Introduction: Crossing Companies

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Introduction: Crossing Companies*

FELICIA GOTTMANN AND PHILIP STERN

Imperial and world history have revealed how chartered companies led early modern European colonial and commercial expansion, and have demonstrated the critical role of go-betweens, permeable borders, and transnational networks in shaping these processes. Despite these insights, the scholarship largely continues to treat such companies as coherent, self-contained, and primarily national institutions. This special issue explores the ways in which these overseas companies were in fact constituted by people, ideas, capital, and goods that cut across both national and institutional boundaries. It examines both the ways more famous concerns, such as the Dutch and English East India Companies, as well as a range of lesser-studied European overseas companies were defined by such transnational networks. Applying the approaches of world history to the constitution of overseas European companies in turn reveals how early modern world history came to define “Europe” itself in the early modern period.

KEYWORDS: chartered corporations, East India companies, early modern, global history, transnational history.

Much of early modern transcontinental and global connections were forged not by states but by a range of agents that navigated between public and private, not least of which was the chartered joint-stock company. From the fifteenth century onward, European chartered

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companies facilitated diplomatic, colonial, and of course commercial expansion and connections, first within Europe and then across the Mediterranean, Atlantic, and Indian Ocean worlds. Crucial motors of what C. A. Bayly has termed “proto-globalization,” such companies were fueled by their capacity to marshal both financial and political capital on great scales. These so-called “first modern multinationals” played a pivotal role not only in “the scandal of empire” but also in the development of both modern international law and modern, global capitalism. Perhaps this is why, against the backdrop of a contemporary world in which transnational corporations drive globalization and reach into every aspect of daily life, bodies like the East India Companies continue to be an omnipresence, not only as subjects of academic works but also in popular culture, from video games to novels, films, and television.

All this attention of late to the role of European companies in shaping world history has led to ever more nuanced understandings of how they operated and interacted with varied commercial and imperial actors and agents. Historians have shown how on the ground in the Americas, Africa, and Asia, for example, these companies’ engagement with other Europeans and indigenous peoples alike were marked not only by conflict but also by cooperation, transgression, and communication among merchants, polities, and cultures. Early-modern globalization was brokered by a panoply of translators, go-betweens, and mediators that trouble any coherent sense we once might have had.

of independent, “national” European practices abroad. From continental North America to the African Coast to East, South, and Southeast Asia, methodological insights from the study of transnational, diasporic, or cross-cultural networks, “entangled empires,” “middle grounds,” and “contact zones” have permitted the integration of the East India Companies and other European chartered monopoly trading companies into a genuinely world historical perspective in which history can be written à parts égales, in “equal parts” as Romain Bertrand has put it.5

As scholarship focusing on companies’ Asian, American, and African operations—be that the transatlantic slave trade, Caribbean smuggling networks, trade in the Indian Ocean or in Canton in China—has firmly established the transnational character of European commercial and imperial expansion overseas,6 a blossoming literature has revealed over the past decades just how much these overseas exchanges fed back into Europe, to define varied material, political, and business


cultures.\textsuperscript{7} What is more, these overseas commercial and colonial institutions established across the Atlantic, Asia, and Africa came to define Europe itself, underscoring and transforming scientific, intellectual, labor, military, print, and of course commercial transnational networks not only among the overseas empires of Western Europe but also within Central and Eastern Europe, Scandinavia, and the Mediterranean.\textsuperscript{8}

Yet, even as we no longer conceive of the agents of European expansion as purely “European,” chartered monopoly companies, the East India Companies in particular, have so far remained immune to any challenge to their status as “national” agents, despite the fact that their scholars have never failed to acknowledge the multiplicity of private interest groups that underlay them.\textsuperscript{9} Even the emerging historiography on the impact of empire and global trade on Europe itself remains firmly anchored in work on particular companies embedded in apparently coherent national frameworks, with special attention and emphasis paid to the behemoths among these companies. Accounts abound, for example, of the “Dutch,” “British,” or “French” East India Companies, for example, or the “British” African and


\textsuperscript{9} See Adams, Bowen, and Pettigrew above. Holden Furber, Rival Empires of Trade in the Orient (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976) stresses the private networks underlying all Companies, while Cyril Northcote Parkinson went so far as to find no actual company at all, only an amalgamation of private interest groups: Trade in the Eastern Seas 1793–1813 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937).
“Dutch” West Indies Company, either in isolation from, or in comparison to, one another. Though entirely understandable given historiographical, linguistic, and archival realities, the collective result is nonetheless a misleading image of these bodies as coherent institutions, extensions of “national” projects in competition with but ultimately independent from these contemporaries, rivals, and interlocutors around the world and across Europe.

