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SERIE IV HISTORIA MODERNA

REVISTA DE LA FACULTAD DE GEOGRAFÍA E HISTORIA







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## TALLER DE HISTORIOGRAFÍA · HISTORIOGRAPHY WORKSHOP

**RESEÑAS · BOOKS REVIEW** 

ALIMENTO, Antonella & STAPELBROEK, Koen (eds.), *The Politics of Commercial Treaties in the Eighteenth Century: Balance of Power, Balance of Trade*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, 472 pp., ISBN: 978-3-319-53574-6.

Fidel J. Tavárez<sup>1</sup>

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To what extent did commercial treaties contribute to the creation of a new international order in the long eighteenth century? What kind of international order were the authors and advocates of commercial treaties trying to create? *The Politics of Commercial Treaties in the Eighteenth Century* attempts to answer these questions by systematically examining how key commercial treaties—including the ideas that underpinned them—structured international relations during the eighteenth century.

It is, of course, somewhat obvious that the authors think that the study of commercial treaties is a good starting point to understand new ideas of international order. However, the key characteristics of these new ideas are not immediately apparent. Luckily, in the introductory chapter, the esteemed historians of eighteenth-century political economy Antonella Alimento and Koen Stapelbroek offer guidance in this regard. In a nutshell, the editors suggest that, for contemporary actors (including statesmen, merchants, political thinkers, and political economists), well-designed commercial treaties could create a new international order that secured a «future vision of peaceful economic competition between nations» (p. 3). Demonstrating this point is the book's main goal.

The effort, of course, is ambitious and gargantuan. To accomplish its goal, the book brings together a range of scholars who address the aforementioned concerns from different national perspectives. In fact, the book is based on two colloquia that took place in 2014 and 2015. The first colloquium, entitled «Treaties of Commerce. Balance of Power, Balance of Trade and the European Order of States,» took place on November 26 and 27, 2014 at the University of Pisa. The second, entitled «Balance of Power, Balance of Trade. The Politics of Commerce in the Eighteenth Century,» took place on January 23 and 24, 2015 at the University of St Andrews. As the acknowledgements indicate, the initial papers were subsequently thoroughly revised, and additional chapters were commissioned.

As is always the case with collaborative projects of this magnitude, the quality of each chapter varies significantly. Nonetheless, almost without exception, the authors work from the perspective of intellectual history. It must be emphasized, however, that the kind of intellectual history displayed in this volume does not simply deal with the «great» thinkers of the Enlightenment. Quite the opposite, one of the most refreshing aspects of the book is its inclusion of lesser known thinkers,

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diplomats, and statesmen. Hence, the perspective employed might be productively described as what historian Keith Michael Baker once called «political culture.»

Before turning to the individual chapters, it is worth dwelling a little on the framework and arguments detailed by the editors in the introductory chapter. The book, the editors state, merges the history of political theory and diplomatic practice to demonstrate how commercial treaties had a «structural impact» on international relations. In other words, «the book takes commercial treaties as a point of departure in order to help develop a new paradigm for thinking about the political economy of the international order in the eighteenth century» (p. 3).

At face value, the argument might seem quite commonsensical. Who would argue, after all, against the idea that international treaties had some effect in the structure of international relations? Surprisingly, there are some skeptics who believe that commercial treaties had a negligible impact over the course of the eighteenth century. For these scholars, eighteenth-century commercial treaties were little more than an extension of the power politics of the previous century, when dominant states asserted their authority through favorable treaties that ensured their continued hegemony. While the editors do not deny that visions like these were sometimes at play, they also identify a new set of ideas that underpinned commercial negotiation during the eighteenth century. To fully recover the intellectual richness of the period, the editors adopt a «differentiated approach» to the study of commercial treaties (p. 6).

By «differentiated approach» the editors mean something simple but important. Rather than assuming that treaties have transhistorical, if not apodictic, functions, the book departs from the premise that their function has changed depending on how people—primarily diplomats, statesmen, and thinkers—have thought about them. Herein lies the payoff, the editors assert, of adopting an intellectual history perspective. Likewise, this intellectual history perspective can also overcome the limitations of strictly quantitative analyses. Even though commercial treaties were relatively rare during the eighteenth century, this does not mean that they played a negligible role in structuring international relations. Abundant or not, the editors suggest, the truth is that, for contemporary historical actors, commercial treaties had become an effective and necessary tool for defining international relations.

