

CfP: Workshop on Commodity Trading Companies in the First Global Economy, 1870-1914

Industrialisation and economic liberalism caused a steep growth of the international trade in commodities during the First Global Economy. Trading companies shaped the emergent global value chains of commodities ranging from minerals to metals and food stuffs. At this highpoint of Britain's economic dominance, British commodity trading companies were front runners. However, rapid growth and a growing need for raw materials and natural resources in the US, Germany and Japan opened up new trading opportunities and markets. Simultaneously, opening imperial trade systems offered opportunities for commodity trading companies in colonial Africa and Asia.

As risk takers, information gatherers and arbitrageurs, commodity trading companies not only shaped global value chains but also contributed to the integration of markets and the convergence of prices. As markets integrated, price spreads fell, reducing the trader's margins. Moreover, the first global economy witnessed the birth of the vertically integrated, multinational enterprise, replacing the role and services offered by merchants and trading companies. Theory suggests that falling margins and competition from manufacturing firms force trading companies to either disappear or diversify away from pure trading and turn into hybrid trading companies or even manufacturing multinationals. Nevertheless, commodity trading companies still exist, some with histories stretching back to the 19th Century. In spite of an abundance of scholarship on market integration, price convergence and the rise of the multinational enterprise, much less is known about the fates of the actual trading companies that shaped the emergent global economy in the first place.

This 2-day workshop aims to bring together scholars working on commodity markets and commodity trading companies during the first global economy. We also welcome papers that extend the period backwards into the early 19th Century or forwards into the 20th Century. The objective is to discuss and compare the role and fate of trading companies across a range of commodities and geographical regions. Who were these companies and traders that shaped global commodity chains? How did they organise their business across borders and continents? And how were they affected by the increasing integration of markets and the rise of multinational enterprises? Is it possible to identify phases of growth and decline, and how do different commodity markets compare? We aim to publish (a selection of) the papers either as an edited volume or a special issue of a peer-reviewed journal.

Proposals

We welcome proposals for papers on any commodity or region that engage with one or more of the above questions. Please send abstracts of max. 500 words and short CVs to Espen Storli (espen.storli@ntnu.no) or Marten Boon (marten.boon@ntnu.no) before 1st October 2016. Presenters are asked to send in an extended abstract of around 4,000 words prior to the workshop.

Time and place

Date: 3-4 February 2017

The workshop will take place in Rotterdam, and is jointly organised with Business History@Erasmus, the Erasmus University's centre for business history. Rotterdam is a fitting

place to hold this workshop. The Port of Rotterdam has since the 19th Century been a global commodities hub. However, it's not just history that propelled Rotterdam into Lonely Planet's top 5 of cities to visit, exclaiming that "Rotterdam is the future....now". Its renowned Market Hall – sampling foods from all over the world and amazing modern architecture indeed make Rotterdam a great place to visit.

The conveners have funds available to cover the cost of travel and accommodation. Lunch and dinner are provided.