This special issue demonstrates that as companies helped thrust Europe into world history, in turn, those companies produced and engendered transnational connections, porous institutional boundaries, and other forms of “company-crossings” that were a characteristic feature of European expansion both at home and abroad. Personnel, goods, ideas, intelligence, capital, strategy, and diplomacy moved not only between but through both national and company borders alike. Considering companies as both independent organizations but also mutually constituted and permeable ones questions whether it is helpful to regard them as exclusively “national” bodies. It also opens up possibilities for broadening our understanding of company colonialism not as “English,” “French,” or “Dutch” but as a European-wide phenomenon which in turn helped make Europe itself.

Attending to these “company crossings” also reminds us of the outsize historiographical legacy of the English and Dutch experience, both East India Companies alongside the behemoth Dutch West India Company. These companies have garnered the vast majority of our attention and as such frequently stand in as a metonym for the nature and ecology of the early modern European overseas chartered company writ large. However, as the essays in this issue show, these companies grew in relation with one another as well as a host of actors across Europe and the world. Moreover, one could be forgiven for not realizing that there were not a handful but nearly a score of East India companies born in Europe through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Some modeled on their Anglo-Dutch predecessors and others seeking to innovate on or reject them, these companies sought to organize European commerce, diplomacy, and settlement in the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds. While quite often identified within national or dynastic terms—Danish, Scottish, French, Swedish, Prussian, Spanish, Holy Roman Empire, and so on—none of these companies developed in isolation from one another. Some never made it or were short-lived, and others came in multiple iterations. A few—most famously the French Compagnie des Indes but also the so-called Scottish “Darien” Company—tied their interests in
the Indian Ocean to colonial and commercial projects across the Atlantic world.10

National accounts of chartered companies cannot convey an adequate sense of their entanglements, which transcended any single state, nation, empire, ocean, or hemisphere. Moreover, there was clearly a shared history and marked co-dependence of “small” and “large” companies, and the East India Companies in particular. Historiographically marginalized companies served as outlets for underused capital and personnel from their better-known rivals and their neutrality during periods of protracted warfare allowed them to guarantee the continuous provisioning of markets both in Asia and Europe. Conversely though often regarded as “interlopers” by larger companies in the Low Countries, Britain, and France, these smaller concerns also relied on them not only as providers of funding, expertise, resources, and personnel but also as markets for the Asian goods they had imported, a majority of which was sold and smuggled abroad.11

By their very nature designed to connect Europe to the rest of the world and to cross boundaries, as both institutions and collections of individuals, these companies drew on one another as well as on polyglot and mobile networks of labor and finance, from the rank-and-file sailor and soldier to company leadership. As on the ground in the Americas, Africa, and Asia, these organizations were defined as much by their metropolitan boards of directors as they were by any number of “go-betweens”—itinerant soldiers and sailors, investors and projectors, envoys, and spies—who not only brokered their relationships but also challenge any coherent notion we may have of them as entirely “English,” “Dutch,” “Swedish,” “Danish,” “French,” “German,” or

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“Flemish” enterprises. Moreover, there were countless more individuals such as rival combines, “interlopers,” and other interests “outside” these companies who, in attempting to evade, countermand, capitalize upon, or even appropriate those companies’ political and economic power, also informed and helped define their structure and networks. And all of them developed not in isolation but in rivalry, alliance, and engagement with one another, not to mention the remarkable overlap and exchange of personnel and intelligence that defined—and often defeated—these ventures as well. These companies were, by design and function, globally and transnationally-oriented operations and we must therefore rethink our approach to their origins in Europe—alongside the work done to complicate our vision of the colonial encounter—as aspects of transnational and world history.

The articles in this collection—each in a different way—apply these insights from world history beyond Europe to trouble our longstanding notion of how these European chartered companies were constructed, organized, and led, even at home. If these companies were indeed critical agents of global interaction, doing so in turn provides an additional and critical dimension to understanding how they came to be and continued to rely on the incoherent nature of early modern European states and the robust transregional and transnational networks of information, capital, expertise, and labor within Europe itself.

Thinking about this era not as one of competing national companies but as a series of overlapping networks of connection and crossing, in turn, asks us to reevaluate even the “behemoths” with which we began. As Andrew Ruoss demonstrates in his essay, even—perhaps especially—the English and Dutch companies cannot be seen in isolation, but rather their strategies, ideologies, and understanding of the nature of Asian trade and diplomacy were shaped by both emulation of and competition with one another as institutions through the seventeenth century. Moreover, the political economy of Eurasian trade resisted any vision of these companies as discrete actors. For the English and Dutch, the re-export and carrying trades were among some of the most profitable enterprises for both East Indian and Atlantic goods, and in turn, re-export or even smuggling into these markets from elsewhere in Europe was critical to the commercial strategies of rival

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companies. This led to a far more syncretic political economy than our nationally-framed stories permit, as Leos Müller clearly details in his account of the complex route that Bengal capital took en route to Britain, via Swedish and Danish trade in Canton and re-export markets across northern Europe.