The key turning point, the editors suggest, took place during the period immediately before and after the Peace of Utrecht. It was then that commercial treaties began to have an impact on the structure of international relations. It was then also that contemporary statesmen and thinkers began to see treaties as effective tools to orchestrate an international order where states could peacefully, though not necessarily amicably, compete for wealth and power through reciprocal trade. Of course, this idea of international order did not begin in 1713. Nor was 1713 a complete watershed that eliminated the all-against-all international system of the seventeenth century.

What, then, makes Utrecht an important turning point? Though not explicitly stated, the editors suggest that it was Britain's and France's power politics that ultimately drove other states to recognize the importance of commercial treaties. That Britain, for instance, had succeeded in asserting its hegemony, especially after

securing the *asiento* and the *navío de permiso* from Spain, all but confirmed that a new international order based on commercial reciprocity was necessary if Britain was to be prevented from becoming Europe's sole hegemon. This was the key transformation that changed the function of commercial treaties over the course of the eighteenth century. It is in this context, moreover, that we must understand the prominence of the concepts of «balance of power» and «balance of trade» among contemporaries and the Abbé de Saint Pierre's early project for perpetual peace and commercial integration.

In spite of this change, the idea of a new commercial order of integration and reciprocity did not immediately win the intellectual battle. While most European states had come to recognize that a new international order based on reciprocity was necessary, some states, France and Spain especially, began to pursue alternate plans, focused on promoting policies that protected national commerce. Thinkers like François Véron Duverger de Forbonnais, and the Gournay school more generally, became completely distrustful of any attempt to promote commercial reciprocity with Britain. In Spain, thinkers like Jerónimo de Uztáriz, Melchor Rafael de Macanaz, José del Campillo y Cossío and Pedro Rodríguez de Campomanes sought to dismantle the commercial advantages Britain had gained after Utrecht. To do so, they focused their attention on promoting policies that allowed Spain to gain control of its colonial markets.

As a result of this skepticism against Britain, European states also began to promote the negotiation of commercial treaties with neutral nations. Forbonnais, for instance, endorsed commercial treaties with the Hanseatic League (1716), Sweden (1741), and Denmark (1742/9) (p. 33). While the rise of Physiocracy in France once again brought forth Saint Pierre's project of pacifist union and European commercial integration, after the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), skepticism towards Britain was widespread. The Bourbon Family Compact of 1761 is a clear example of this skepticism. The Duke de Choiseul, one of Louis XV's most important ministers, ordered the Abbé Beliardi to design a commercial treaty alongside the Family Compact. Beliardi suggested that together France, Spain, and Italy could create a self-sufficient commercial block to undermine Britain's commercial ambitions (p. 35). However, in spite of Beliardi's isolationist proposal, Choiseul himself preferred a system of global commercial equilibrium.

Over the course of the next three decades, this particular vision for a global order predicated on commercial equilibrium became an essential component of diplomatic politics in Europe. Once again, France played a key role in orchestrating this new international order based on competitive trade. Following Choiseul's project, the Count of Vergennes led the way in signing commercial treaties with the United States (1778), Sweden (1784), Spain (1786), Portugal (1786), Russia (1787), and most famously Britain (1786). In Britain too, a range of voices, of which Jeremy Bentham was the most famous, began to argue for the need to negotiate commercial treaties that instituted a new international order of peaceful commercial competition.

Of course, the revolutionary wars of the 1790s all but evaporated whatever efforts European states had made in the 1780s to institute a new international order predicated on commercial integration. In the midst of this international

breakdown, France turned to the more isolationist system developed earlier in the century by the likes of Gournay and Forbonnais. However, by the Congress of Vienna in 1814, when commercial treaties gained recognition once again as effective tools for creating a new international order centered on commercial integration, the key elements of the debate had already been well-rehearsed over the course of the eighteenth century.

