

Call for Papers

Moralising Commerce in a Globalising World – Multidisciplinary approaches to a history of economic conscience, 1600-1900

German Historical Institute London, 22-24 June 2017

In the twenty-first century, the principles and practices of ethical investment and fair trade, the politics of boycott as well as corporate 'greenwashing' are well established in the repertoire of corporate and individual action and public debate. The history of transatlantic slavery and its opponents in the eighteenth century, and of the opposition against colonial exploitation in the nineteenth century, remind us that this repertoire has a history; neither moral indifference nor ethical engagement is 'natural' or self-evident. When and how do (and did) people with a measurable material interest, but who are not already embedded in long-standing maritime-mercantile networks, come to see themselves as participants in global businesses? How and when does (and did) awareness of one's material stake in an aspect of global trade prompt awareness of ethical implication and/or moral-political engagement? How and when have those who benefited from business enterprises with human or environmental costs indirectly, at second hand, or as subaltern agents come to reflect on the nature of the business?

This conference aims to provide a focus for discussion of how we might historicise economic conscience, investigating the means and processes by which individuals and collective actors have learned to see their own economic choices as contributing to a global system and to reflect on the impacts of their choices on other people and places, both near and far. Accordingly, our interest is less in critical characterisations of global systems – colonialism, imperialism, capitalism for example – or the social movements that inscribed those critiques on their banners than in the structures of sentiment and knowledge that made possible new articulations between understandings of moral obligation, locality, the spaces of humanity and the 'economic'. Based on that, we furthermore ask about respective individual expressions and collective actions like criticism of greed for profits from global commerce, voluntary self-restrictions, consumer boycotts and responding corporate strategies.

We invite contributions that explore the evidence of individual mentalities, collective argument as well as public discourse, and also papers reflecting on the social and cultural preconditions for change, including the ways in which information regimes of various kinds were implicated in the transmission of ethically meaningful knowledge. Contributions from all relevant disciplines are welcome, including historical, economic, literary, cultural and visual studies. Possible topics and contexts might include:

- Absentee slaveholding, antislavery, ethics of consumption, and the politics of boycott
- The company as political or economic actor / the shareholder as citizen or profiteer (e.g. in critiques of the East India Company and beyond)
- Corporate governance and the morality of the enterprise; ethical semiotics: trademarks and branding
- Reflections on exploitative modalities of global trade and its social and environmental costs
- Contested commodities and negative depictions of commercial actors (e.g. the gun-runner)
- Articulations of global humanity in relation to commercial exchange

The conference will be held at the German Historical Institute, London. We anticipate being able to reimburse standard travel expenses and the cost of accommodation for the duration of the conference. Papers from scholars at any stage of their career drawing on reflecting developments in any world area and any period between roughly 1600 and 1900 are invited. Abstracts of about 300 words and a short CV should be sent both to Felix Brahm and Eve Rosenhaft (brahm@ghil.ac.uk, dan85@liverpool.ac.uk) by 15 November 2016.