settlements, lack of food production rendered colonizers dependent on indigenous communities to supply their basic needs, while the trade in food and livestock was also a key factor binding together European Atlantic settlements. Klooster and Oostindie note that accounts of slavery in the Dutch Caribbean have often missed the fact that the maritime economy depended on local food production by enslaved laborers. Food, this suggests, would be a fruitful lens into how these interdependent colonial communities were understood and experienced. It could also offer insight into the position of indigenous peoples and persistent practices of Native enslavement in Dutch colonies—topics that receive relatively perfunctory treatment from Klooster and Oostindie, who maintain that in most colonies Amerindians were soon “relegated to the periphery” (p. 162). Another recurring topic that would repay further investigation is the cross-imperial influence of Dutch credit markets. Generous credit helped make Dutch merchants competitive and fueled plantation economies, but Klooster and Oostindie also show how the Dutch invested large amounts of capital in other nations’ colonial and commercial ventures, including their British and later American competitors. The extremely rich material discussed here suggests that there is a great deal more to be learned about the political and institutional consequences of this informal empire of Dutch capital.

The final two chapters and conclusion return to broader thematic questions, discussing the circulation of ideas and knowledge, and the final contraction of the Dutch Atlantic. Besides a brief “Suriname enlightenment,” Klooster and Oostindie suggest that Dutch Atlantic colonies saw lit-

tle scientific or cultural production of their own but plenty of engagement with interimperial intellectual networks (p. 205). In the Dutch Republic, they find scant evidence of cultural awareness of the Atlantic world beyond those with personal investments in the colonies. Klooster and Oostindie see this lack of engagement on the part of Dutch elites, along with the weakness of the Dutch state, as an important reason for the absence of radicalism or ideological conflict in the Dutch Atlantic. Neither creole nationalism nor abolitionism gained much traction, while Patriot versus Orangist conflicts in the 1780s and 90s were driven by “local idiosyncrasies” and opportunism rather than genuine ideological commitments (p. 234). The “implosion” of the Dutch Atlantic during the Age of Revolutions was thus due to the era’s geopolitical rather than ideological shifts (pp. 225, 255). Increasing British hegemony, the rise of creole states, and the “end of the era of mercantilism” cost the Dutch their position as interimperial middlemen, while the weak Dutch state proved unable to protect its colonies during the destructive Fourth Anglo-Dutch and Napoleonic Wars (p. 225).

This account of Dutch decline as a problem “of a geopolitical nature” illuminates the book’s central preoccupation with the state (p. 248). The eventual failure of the Dutch Atlantic, in this analysis, was ultimately a failure of state formation. Klooster and Oostindie view the decentralized and heterogeneous structures of Dutch politics as a geopolitical liability, causing a “lack of consistent leadership” and undermining Dutch capacity to compete with more centralized fiscal-military states (p. 7). Like many, they see a symbiotic relationship between commerce and state power in which military might was necessary to sustain successful commerce (and vice versa). In their realist reading of international politics, the Dutch learned to their cost that purely commercial states could not hope to survive long, because “a weak state’s neutrality lasts only as long as larger states condone it” (p. 245). This framework of in-

terstate competition is fundamental to the book but goes largely unarticulated. Klooster and Oostindie do not engage with the recent historiography on Dutch state formation, some of which has argued that the Dutch state was neither as weak nor as disinterested in Atlantic power-projection as they suggest.[3] Nor do they engage with the substantial literature on the highly contested concept of mercantilism—a key component of their argument.[4] These feel like missed opportunities to both test the book’s conceptual foundations and build a case for the significance of a Dutch Atlantic perspective to these broader debates.

If Klooster and Oostindie’s model of commercial realpolitik explains Dutch decline, it makes Dutch success more puzzling. If commerce depended on state power and the Dutch state was weak, why did the Dutch Atlantic economy grow for the first three quarters of the eighteenth century? Their solution is to emphasize external explanations for Dutch economic success and failure, rather than focusing on the republic’s internal institutions, social structures, or systems of production. Dutch colonies and their economic networks thrived because they were allowed to survive by the British and French fiscal-military states, and they collapsed as soon as those bigger empires decided they could no longer condone Dutch neutrality. This argument of Dutch success by default is not uncommon, but it leaves little room for Dutch historical agency. The key turning points in the narrative are geopolitical events in which change was largely imposed on the Dutch: the Treaty of Utrecht, the Seven Years’ War, and the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War. Perhaps inadvertently, Klooster and Oostindie’s repeated description of the Dutch as “lubricants” of Atlantic economic systems evokes this rather passive Dutch role: important but ultimately fungible contributors rather than integral parts of the Atlantic machine.