As should be evident by now, the arguments offered in the introduction are certainly complex and nuanced. Demonstrating the claims of the introductory chapter is a tall order, especially considering that this is a collected volume. It is often extremely difficult, if not altogether impossible, to keep such a diverse collection of scholars focused on the framework designed by the editors. In general, the different contributors succeed in advancing arguments that fit within the scope of the framework offered by the editors. Let us dive very briefly into some of the individual chapters.

While the key inflexion point upon which this book's argument hinges is the Peace of Utrecht, the first two chapters deal with the period immediately before. The first chapter, written by Moritz Isenmann, reconsiders the legacy of France's notorious minister of finance, Jean Baptist-Colbert. Rather than a simple-minded mercantilist with no understanding of Europe's economic reality, Isenmann portrays Colbert as a skillful minster who, through commercial treaties, sought to keep trade relatively open while securing France's share of global trade. The next chapter, written by José Luís Cardoso, reinterprets the Anglo-Portuguese Methuen Treaty of 1703. Rather than ensuring Portugal's subordination to Britain, Cardoso argues that the treaty both gave Portugal military security and, most importantly, stimulated its wine industry by giving it access to British markets.

The next two chapters turn to the Peace of Utrecht, focusing on its political effects in Britain and Spain. In his chapter, Doohwan Ahn reconstructs two competing visions of international order that emerged among Whig and Tory men of politics. While many Tories believed that the international system of states was irremediably characterized by fierce power politics, Whigs pushed for an anti-Bourbon alliance focused on creating an integrated international system on the basis of the law of nations. Virginia Léon Sanz and Niccolò Guasti address Spain's predicament *vis-à-vis* Britain in the period after the *Asiento* Treaty. They show, in short, how Britain's success in securing access to Spanish American markets drove Spain to focus its attention on securing its colonial markets for the rest of the century.

Continuing with the aftereffects of Utrecht, Olga Volosyuk discusses how Russia and Spain attempted to develop closer commercial relations during the early eighteenth century. While England had been Russia's main trading partner in the Baltic region, this relationship soured when England sought an alliance with Sweden, Russia's foe, during the War of Spanish Succession. As a consequence of this break between Russia and England, Spain and Russia tried to deepen their commercial relations. While the enterprise failed, this episode showcases, nonetheless, how European states sought to integrate European trade through commercial treaties.

Koen Stapelbroek turns to the Dutch Republic and its efforts to institute a new international order through commercial treaties. In the seventeenth century, the

Dutch Republic was Europe's commercial state *par excellence*, and it often achieved economic success by securing its political independence and its identity as «the common Carriers of the World,» as one contemporary put it (p. 196). After Utrecht, Stapelbroek tells us, «this direct linkage of political and commercial independence disappeared» (p. 196). Instead, the Dutch state sought to secure its commercial interests by forming coalitions between Europe's preeminent states, Britain and France. This subordinate condition, as it were, drove many Dutch thinkers and pamphleteers to insist on the necessity for a general system of neutrality, a development that brought to the fore some of the most forward-looking ideas concerning the politics of international trade.

Up until this point, the chapters of this volume have addressed particular cases involving one or two states. Éric Schnakenbourg shifts gears and takes a wide-ranging view of the intellectual landscape of the eighteenth century. In a nutshell, Schnakenbourg argues that «while in the seventeenth century the world had been seen as an arena in which trade wars could be used to weaken rivals and favour military success, in the eighteenth century commerce often served as a means of drawing nations together, as an expression of cosmopolitanism and as a basis for peace» (p. 218). This transformation, in turn, drove many eighteenth-century thinkers to deploy the law of nations in order to secure trade in times of war. In fact, Schnakenbourg argues, commercial treaties became the key to creating an international system where trade could thrive even in a world of fierce rivalries.

In the next chapter, Antonella Alimento, analyzes «the French solutions to international competition» between 1736 and 1770. Addressing many of the issues that were outlined in the introduction, Alimento traces how France became skeptical of European commercial integration and turned to design its own Navigation Act, especially during the apogee of the Gournay school. However, this isolationist moment, for lack of a better phrase, came to an end during the 1770s, when the Duke de Choiseul began to pursue a policy of commercial equilibrium between European states. This development laid the foundations for the efflorescence of commercial treaties during the 1780s.

