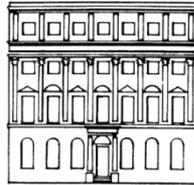


German Historical Institute London



BULLETIN

ISSN 0269-8552

Alexandra Gittermann:

*Moralizing Commerce in a Globalizing World: Multidisciplinary
Approaches to a History of Economic Conscience, 1600–1900*

Conference Report

German Historical Institute London Bulletin, Vol 39, No. 2
(November 2017), pp117-122

Moralizing Commerce in a Globalizing World: Multidisciplinary Approaches to a History of Economic Conscience, 1600–1900. Conference held at the German Historical Institute London, 22–24 June 2017. Conveners: Felix Brahm (GHIL) and Eve Rosenhaft (University of Liverpool).

The relevance of this conference, organized by Eve Rosenhaft and Felix Brahm at the German Historical Institute in London, needs no explanation. The question of the relationship between commerce and morality is an important one on both a global and an individual scale at a time when involvement in commercial networks and activities in a globalized context is still growing. In historicizing the subject, the conference offered a wide range of reflections on the matter from early views on the emergence of a ‘commercial society’ to contemporary working conditions, although it focused mainly on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The growing interaction with distant countries and the intrusion of related economic matters in everyday life during the early modern period left its traces in various forms of public discourse. Yusuke Wakazawa (York) showed how its consequences were perceived within Europe, based on the example of Tobias Smollett’s epistolary novel *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*, published in 1771. The disproportionate growth of cities involved in international trade, the exhibition of luxury on the one hand and increasing social inequality on the other were, among other changes, interpreted as signs of a growing imbalance within the body politic. The epistolary structure of the novel, as Wakazawa stressed, reflects the fragmented perception of a reality that was ever more complex and difficult to grasp in its entirety. Similarly, Joyce Goggin (Amsterdam) pointed towards fictionalization as a means of dealing with a financial world that had

First published as *Moralising Commerce in a Globalising World. Multidisciplinary Approaches to a History of Economic Conscience, 1600–1900*, 22.06.2017–24.06.2017 London, H-Soz-Kult, 06.09.2017 <www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-7300>. Copyright © 2017 by H-NET, Clio-online and H-Soz-Kult, and the author, all rights reserved.

The full conference programme can be found under ‘Events and Conferences’ on the GHIL’s website <www.ghil.ac.uk>.

a deep impact on personal lives. At the same time it was perceived as more and more abstract and beyond human control, as expressed in early literary reflections on the spectacular failure of the financial bubble created by John Law. These reveal many parallels with contemporary fictionalizations of financial success and failure.

More and more impersonal economic structures that seemed to be detached from the lives of the greater part of the population and from political control apparently generated mistrust in the protagonists of these developments and towards the forces of attraction a globalized economic order exerted on societies in general. This mistrust can even be traced on the margins of the international trading centres, as Justus Nipperdey (Saarbrücken) outlined in his talk about the German Cameralists. Their fear of the consequences of economic freedom in terms of social inequality and mistrust of the figure of the merchant, who was suspected of working solely for his own interest, while they continued to trust monarchical governments alone to regulate economic structures and working conditions for the common good, exemplified contemporary concerns about changes in society brought about by the emergence of a new globalized order based on liberal principles.

But while these early criticisms seem to lend themselves easily to drawing parallels with modern criticism, historians should not ignore the moral and religious attitudes on which economic enterprise was based during that period. In this respect, Aaron Graham (London) showed that even in a business with as negative connotations as the arms trade today, moral values such as trust and public benefit were perceived as essential in business connections that were still mainly based on family or friendship. Highlighting the examples of two contractors, he outlined how concern about 'fair prices' and the public good was passed down and was intended to guide actions at all levels within the business hierarchy. Richard Huzzey (Durham), for his part, suggested stressing the religious motives behind abolitionism, and putting these at the origin of the belief in free labour that is usually cited as the abolitionists' leading principle. He showed that the deeply religious language used in the abolitionist campaigns in Britain, many of whose arguments were based on the Bible, concepts of sin and virtue, and even apocalyptic visions, led to the argument that real prosperity could only derive from a new type of 'moralized commerce' more in line with divine providence and justice.

But Enlightenment discourse—based as it was on a strongly moralized language focused on the ‘common good’ and ‘public happiness’—did not necessarily imply that its values were considered universally applicable. When it came to distant countries and cultures, the *lumières* revealed their inherent tendency to apply ‘civilizing’ methods to societies apparently less developed. This means that enlightened discourse could easily be used to justify the establishment of imperial structures in line with expanding economic interests. This was demonstrated by Laura Tarkka-Robinson (Helsinki) in her talk on how reports written by East India Company employees in the eighteenth century contributed to shaping a new orientalism. This was based on the Enlightenment’s obsession with national stereotypes and an idea of historical progress that helped to justify the establishment of imperial structures in southern Asia. Similarly, a former official of the Dutch East India Company apparently did not see any contradiction in morally justifying a land reform benefiting Javanese farmers to allow them to pursue their personal interest in fostering public happiness and wealth, while at the same time sharply condemning the Chinese merchants in the area. He loaded their pursuit of their own private interests with negative connotations and pictured it as diametrically opposed to the common good, as Blake Smith (Chicago/Paris) explained. Thus where national economic interests were concerned, moral language could be used to promote one’s ‘own’ interests, while at the same time denegrating ‘others’ for not meeting allegedly universal principles. Sarah Lentz (Bremen) offered another interesting example of the pursuit of national economic interest based on moral arguments in her talk on Prussia’s sudden involvement in the abolitionist discourse around 1800. Here the invention of beet sugar by a Prussian scientist seemed to offer an alternative to slave-produced cane sugar at the same time as it opened up prospects of wealth for its producers and the state.

