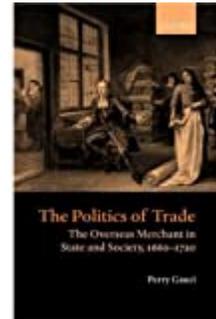


Perry Gauci. *The Politics of Trade: The Overseas Merchant in State and Society, 1660-1720.* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. xvi + 302 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-924193-4.



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Metropolitan Merchants and the Public Sphere

Metropolitan Merchants and the Public Sphere

Perry Gauci, author of a study on politics and society in Great Yarmouth, 1660-1714, turns his attention in his second book to the commercial structure of the London mercantile community and the contribution of English merchants to public life in the Augustan era. He focuses his monograph on a sample of 850 London businessmen identified from City assessments for poll taxes levied in the 1690s. He links these people with data from other contemporary sources to provide a richly nuanced account of the socio-economic environment of London merchants over several generations in the later Stuart period. To test whether his findings for London have wider application, Gauci looks, less comprehensively but intelligently, at the merchant communities of York and Liverpool. *The Politics of Trade* also estimates the contribution of merchants to English public life through their use of mercantile associations, lobbying of Parliament, and the development of an economic press. The book concludes with a case study of the economic and political ramifications of the French commerce bill of 1713 that illustrates the greater public role of English merchants in the late

Stuart period compared with the pre-Restoration era.

The Politics of Trade shows that the London merchant community of the late seventeenth century was notably cosmopolitan: 226 of the 850 individuals sampled were merchants of foreign ancestry. Of this group, French, Dutch, and Jewish traders were concentrated in particular areas of the City. Merchants, whether of foreign or domestic extraction, dominated the eastern wards. Thus the group was fairly homogeneous in its residence and social interaction. Mercantile fathers were important for getting sons started in trade; mercantile sons were common. Recruitment of merchants into London's commercial society came mainly from within the City and surrounding areas: there was little evidence of traders being recruited from landed backgrounds. Business success was combined with participation in civic and parish institutions by many London merchants, but there was considerable merchant indifference to "investment in land and the establishment of great country estates" (p. 92). Gauci finds some parallel developments at York and Liverpool but also some differences. For instance, Liverpool's recruitment pattern for apprentices was largely

from the adjacent counties of Lancashire and Cheshire rather than from the city itself, while York's merchants lacked the religious and ethnic ties found in the capital.

These findings are helpful in fleshing out our previously sketchy knowledge of London merchant society in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Gauci's findings could now be synthesized along with D. W. Jones's work on London merchants of the 1690s, Nuala Zahedieh's articles on the transatlantic sector of London's commerce in the later seventeenth century, Henry Roseveare's investigation of the operation of the seventeenth-century port of London, and Peter Earle's publications on early modern London mariners to present a fully rounded portrait of the London merchant community in the later Stuart era.^[1] It would have been interesting to know, in more detail, the extent to which the merchants of foreign extraction in London exercised particular leverage in the commercial life of the metropolis, and whether these groups mainly traded within their own ethnic enclaves or were more wide-ranging in their business dealings. The sections on Liverpool and York in the first half of the book could clearly have been amplified further: they are tasters of what could be a larger consideration of merchant communities in early modern England.

Looking at the public role of merchants, Gauci finds many mercantile political associations that "were fashioned by the need for political services to obtain commercial ends" (p. 154). Contemporary discussions emphasized the importance of merchants to the state, commercial handbooks became more widely available, and there were other examples of a burgeoning economic press, including printed histories of trade. Though many late-seventeenth-century publications discussed the ways in which trade could be advanced, fundamental reforms did not occur save for cutting back the monopoly rights of certain trading organizations such as the Royal African Company. Westminster became an increasingly important forum for overseas traders as more merchants entered the House of Commons after 1690 (though they were heavily outnumbered by the gentry) and petitioning on mercantile issues rose significantly, not just from London but also from provincial ports. The Commons processed a large number of petitions submitted that were related to trade. The contents of petitions showed that "commercial lobbyists were increasingly adept at presenting their case to a gentry-dominated Commons" (p. 216). Merchants were not trying to encroach on the preserve of the landed classes in Parliament; they were simply finding ways of registering their voice effectively at

Westminster. Gauci's overall argument here is that "the 1690-1715 period saw an important readjustment of the interaction between a gentry-dominated Parliament and overseas trade" (pp. 197-98).

This consideration of English merchants in public life is sometimes difficult to disentangle because the wood often obscures the trees and the author modestly does not always pull together his broader points in emphatic, direct conclusions; thus much has to be inferred from conscientious discussions placing merchants in their socio-economic and public context. This stylistic problem could have been diluted by relegating the frequent comments on the reliability of source material, and the difficulties of handling it, to an appendix. Nevertheless, the substance of the book is important. Gauci's evidence points irrefutably to a larger role in public life for merchants in the period 1660-1714. It shows additionally, certainly with reference to petitions, that provincial merchants were as adept at promoting their views at Westminster as Londoners. It reveals the way in which merchants seized their opportunity to advance their interests after the Glorious Revolution without attempting to challenge the hegemony of the gentry in Parliament. Gauci is particularly good at ensuring that he does not conflate merchants with the business community as a whole; he also helpfully links the rise of merchant communities to previous scholarship on the growth of the professions in Augustan England. Future work on English merchants in the later Stuart period will want to explore mercantile networks and lobbyists further, especially with regard to the spiraling transatlantic trade of the period. In carrying out that work, specialists will be grateful for having *The Politics of Trade* as a solid, scholarly platform from which to launch future investigations of mercantile involvement with the state.

Note

[1]. D. W. Jones, *War and Economy in the Age of William III and Marlborough* (Oxford and New York: Blackwell, 1998); D. W. Jones, "London Merchants and the Crisis of the 1690s," in *Crisis and Order in English Towns, 1500-1700*, ed. P. Clark and P. Slack (1972), pp. 311-56; Nuala Zahedieh, "The Merchants of Port Royal, Jamaica, and the Spanish Contraband Trade, 1655-1692," *William and Mary Quarterly* 43 (October 1986): pp. 570-93; Nuala Zahedieh, "Making Mercantilism Work: London Merchants and Atlantic Trade in the Seventeenth Century," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser., 9 (1999): pp. 143-58; Henry Roseveare, *Markets and Merchants in the Late Seventeenth Century: The*

Marescoe-David Letters, 1668-1680 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); and Peter Earle, *Sailors: English Merchant Seamen, 1650-1775* (London: Methuen, 1998).

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