Moving outside of Europe, John Shovlin focuses his attention on the «east Indies,» where shortly before the Seven Years' War the English East India Company and the French *Compagnie des Indes* attempted to institute commercial treaties that allowed both companies to trade in South Asia. While the historiography has focused on the fact that during this period the English East India Company crushed its French counterpart and acquired a large South Asian empire, Shovlin invites his readers to take seriously the treaty negotiations that took place between the company directors in 1753. In spite of their failure, these treaty negotiations show how even very practical men like the directors of commercial companies participated actively in the creation of a new international order.

Marco Cavarzere turns to examine the reign Frederick II, King of Prussia and its relationship to Europe's aspiration for a new global order predicated on commercial integration. Cavarzere begins by discrediting traditional accounts of Frederick II, which often suggest that the Prussian king was fundamentally interested in glory and territorial expansion. Focusing on Prussia's relationship with France during

the 1740s and 50s, Cavarzere shows how Frederick II drew on eighteenth-century ideas and debates about commerce to secure Prussia's position among other European powers while protecting the progress and expansion of international trade.

Focusing on what we may call the European periphery, Christopher Storrs examines the Savoyard state and asks whether neutrality and commercial treaties were a viable option for small states over the course of the eighteenth century. Storrs argues that the court of Turin was unwilling to commit itself to commercial treaties for the long term. This did not mean, however, that it remained unwilling to participate in Europe's new project of commercial integration. Rather, the Savoyard State opted to do so through «narrower agreements which removed some lesser obstacles to trade and thus facilitated improved commercial relations and economic growth without restricting its freedom of political manoeuvre» (p. 322).

Christine Lebeau turns to the eighteenth-century Habsburg Monarchy and asks how a large, seemingly non-commercial state, engaged with Europe's recognition that commerce had become a key concern for international relations. Scholars have rarely asked this question, for it is widely accepted that Habsburg power stemmed from its large territorial extension and strategic political position. Lebeau argues that this one-dimensional picture might stem from the fact that the Habsburg Monarchy did not sign any major commercial treaty, as did Britain and France. However, looking beyond commercial treaties, Lebeau recovers a rich tableau of commercial projects that surfaced over the course of the century. In this sense, the Habsburg Monarchy was not unaffected, for lack of a better word, by the new international order predicated on commercial integration.

In the next chapter, Pascal Dupuy pays attention to the most studied and famous commercial treaty of the eighteenth century: the Anglo-French Treaty of 1786. But rather than the treaty itself, Dupuy focuses on its reception in France. The picture Dupuy portrays is one of distrust towards Britain. Rather than a project of commercial integration, many saw the 1786 treaty as another British imperialistic attempt to dominate European trade. Dupuy's chapter, hence, reminds us that, in spite of thinkers' and statesmen's intention to create a new international system, distrust and jealousy still reigned supreme.

In the penultimate chapter, Paul Cheney moves from France to its preeminent colony: Saint-Domingue (after 1804 Haiti). Cheney's point of departure is the fact that commercial treaties, or agreements, were not always conducted between sovereign states. In fact, they were often negotiated between different regions within a state. In the French Empire, metropolitan authorities and the colonial aristocracies often debated about how to organize the empire's trade. This debate played itself out several times over the issue of relaxing the *Exclusif*, a policy that the colonial aristocracy pushed for in order to gain access to international markets for their crops. In the post-independence period, Haiti similarly struggled to balance two competing interests: 1) the new Haitian, often mulatto, aristocracy who wanted to create a slave-less plantation complex focused on exports, and 2) the large contingent of former slaves—future peasants—who preferred to secure their freedom and self-sufficiency through plots of land. While not explicitly stated in this way,

Cheney's chapter shows how high-minded ideals about free trade and commercial integration sometimes served the interests of the exploitative plantation complex.