The overall suggestion is that there was something peculiar, perhaps unique, about the devel-

opment of the Dutch state and its colonial extensions, resulting in an Atlantic realm rather than empire. But this distinctive Dutchness seems to dissipate in the chapters that focus on the Dutch settlements themselves. Seen from the colonies, the differences between Dutch ventures and the empire building of other European states appear to be differences of scale rather than category. Dutch colonies may have been especially decentralized and heterogenous, but legal, political, and cultural pluralism were hallmarks of many other European colonies too. Though the Dutch stopped expanding at the expense of other Europeans, the reduction in intra-European conquests was a pan-Atlantic trend after 1670 and there was no tapering of Dutch colonial violence from the perspectives of dispossessed and enslaved Amerindians and Africans. By Klooster and Oostindie's own account, life in Dutch colonies was shaped more by local socioeconomic and environmental factors than by Dutch culture or institutions. As they remark, there is a "certain arbitrariness" to describing these colonies as Dutch at all, given the preponderance of non-Dutch settlers (p. 198).

Ultimately, Klooster and Oostindie want to set up a "discussion of commonalities and differences between the Dutch realm and the Atlantic empires," but the heterogeneity and entanglement of Dutch Atlantic colonizing means it resists easy categorization or comparison along national lines (p. 258). One senses that the book's argument might have been quite different had it taken the colonial perspectives outlined in the middle chapters as its starting point. There are hints here of innovative, nonnational conceptions of politics that developed in (inter)colonial spaces. Fascinating glimpses of negotiations between colonists and the leaders of the 1763 Berbice slave revolt, or the three-hundred-man expedition dispatched by New England merchant Gedney Clarke to suppress a rebellion in Dutch Essequibo, to name just two examples, suggest a flexible political imagination undergirding complex cross-polity associations. But Klooster and Oostindie spend little time

on Dutch ideas about commercial and political governance, which they describe as "utilitarian" and "hard-nosed" (pp. 209, 215). As a result, the reader gets little sense of how political entanglements may have accompanied interimperial economic relationships, with the state crowding out all other forms of political organization.

Realm between Empires acts as a synthetic work that is also rich in colorful anecdotes and archival details. Both aspects will greatly benefit anyone seeking an introduction to the Dutch Atlantic literature or attempting to integrate the Dutch into their Atlantic history surveys. Though occasionally hesitant in its historiographical engagement, *Realm between Empires* provides a useful snapshot of where Dutch Atlantic history stands, and points to where it might need to go next. Mining a rich seam of revisionist work produced by Dutch scholars in the past decade, Klooster and Oostindie convincingly show that the Dutch were a significant Atlantic presence until the end of the eighteenth century. In seeking to affirm the present emphases of Atlantic history, it is no surprise that they run into some of the field's familiar problems in juggling national and transnational categories of analysis. An approach that emphasizes comparisons between distinct and competing national empires leaves one wondering whether the economic and cultural entanglements generated by the Dutch (among others) were in fact a feature or a bug in Atlantic colonizing. To understand the systemic impact of Dutch interimperial networks, the next challenge for the field will be to develop analytical frameworks that treat such entanglement as constitutive of fundamentally extra-national colonial political formations.

Notes

[1]. Gert Oostindie and Jessica Vance Roitman, "Repositioning the Dutch in the Atlantic, 1680–1800," *Itinerario* 36, no. 2 (August 2012): 129.

[2]. Matthias van Rossum and Karwan Fatah-Black, "Wat Is Winst? De Economische Impact van

de Nederlandse Trans-Atlantische Slavenhande,” *TSEG/ Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History* 9, no. 1 (March 15, 2012): 3-29. For older literature on the Dutch Atlantic slave trade, see especially Pieter C. Emmer, *The Dutch Slave Trade, 1500-1850*, trans. Chris Emery (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006); and Johannes Postma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1600-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[3]. Pepijn Brandon, *War, Capital, and the Dutch State (1588-1795)* (Leiden: Brill, 2015); and Karwan Fatah-Black and Pepijn Brandon, “‘For the Reputation and Respectability of the State’: Trade, the Imperial State, Unfree Labor, and Empire in the Dutch Atlantic,” in *Building the Atlantic Empires: Unfree Labor and Imperial States in the Political Economy of Capitalism, ca. 1500-1914*, ed. John Donoghue and Evelyn P. Jennings (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 84-108.

[4]. On recent efforts to interrogate the utility of mercantilism as an analytical category, see Philip J. Stern and Carl Wennerlind, eds., *Mercantilism Reimagined: Political Economy in Early Modern Britain and Its Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

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