Parallel to these difficulties in separating moral claims from economic interests on a national level at times of economic expansion, it is also difficult to draw a clear line between moral considerations and the pursuit of business interests at company or individual level. In this context, Aske Laursen Brock (Canterbury) drew attention to the motives behind merchants’ involvement in social institutions in seventeenth-century London. At a time when companies were growing and coming under criticism for being increasingly detached from the

common weal, donations, but also investments in manufactures that provided work for the poor, became a means of accumulating moral capital, thus serving the image of companies and the public benefit at the same time. Again, what was morally at stake in one part of the world was not necessarily so when it came to distant countries. Joseph Kelly (Liverpool) cited the illuminating example of the British Imperial Brazilian Mining Association. While Britain itself had already abolished slavery, this company continued to employ slaves in Brazil. Stockholders clashed over this issue in 1841 and, again, it is difficult to discern whether it was out of genuine moral concern or concern for the company's public image. Both sides relied on moral arguments to justify their position. The defenders of slave labour alleged that the company had transferred knowledge and capital to a country lacking in both, and that to free the slaves would only mean exposing them to re-enslavement by Brazilians under much worse conditions. In the end, the company continued to rely on slave labour in a distant country, even after slavery was condemned in Europe.

A completely different view of this paternalistic treatment of slaves was offered by Jake Richards (Cambridge), who gave a rare insight into former slaves' attitudes towards Western authorities' attempts to determine their working conditions. After the abolition of the slave trade on the British side, 'liberated Africans' were put to work as apprentices on large land holdings, mainly in South Africa and the Americas. Taking the example of three liberated slaves, Richards showed how they used the limited possibilities they had to express their discontent at this display of paternalism that prevented them from choosing their own path in the transition from slavery to free labour. While the authorities hardly had the means to prevent these apprenticeships from turning into *de facto* re-enslavement, they still reacted with contempt towards the Africans for not corresponding to their views on political economy.

As became apparent on various occasions, moral arguments were often used to stabilize the existing order rather than change it. In this context, Andrés Spognardi (Coimbra) showed how attempts by Portuguese governments to alleviate the miserable living conditions of the working class and overcome growing social inequality, regarded as a consequence of exaggerated liberalism, by facilitating the foundation of co-operations in 1876 were mainly a means of anticipating and thereby controlling socialist movements, and thus of

maintaining social peace and the existing hierarchy. This use of moral language to stabilize hierarchical rule also applies to imperial structures and exploitative methods of production. This issue was also vital in Kim Sebastian Todzi's (Hamburg) paper on Germany's involvement in the African liquor trade at the end of the nineteenth century. Moral arguments that were used to criticize the detrimental effects of alcohol on African society clashed with the financial interests of traders and authorities, who likewise used moral arguments based mainly on the civilizing effects of free trade in Africa. Growing pressure on merchants ultimately had no effect because of vested interests, not least those of governments, in maintaining the income provided by duties derived from colonial trade.

While in this case it was the profits made by institutions directly involved in exploitative methods of production that resulted in these structures being maintained, another talk raised the question of consumer responsibility in this respect. Prices were a determining factor in the development of modern industry, as the creation of a new market of affordable goods for the emerging middle classes and labourers led to an increasing pressure on production costs, as Jennifer Davis (Liverpool) explained in her keynote lecture on the relationship between the establishment of trademarks and working conditions in the British textile sector. The search for cheaper production processes led to large-scale outsourcing to workshops employing unskilled labourers with miserable working conditions inside and outside Britain. At the beginning, trademarks were intended to allow the origins of a product to be traced. But misuse, exceptions, and 'deceptive marketing' helped to strengthen the position of large proprietors who were increasingly able to hide exploitation of workers behind their public image. By contrast, attempts by trade unions to establish their own trademarks certifying fair working conditions did not flourish, mainly because of price differences.

This talk touched on many issues that are still at the centre of debates on working conditions today, which was further illustrated by the second keynote lecture, delivered by William G. Clarence-Smith (London), and by Benjamin Möckel's (Cologne) contribution to the final discussion. Both opened up paths for the further development of the conference theme. Clarence-Smith introduced the attitudes of different African and Asian cultures towards forced labour in the pearl trade, and suggested looking at non-European discourses, such as

CONFERENCE REPORTS

Muslim abolitionism. Möckel pointed to the need to deal with the moralizing views of contemporary slave-owners, who often depict themselves as victims of globalization and free market ideas, and whose attitude towards their labourers might contradict Western human rights movements, but not necessarily their own cultural values.

The conference concluded with this turn towards a more globalized consideration of moralizing views on commerce. It had exposed a variety of subjects from the emergence of a 'commercial society' to contemporary moral debates related to commerce, such as fair trade, price policy, forced labour, consumer responsibility, and the role of governments in establishing moral codes for business, all of which, as was shown, have a long history that can be traced back to earlier stages of a globalized trade.

ALEXANDRA GITTERMANN (Hamburg)