In the last chapter, Marc Belissa returns to France, focusing on how contemporaries reframed their perspective on commercial treaties during the revolutionary period between 1792 and 1799. Indeed, after the abolition of the monarchy in 1792, it was clear to most contemporaries that France had to change how it engaged with the international community of states. No longer a «tyrannical» and «feudal» monarchy, a republic had to design a robust trade policy. In spite of this general agreement, the characteristics of this new trade policy were fiercely debated during the revolutionary period. While some opted for a «commercial diplomacy» designed to engage with the international community of states others preferred a new Navigation Act aimed at excluding Britain and challenging its commercial dominance.

Without a doubt, this book is a great achievement. Not only does it uncover «the politics of commercial treaties in the eighteenth century,» as the title suggests, but it also allows us to understand eighteenth-century European politics in a new way. The book accomplishes this by focusing not only on the commercial treaties themselves but also on the ideas that underpinned them over the course of the century. On the basis of this strategy, the authors are able to show how the century that we now call enlightened witnessed the rise of a new conception of international order based on commercial equilibrium. As should be evident, recovering this history is not a mere antiquarian endeavor. In many ways, we have inherited these eighteenth-century ideas about what constitutes a salutary international system.

In the spirit of constructive scholarly discussion, I should mention that I have two minor quibbles with the book. First, its unapologetic focus on intellectual history may also be one of its main limitations. While we get a very clear picture of how contemporaries thought about the new international order, we do not get a clear perspective on how this new concept of international order played out in practice. Did this new concept of international relations lead to more commercial integration among European states? How do we square the rise of this new concept of international order with the fact that the eighteenth century also was a century of great wars, even global ones, including the War of Spanish Succession, the Seven Years' War, and the Napoleonic Wars? Perhaps it is unfair to demand more from an already-ambitious book. I only hope that future researchers will take on the challenge.

Second, it is surprising that the book failed to discuss the independence of Latin America and what contemporaries thought this meant for global commercial integration. Not only did celebrated thinkers like Jeremy Bentham worry intensely about this question, but many Spanish American thinkers also made interesting arguments about how independence would help create a new global order. For instance, the exiled Peruvian Jesuit, Juan Pablo Viscardo y Guzmán, wrote an extremely relevant unpublished paper titled *La paix et le bonheur du siècle prochain* (1797). In it, Viscardo argued that Spanish American markets were large enough that, if released from the shackles of Spanish monopoly, they could potentially create the conditions for a viable project of perpetual peace by opening up a vast array of markets and territories for market-hungry European states. Future so-called liberators

like Francisco de Miranda and Simón Bolívar made similar arguments about the promise of Spanish America's vast markets.

These minor qualms aside, this book will certainly become a key reference for scholars of eighteenth-century international politics and political economy. It is not often that one sees a collective work of this magnitude with a coherent framework running through all of the chapters. I will look forward to reading future works by the editors and authors of this wonderful volume.



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María Baudot Monroy, Manuel Díaz-Ordóñez & Iván Valdez-Bubnov

Introducción / Introduction

AG**ustín González Enciso**Estado y empresa en la provisión de armas de fuego en el Siglo XVIII /
State and Enterprises in the Supply of Firearms in the Eighteenth Century

MANUEL DÍAZ-ORDÓÑEZ
El abastecimiento militar de cáñamo para el imperio español (1665-1808): globalización, estado y empresarios en el largo Siglo XVIII / Providing Hemp for Military Purpose for the Spanish Empire (1665-1808): Globalization, State and Entrepreneurs in the Long Eighteenth Century

RAFAL B. REICHERT ¿Cómo España trató de recuperar su poderío naval? Un acercamiento a las estrategias de la marina real sobre los suministros de materias primas forestales provenientes del Báltico y Nueva España (1754-1795) / How did Spain Tried to Recover his Naval Power? An Approach to the Strategies of the Royal Navy on the Supply of Forest Raw Materials from Baltic Sea and New Spain (1754-1795)

José Manuel Vázquez Lijó

Servir en la marina de Aranjuez en el Siglo XVIII: un destino deseado /

Serving in the Navy in Aranjuez in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century: A Desirable Destination

