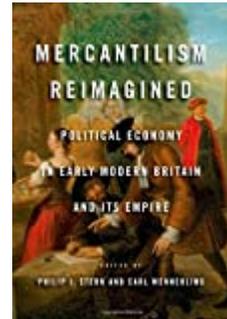




Philip J. Stern, Carl Wennerlind, eds. *Mercantilism Reimagined: Political Economy in Early Modern Britain and Its Empire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. ix + 404 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-998853-2.



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The volume under review contains sixteen chapters in addition to an introduction by the editors and an afterword linking many of its debates to recent matters of economic policy, such as the near-bankruptcy of weaker Eurozone countries in 2009-10. The editors deserve much credit for successfully wrangling so many academics into writing distinct yet complementary chapters that but minimally encroach on each others' areas of research. The broad rubric is "mercantilism," both as debated and as practiced in early modern Britain and its global sphere of influence.

The chapters are grouped into five parts. The first part, "Circulation," includes analyses of monetary instruments (currency and other); population theory; and changes in labor-process organization, such as the gradual replacement in colonies of indentured servants sold for finite terms with slaves sold for their lifetimes. The section titled "Knowledge" begins with a chapter on the epistemology of the world of commerce, and another essay studies the "science" around the introduction of tobacco. Then it moves to Andre Wakefield's study of "cameralism"—a term collectively applied to the sciences and pseudo-sciences of statecraft in the many German states of the eighteenth century, a body of learning similar to what nowadays is labeled "business administra-

tion." Forgotten precursors of McKinsey & Co., Boston Consulting Group, and others, these omniscient consultants of yore liked to publish "practical" treatises about how to brew beer or to raise cattle, for example, and they often made it sound easy ... even as the people drank miserable beer and struggled to feed themselves" (p. 136). This interesting chapter brings out the international and multilingual dimension of both pure and practical learning at the time, something not perhaps adequately presented in several of the other chapters on economic debates of the time. It would have been beneficial to know from Wakefield if the early Georges brought cameralist ideas to bear in their new domain.

Furthermore, English merchants traveled and picked up languages while the educated classes certainly read and often wrote both in Latin and in modern languages. Intellectual historians should surely read what their subjects read (and indeed more.) Yet this international dimension of the public life of the early modern period only appears sporadically in much of the book. Some contributors seem, indeed, to have adopted quondam Texas governor Miriam A. Ferguson's maxim: "If English was good enough for Jesus Christ, it's good enough for me."

Four innovative chapters comprise the third part, "In-

stitutions. The floating republics of pirate ships are presented in one chapter by Niklas Frykman and the seaborne pulpits of the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (along approved Anglican lines) are covered by Brent S. Sirota. Two other chapters in this section by Henry S. Turner and Philip J. Stern are particularly interesting in their parallels with present-day institutions. We can all today observe the corporatization of formerly state functions (as in Blackwater/Xe or KBR, for example). Turner presents the theory of the corporation as both agent and subject as understood by important Elizabethans. Global rivalries promoted efforts to create new hybrid corporations to intervene in the pluralist world of commerce and rule (p. 154). That experiment began, he continues, as did several other ruthless colonial enterprises as a plan for the rebellious territories of Celtic Ireland. It was proposed by the learned Thomas Smith in 1572 with the novel twist that a section of the corporate domain of 360,000 acres would be run as a joint-stock corporation. A few decades later, Turner points out, joint-stock companies most prominently the English India Company were monopolies with a disquieting similarity to the sovereign monarchy itself. Might all corporate bodies then be of the same kind (p. 190)? In the eighteenth century, the monarchical state, Stern notes in his essay, broke away from lesser corporations and the Board of Trade, the Board of Control, and other agencies of the emerging military-fiscal state finally had the upper hand. But he persuasively argues that we need to remain aware that the simple binary of ruler-ruled/state-subject is anachronistic when applied to the early modern era. That was a time when companies and corporations, not states, did much of the business of early modern empire (p. 191).

This argument connects well with a sophisticated one made by Sophus A. Reinert about international rivalry and emulation as a source of innovative dynamism and political conflict in the early modern and modern eras. Reinert's chapter, *Rivalry: Greatness in Early Modern Political Economy*, is placed at the end of the fifth section, *Conflict*. He suggests that mercantilism is both the past and the future of the world system. The author writes that the tension between Leviathans and corporations in a global economy of impossible-to-conceptualize complexity remains at the forefront of contemporary debates, suggesting the possibly intermezzate nature of the state, looming distortingly large at a particular moment but brief from a particular perspective and the comparative longevity of powerful nonstate politico-economic forces (pp. 361-362).

