

Book Reviews



Citation: Jake Dyble (2023). *Histories of trade as histories of civilisation*, edited by Antonella Alimento, Aris Della Fontana, Palgrave Macmillan. *Diciottesimo Secolo* Vol. 8: 139-140. doi: 10.36253/ds-14190

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Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

***Histories of trade as histories of civilisation*, edited by Antonella Alimento, Aris Della Fontana, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham (Switzerland) 2021, XII-361 pp.**

Thomas Hobbes was perhaps the last European philosopher who could afford to give commerce a secondary role in an account of human history, politics, and society. By the Eighteenth century, the paradigm shift occasioned by global trade was too big to ignore. *Histories of Trade as Histories of Civilization* brings together ten essays examining how Eighteenth-century thinkers from across Europe wrote histories of a trade as a means of reflecting upon the challenges brought about by this transformation. The book travels a path broken by Istvan Hont, whose collection of essays published as *Jealousy of Trade* in 2005 reminded us that Eighteenth-century reflections on commercial society were much richer and wide-ranging than modern economics textbooks suggest. Rather than considering canonical thinkers, however, the contributions in *Histories of Trade* focus on figures who are generally less well known.

It is perhaps a slight exaggeration to say that all of these writers contributed to a theory of civilisation through their histories. Many – perhaps most – were more mundane in their outlook, and their works are best grouped under the rubric of political economy: as Koen Stapelbroek’s contribution states, these ‘histories of trade could be, and increasingly were, written for political purposes, to instigate new commercial policies and initiatives’ in a context of global commercial competition, even if this did not necessarily exclude considerations on the wider implications for morality, justice, and human society. It is significant that most of the contributions here end up talking of ‘histories of civilisations’ in the plural. William Ashworth contextualises seventeenth-century English writing on trade and industrial policy within the ultimately successful attempt of the English state to improve its position with respect to French and Dutch competition (*Emulation, Wealth and Civilisation: Works on the History of Trade and Industry in Early Modern England*, pp. 151-80). The physiocrats of the second half of the century, meanwhile, certainly did not see mercantile activities as the engine of civilisation, but free trade could nevertheless help to rebuild the French Empire on a new basis by defeating the international ‘traffickers’ who wrongfully occupied a commanding position *vis a vis* the state, as Arnault Skornicki’s essay argues (*The Physiocratic Counter-History of Trade*, pp. 83-116).

In Naples, contemporaries were painfully aware of the challenge posed by the kingdom’s dependent position with regards to global trade: the tracts penned by Nicola Fortunato and Michele de Jorio, examined here by Alida Clemente, presented didactic and identity-building accounts that might alleviate this situation, but searched with difficulty for an ethical solution that

did not simply involve a dominated state becoming a dominator (*From Contemporary Models to the Glories of Antiquity: Power, Decline and National Virtues in the Neapolitan Histories of Trade*, pp. 245-76). Ere Nokkala considers August Ludwig von Schlözer's essay on the general history of trade, showing how late cameralists, unlike some of their predecessors, believed that domestic economic development and foreign trade could form a compatible policy which would in time improve Sweden's political economy (*August Ludwig Schlözer's General History of Trade and of Seafaring (1758): Cameralism, Natural History, and the Rise of Civilisation*, pp. 217-44). Aris Della Fontana, meanwhile, examines the transnational migrations of Francesco Mengotti's *Del commercio de' romani dalla prima guerra punica a Costantino* (1785), written with a geopolitically vulnerable Venetian state in mind, but significantly altered when translated into Spanish and French in order to speak directly to different political concerns (*In the Mirror of Rome: Commerce, Conquest and Civilisation Between Venice, Spain and France (1781-1800)*, pp. 245-76).

Other contemporaries wrote histories of trade to consolidate the identity of their home state, sometimes with a view to influencing domestic policy. Antonella Alimento examines the way that the Florentine patrician Carlo Ginori and his circle helped to institutionalize the memory of the Medici – and their support for commerce – as a means of 'educating' the new Habsburg rulers of Tuscany, hoping thus to win support for their own political-economic projects (*Re-employing Sources to Reflect on Merchants and Sovereigns: Medici Nostalgia and Civilisation in Eighteenth-Century Livorno*, pp. 181-216). Koen Stapelbroek's essay (*The History of Trade and the Legitimacy of the Dutch Republic*, pp. 117-150) looks at the way that seventeenth-century Dutch discourse on their own emergence as a trading nation was used to justify the Dutch state and legitimate its presence on an international level (though it would be wrong to dismiss this as simple nation-building, given the need to explain the radical changes in material circumstances that accompanied the emergence of the Republic).

Not all histories of trade were written under the shadow of a particular state and its policies, of course. Some writers, like the Abbé Raynal, explicitly sought to 'soar above' the particular concerns of individuals and nations and 'behold the globe beneath'. Jenny Mander's fascinating essay focuses on Raynal's idiosyncratic and thought-provoking critique of European trade and colonialism, whose supposedly civilised representatives became 'more barbarous than the savage' on the frontier. Raynal's account emphasised the role of the unrooted, wandering coloniser – the *flibustier* – whose

rapacious energy was intensified by temporal and emotional constraints resulting from a spatial estrangement from the homeland (*The City, War and Modern Civilisation from the Perspective of Raynal's Histoire Des Deux Indes*, pp. 277-308). Jansenist pedagogues, on the other hand, saw international trade, along with other forms of enrichment, as potentially commendable and even a sign of divine election, if this flowed from hard, creative work and a proper understanding of one's true interest, as argued by Arnaud Orain's essay (*Figurism, Temporal Goods, and the Manifestation of the Divine: The History of Trade Among Eighteenth-Century Jansenist Pedagogues*, pp. 57-82).

The resulting collection presents a highly coherent account of a heterogeneous intellectual landscape: an undergraduate or masters student hoping to understand the intellectual preoccupations of Eighteenth-century Europe could do far worse than read the volume from cover to cover. All contributions are clearly written and translated and give a rich sense both of the specific contexts in which works emerged and their place within a broader European conversation. By shifting focus away from the Enlightenment canon, moreover, the book gives a sense of both the shared concerns and wildly different responses that were occasioned by the rise of commercial society and a global commercial order.

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