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MARIA BAUDOT MONROY
La construcción de la Real Armada en Filipinas. Marinos españoles en
Manila en la segunda mitad del siglo XVIII / Constructing the Spanish Royal
Navy in the Philippines. Navy Officers in Manila during the Second Half of the
Eighteenth Century

Miscelánea · Miscellany

IVÁN LÁZARO URDIALES

Las relaciones entre España y Rusia durante el reinado de Felipe V
(1722-1742) / Relationships between Spain and Russia during the Reign of
Philip V (1722-1742

LEOPOLDINA LANDEROS DE CASOLARI
Controversias sobre el cosmógrafo Andrés García de Céspedes /
Controversies about the Cosmographer Andrés García de Céspedes

AINOA CHINCHILLA GALARZO
Portugal y la fallida paz con Francia: mediación española y corrupción francesa (1796-1800) / Portugal and the Failed Peace with France: Spanish Mediation and French Corruption (1796-1800)

MARCOS RAFAEL CAÑAS PELAYO

De una compañía comercial a la inserción en la élite cordobesa: los Fernández de Carreras (S. XVI-XVIII) / From a Trade Company to the Insertior in the Cordovan Elite: Fernández de Carreras's Lineage (16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> Centuries)

RUMEN SOSA MARTÍN

La sustitución lingüística del guanche en las Islas Canarias, un caso excepcional en la historia del mundo bereber / The Language Shift of Guanche Language in the Canary Islands, an Exceptional Case in the History of the Berber's World

AITOR DÍAZ PAREDES
Fidelidad, fueros y negociación. Las Cortes de Sangüesa en la defensa de la Corona de Aragón (1705) / Loyalty, *Fueros* and Negotiation. The Cortes of Sangüesa in the Defense of the Crown of Aragon (1705)

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DAVID MARTÍN MARCOS

La otra mirada de António Manuel Hespanha (1945-2019), *In Memoriam /*An Alternative Gaze: António Manuel Hespanha (1945-2019), *In Memoriam* 

GABRIEL ASTEY

Virtud de la retorsión / Nobility of Contortion







**SERIE IV HISTORIA MODERNA** REVISTA DE LA FACULTAD DE GEOGRAFÍA E HISTORIA

## Reseñas · Book Review

- 345 Burke, Peter Hybrid Renaissance. Culture, Language,
  Architecture (Antonio Urquízar Herrera)
- OLDS, Katrina B., Forging the past. The Invented Histories in Counter-Reformation Spain (JAVIER RODRÍGUEZ SOLÍS)
- BOLUFER PERUGA, Mónica, Mujeres y Hombres en la Historia. Una propuesta historiográfica y docente (Julio Arroyo Vozmediano)
- MIRA CABALLOS, Esteban, Francisco Pizarro. Una nueva visión de la conquista del Perú, (BEATRIZ ALONSO ACERO)
- 367 ESTEBAN ESTRÍNGANA, Alicia (ed.), Decidir la lealtad. Leales y desleales en contexto (siglos XVI-XVII) (JOSÉ MIGUEL ESCRIBANO PÁEZ)
- 371 GAUDIN, Guillaume, El Imperio de papel de Juan Díez de la Calle. Pensar y gobernar el Nuevo Mundo en el siglo XVII (JAVIER RUIZ IBÁÑEZ)
- PASOLINI, Alessandra y PILO, Rafaella (eds.), Cagliari and Valencia during the Baroque Age. Essays on Art, History and Literature (FERNANDO CIARAMITARO)
- Sánchez-Montes González, Francisco, El viaje de Felipe IV a Andalucía en 1624. Tiempo de recursos y consolidación de lealtades (Francisco Precioso Izquierdo)
- ALIMENTO, Antonella & STAPELBROEK, Koen (eds.), The Politics of Commercial Treaties in the Eighteenth Century:
  Balance of Power, Balance of Trade (FIDEL J. TAVÁREZ)
- MARCHENA FERNÁNDEZ, Juan y CUÑO BONITO, Justo (eds.), Vientos de guerra. Apogeo y crisis de la Real Armada (PABLO ORTEGA DEL CERRO)