

REVIEW OF ANTONELLA ALIMENTO
AND ARIS DELLA FONTANA (EDS.), *HISTORIES OF TRADE
AS HISTORIES OF CIVILISATION*,
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This book, edited by Antonella Alimento and Aris Della Fontana, is part of a historiographical trend which, especially in the last twenty years, has decisively changed and re-oriented studies in a very broad interdisciplinary area, namely that spanning the history of economic and political thought, the history of culture, economic history (particularly of mercantile and colonial relations) and political and diplomatic history, in the period between the second half of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century. At the heart of this historiographical debate is the analysis of the birth of the “science of commerce”, which is usually studied in relation to the culture, debates and communication media of the Enlightenment.

The many essays, books and edited volumes that Alimento has produced in recent years have several merits, including their undoubted ability to bring together different historiographical traditions and disciplines. Hers, in other words, is a multidimensional and multifaceted approach, and *Histories of Trade as Histories of Civilisation* (this time edited with one of her former students from Pisa, Aris Della Fontana) is a reflection of this decades-long pursuit. The volume is made up of ten essays (including the important introduction by the two editors), and focuses on the analysis of a historiographical genre, that of the histories of trade, which emerged and probably also achieved its greatest development in Europe and the Atlantic area between the “crisis of the European conscience” and the Napoleonic age. Having arisen in the context of the revolution that the Enlightenment

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forced on the historical method by overcoming the purely “evenemential” and political character typical of the discipline of history since antiquity, the histories of trade certainly carved out an important space for themselves, so much so that many of them can be considered integral to so-called “philosophical history”. The diffusion of this new historiographical genre also appears connected to the development of reformism and the birth of political or civil economy. Specifically in the eighteenth century the latter acquired its scientific and academic status thanks first of all to the so-called “science of commerce” developed by Jean-François Melon, Richard Cantillon, the Gournay circle and Antonio Genovesi, and then by the Physiocrats and the ideas of Adam Smith.

In their substantial introduction (pp. 1-55) Alimento and Della Fontana summarise the key themes tackled by the individual contributions to the volume, and provide a kind of general interpretative and historiographical framework. The editors begin by underlining how the success of histories of trade depended on the fact that the genre, by facilitating the consideration of some very different intellectual and political views, was conceived as a flexible tool that not only encouraged an understanding of the vicissitudes of global commerce over the centuries, but also enabled comparative investigations of the dynamics of the history of human civilisation (particularly European civilisation) and of national communities.

Since the beginning of the seventeenth century, trade was considered by many economic and political thinkers not only to be a matter of state, but also a decisive factor in the advance and historical development of human civilisation, which is why histories of trade gradually came to represent a heuristic method for reflecting on both the dynamics of the economies (European, colonial and global) of the period and on the influence of political decisions on economic development. The method adopted by the writers of histories of trade, at least until the spread of Physiocracy, was based on an empirical approach, that is, on the certainty that the past, even the past narrated in the Bible and by ancient historians, can provide useful lessons with which to interpret the dynamics of contemporary economics and politics. In other words, the book’s editors argue, the history of commerce can be considered an aspect of eighteenth-century political economy, given that its aim was to use examples from human history to understand the rules of contemporary economics that governments might use to develop the most suitable and effective policies and adapt them to the specificities of individual contexts and the particular challenges posed by international politics. In the context of a philosophy of history that usually adopted a cyclical and organicist approach, the authors’ objective was not to be erudite, but to be essentially political, in other words to identify the concrete economic and fiscal strategies or the most appropriate

reforms needed to ensure that European states (whether monarchical or republican) and their colonial empires could continue their development and face down the spectre of future decline.