This general point is reinforced by another important chapter in the fourth section, *Regulation*, by Regina Grafe on the Spanish Empire. (Its inclusion in a volume on Britain and its empire is baffling, even if the short-lived Mary Tudor did indeed marry Philip II of Spain.) Grafe argues that the town corporations in Spain were too strong for the monarchy to impose mercantilist policies even if its wisest advisers wished to do just that and were in communication with developments elsewhere in Europe (p. 243). But she says that the only other country with similarly powerful urban corporations was the Dutch Republic. Grafe's work then implies that not just corporations but corporations with different attitudes, maybe Dutch rather than Spanish ones, were needed for the successful practice of mercantilism. Was there, then, something to Max Weber's theory of the Protestant spirit after all?

Credit and consumption are allotted a chapter apiece in part 4 before we move to international affairs in the final part entitled *Conflict*, which includes *War and Peace* by John Shovlin, *Neutrality* by Victor Enthoven, and *Reinert's Rivalry*. Shovlin rebuts the idea that trade rivalry rather than dynastic and imperial disputes was the chief motive for wars until the second half of the eighteenth century. But he does concede that the idiom of nations rather than kings being at war grew out of emerging ideas about the collective existence of national economies; equally, he recognizes that victory in war often brought decisive changes in the commercial fortunes of nations even if such gain was not the motive for launching the war itself. Commercial rivalry broke out into violence more easily where not dynasties but corporations and freebooters represented distant nations in places such as Asia and the Americas. Therefore treaties ending wars, from the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 to the Treaty of Paris in 1783, had commercial clauses and these slowly shaped the regime of global trade. The place of neutrals in these war-torn centuries is studied by Enthoven largely on the basis of the Dutch stance on this question, through the transition from the bellicose seventeenth century to the relatively pacifist eighteenth century.

Craig Muldrew's afterword asks why we should think again about mercantilism. He suggests that the financial crisis of 2008 demonstrated once more that the steadying arm of state regulation is needed to periodically check the animal spirits of investors from leading us all to disaster. Mercantilist thinkers wrestled with that and much else that preoccupies behavioral economics today. And as the essays in this volume amply demon-

strate, mercantilism was much more than obsession with bullion: employment, poverty, population, resources, and above all, the appropriate role of government were central to that school of thought. Missing however is another ubiquitous feature of that and the present era: official venality and interested polemic. The former was addressed half a century ago by Jacob van Klaveren in an essay translated for D. C. Coleman's edited collection *Revisions in Mercantilism* in 1969. Klaveren pointed out that we need to consider how policies ostensibly intend to benefit the economy or specific trades; how they might in fact only benefit the fisc; or indeed how they do not benefit the fisc but only line the pockets of officials charged with enforcement. Finally, there was simple speculation where officials took fees and commissions or private payments from payers and payees alike. Klaveren wrote: "The pretences of pseudo-mercantilism are often the more easily accepted because people concentrate on the text of the laws but lose sight of their execution, which is what really matters." [1]

A greater awareness of this would have enriched several of the chapters in this volume, whose authors tend to read high-minded asseverations in a naïve way. Additionally, we should not forget that venal publicists were at work long before the creation of the Heartland Insti-

tute, or the Monitor Group's recruitment of many public intellectuals from the Boston area to burnish the image of the late Muammar Ghaddafi's Jamahiriya. [2] Even a great writer like Jonathan Swift could descend anonymously to the political polemic contained in *The Conduct of the Allies and of the Late Ministry in Beginning and Carrying on the Present War* (1711), and we should read the many polemics around trade with some attention to the interests of the patrons who commissioned place-hunting scribes to advance their interests. It is of course true that effective tendentious writing needs to grow out of accepted maxims and the "common sense" of at least the "serious" people. But sometimes the existence of private payoffs to policy pundits should be recognized even by all of us high-minded historians.

Notes

[1]. Jacob van Klaveren, "Fiscalism, Mercantilism and Corruption," in *Revisions in Mercantilism*, ed. D. C. Coleman (London: Methuen and Co., 1969), 140-161, quotation on 147.

[2]. Laura Rozen, "Among Libya's Lobbyists," *Politico* (February 21, 2011), http://www.politico.com/blogs/laurarozen/0211/Among_Libyas_lobbyists.html.

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