Furthermore, one of the cornerstones of this historiographical genre was the awareness that the military power of states, in the past and in the present, depends on the development of productive activities and, more generally, on the wealth of citizens and subjects, beginning with merchants. From the end of the seventeenth century, starting with the histories of trade that Colbert commissioned from Pierre-Daniel Huet, and through to the 1780s, historical discourse relating to trade revolved around two concepts, the *esprit de conquête* exemplified by the history of Rome but also by modern Spain, and the *esprit de commerce*, identified with ancient Carthage and modern Holland. Thanks to Melon and Montesquieu, these concepts dominated the economic and political reflection of the Enlightenment for a long period. Some authors, including Huet himself, considered the two to be compatible, given that – as demonstrated by Alexander the Great, Peter I of Russia and, at least initially, Louis XIV – military force and expansionism could be supported by the development of trade. However, most eighteenth-century thinkers, such as Francesco Mengotti, who is analysed in the essay by Della Fontana, considered them to be absolutely irreconcilable. On the other hand, the awareness, which had developed since the first decade of the eighteenth century, that “jealousy of trade” and international mercantile competition (the primary cause of several global conflicts between European states) depended on competing and specific national interests further encouraged thinking on the role of trade in the history of states. For this reason throughout the century political economy was often considered within the context of a distinctly patriotic discourse.

Two schools of thought on the historical role of commerce opposed each other until the end of the century, as Alimento and Della Fontana recall. The first, which John G.A. Pocock has defined “commercial Humanism” (whose most important theorists were Melon, Voltaire, Hume, Saint-Pierre, Forbonnais and Montesquieu) maintained a positive view of commerce: in addition to civilising nations, history showed that mercantile exchange had always united people and nations, making them interdependent. Furthermore, in eighteenth-century Europe trade supported a relatively stable balance of power, in part thanks to the existence of trade treaties. A second line of thought – represented on the one hand by republican thinkers (like Mably and Rousseau), and on the other by the Physiocrats – instead tended to discuss the negative and destructive effects of the jealousy of trade. Although the republican thinkers and the Physiocrats both condemned the political, moral and economic consequences of luxury, they clearly diverged in their proposed alternatives to eighteenth-century

mercantile society: while Sparta was the reference point for the republican tradition, for François Quesnay Victor Riqueti Mirabeau, Pierre-Paul Lemercier de La Rivière, Nicolas Baudeau and many other members of the “sect”, the states worth imitating were instead Confucian China and the Inca Empire.

It was in fact the Physiocrats, as demonstrated by the essay by Arnault Skornicki (pp. 83-115), who actively devoted their treatises and journalistic articles to producing a “counter-history of trade” based on overturning the theses and epistemological foundations of the supporters of the “science of commerce”. Thus, if human civilisation was unquestionably dependent on the development of agriculture and *laissez-faire* – given that international trade competition had produced a destructive monopolistic and colonial system that brought only continuous war – the laws that regulated the economy, starting with the law of productive consumption theorised by Mirabeau, had to be derived from the natural order. In other words, for the Physiocrats, the economic science could not be based on an empirical and inductive method cantered on history, but had to take a hypothetical-deductive approach. This is why the histories of trade that they produced all devalued the heuristic value of history, which, at most, could only be used after the fact to confirm the objective laws that underpinned the creation of the *produit net*.

Raynal and Diderot later attempted, in truth without success, to integrate these two opposite visions of commerce in their *Histoire des Deux Indes* (1770, 1774, 1780): over the course of the treatise’s nineteen books – starting with the tenth, dedicated to the Antilles and the subject of the in-depth analysis of Jenny Mander’s essay (pp. 277-308) – the two Enlightenment thinkers offered an ambivalent interpretation of European trade expansion developed on the basis of the sometimes irreconcilable arguments between both aforementioned schools of thought. If, as the rival philosophies claimed, the development of trade in fact made it possible to civilise numerous barbarian populations, mercantile competition on a global scale had nevertheless produced a brutal colonial system based on slavery.

The genuinely rich and diverse picture presented by *Histories of Trade as Histories of Civilisation* is completed, aside from the contributions already mentioned, by essays from Arnaud Orain, Koen Stapelbroek, William J. Ashworth, Ere Nokkala and Alida Clemente. The first (pp. 57-81) examines the “theological figurism” of Augustinian origin developed by French Jansenism, according to which the Scriptures and ancient history made it possible to use recollections of the past to predict the future. Since commerce is one of the things that allow mankind to comprehend the presence of the divine on earth, and given the fact that the destiny of nations was in the hands of Providence, authors like Charles Rollin, Jacques

Vincent d'Asfeld and Jacques-Joseph Duguet saw the history of commerce as one of the essential instruments capable of teaching rulers and individual people how to use wealth correctly. As a result, Orain concludes, in the wake of Perrot, the economic theology produced by Jansenism helped to forge the ethics of capitalism.

Stapelbroek's contribution (pp. 117-150) analyses the changes that occurred in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dutch reflections on commerce, which overall was considered a politically vital element of all modern states. The United Provinces became an important case study since they were considered both an agent capable of pacifying and balancing interstate relations, and an obstacle to the development of a sustainable European regime of global trade.

Ashworth's essay (pp. 151-179) instead analyses a number of important histories of trade and other English books or pamphlets published between the 1630s and the start of the following century. These reveal how the English came to understand the importance of industrial protection from French Colbertism, and the need for a strong navy, aggressive trade and a credible fiscal regime from the Dutch. The political and economic rise of England after the Glorious Revolution, Ashworth argues, owed much to the ruling classes' ability to make the most of these economic approaches and combine them within a strong, dynamic state.

In his chapter, Ere Nokkala (pp. 217-244) analyses the *General History of Trade and of Seafaring* (1758), a work in which August von Schlözer, one of the most important German cameralists, likened the Phoenicians to the contemporary United Provinces. Starting from a positive view of the role of commerce in civilising nations, Schlözer pointed out the importance that people of any era understand and correctly apply the principles of the science of commerce, starting from the basic rule that in order to stand firm the foundations of successful commercial nations had to be based on internal development, and more precisely on a virtuous interplay between demographic growth and increased diversification of national production.

Finally, the essays by Alida Clemente, Alimento and Della Fontana are dedicated to the heterogenous situation in Italy, or more precisely to the Kingdom of Naples, the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, and the Republic of Venice. Clemente's contribution (pp. 245-276) analyses the role that the historical approach had on the definition of civil economy developed by Antonio Genovesi and two of his disciples, Nicola Fortunato and Michele de Jorio. While the Neapolitan professor had analysed the history of the triumph of the new trading powers, his followers focused their attention on national history in order to demonstrate the historical possibility of rebirth and to provide proposals for reforms capable of lifting the Kingdom out of its mediocracy and commercial dependence.

On the other hand, the essay by Antonella Alimento (pp. 181-216) reconstructs the political and intellectual dynamics used to support an attempt to refer back to the Medicean past in order to influence the political economy of the House of Habsburg-Lorraine. In particular, the contribution analyses the political use that the circle of Senator Carlo Ginori made of certain articles published in the English *Universal Magazine of Knowledge* and of the *Préface historique* that Jacques Savary des Bruslons included in the first volume of his *Dictionnaire Universel de commerce* (1723). The Medicean model of civilisation built on trade was particularly well-suited to a relaunch of the economy of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, given its reliance on the involvement of civil society and private enterprise.

Finally, the already mentioned essay by Della Fontana (pp. 309-240) traces the European debate, in particular between Spain and France, produced by the treatise written by the Venetian count Francesco Mengotti, *Del commercio de' romani* (1787). Condemning Roman militarism, Mengotti argued that trade was by definition *doux*. Thus, in opposition to imperial schemes based on the combination of "industry" and "force", he, a citizen of a militarily vulnerable state, asserted the need to conceive of international trade as an essentially pacifying dynamic based on interdependency.

In conclusion, thanks to the variety of their approaches and perspectives, the essays contained in *Histories of Trade as Histories of Civilisation* offer an important contribution not only to our understanding of the role played by the history of trade, an auxiliary historiographical genre of the nascent political economy. In the coming years, it will certainly be worth exploring some of the research pathways proposed in the book, starting with the relationship between the history of trade and sixteenth- and seventeenth century political treatises on the reason of state. This is a subject sketched out only briefly by some of the contributions in this book, but one which certainly deserves further in-depth analysis, considering that many theorists of the reason of state (including Giovanni Botero, Juan de Mariana and Diego de Saavedra Fajardo) had already expressed a clear awareness that the state power depended on the protection of productive activities, the development of trade and a tax system that did not drain the wealth of the subjects. Even the empirical use that historians of commerce made of ancient history (seen as a heuristic basis for deciphering the present and guiding the decisions of rulers) was certainly not unknown to seventeenth-century thinkers, in particular to the so-called Tacitists and neostoics. It would therefore be useful and appropriate, in the near future, to establish clearly the continuities and ruptures between the political reflection of the early modern age and the historiographical genre of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century history of commerce.