Certainly Europeans in the East Indies relied on a host of Asian agents to conduct business, whether vakils at various royal courts, soldiers manning their forts, or ships’ pilots navigating ships from port to port. Yet, these companies were also supported by Europeans—sailors, soldiers, traders, doctors, agents, and many others—who moved among companies to expand their opportunities, potentially returning home with not only greater knowledge but also a good deal of capital to invest. Commercial and colonial expansion transcended, and even at times resisted, family and national networks, relying instead on cross-cultural encounters of merchants, financiers, and bureaucrats that stretched across Europe into the Atlantic and Asia and back.13 This process is revealed in this issue by Hanna Hodacs and Kaarle Wirta. Wirta looks to the Atlantic to show the elaborate and overlapping “cross-company” routes that seventeenth-century Danish, Dutch, and German traders took through Amsterdam and the networks of the Dutch West India Company. Like virtually all of those who set up small rival enterprises in the hinterlands of the large chartered companies, Wirta’s protagonists came from larger and more established trading companies such as the Dutch Company. Such company-crossers left their country of birth to advance their careers and make their fortunes more quickly. Despite very strict protectionist legislation, forbidding French, British, or Dutch nationals from engaging with any foreign chartered companies, many of these individuals not only did so, but, having achieved a modicum of success, eventually returned home and sometimes even to the service of their “national” enterprises, as Wirta shows.

In the eighteenth century, company crossing remained an important outlet for those who lacked the right connections to obtain the most lucrative posts at home. Those who went to the Ostend, Swedish, and Prussian East India Companies for instance were often relative outsiders: among Britons, Quakers, Scots, Irish, or “Jacobites”; those who had been unable to make it to the top of the Dutch East India

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Company in the Netherlands; and, in the Flemish case, those who no longer had a local outlet with which to engage after the Ostend Company was suspended and then suppressed in 1727 and 1731. Thus, Scottish and Irish soldiers not only, as Linda Colley has famously argued, made their way as “Britons” into the English company but rather continued through the eighteenth century to find other European outlets to Asian trade and service.\(^\text{14}\) Any number of Scottish or Irish “interlopers” on the English trade shopped their services around Europe, from the Austrian Netherlands to Poland to, perhaps especially, as Hanna Hodacs shows in her article, Scandinavia. As potential competition and outlets for excluded countrymen, these upstart European East India projects—despite their somewhat sidelined historiographical reputation—caused the larger more established companies immense anxiety, and both the English and Dutch companies spent a great amount of financial and political capital attempting to cut them off before they started.

These smaller companies located on the peripheries of the European Atlantic world with ambitions in Asia provide a crucial counter-narrative to the depiction of the large European chartered monopoly companies as bastions of nationalist or mercantilist expansion. The seventeenth-century Glückstadt companies or the eighteenth-century German and Scandinavian East India companies, for example, frequently existed without any view to territorial expansion abroad and were resolutely multi-national in their make-up. They drew their directors, shareholders, sailors, ship’s officers, and merchants from Scandinavia, the Low Countries, Germany, Britain, Ireland, and France, while also maintaining close ties with Spain and the Ibero-Atlantic world, via Cadiz in particular.\(^\text{15}\) Thus, as Felicia Gottmann puts it in her article, despite the continued reputation of the English and Dutch East India Companies as the “first modern multinationals,”


it was perhaps these smaller, lesser known projects that were the true “transnational” enterprises, reliant as they were on the ideas, labor, and capital of a range of European and Asian employees and leadership. These multinational, cross-company networks should not surprise us, as they were common across the early modern commercial world, but as the essays in this volume show, these companies were perhaps especially permeable.

Thus, transnational and private networks were crucial to the functioning of the companies, and individual companies depended on each other for their functioning even as their official stance was one of mutual hostility. However, these companies were nevertheless crucial to eighteenth-century nation and state-building projects. Indeed, there was a similar mutually beneficial relationship between private traders and companies on the one hand and states and companies on the other: after all, early modern states were corporate, while early modern chartered monopoly companies frequently were sovereigns in their own right abroad. Contributions to this special issue stress the crucial role governmental support as well as international power politics, imperial expansion, and diplomacy played in day-to-day operations but also in the ultimate flourishing or decline of the companies. Just as companies depended on states, private traders depended on companies: given the long distances and high levels of risk involved, private traders relied on company infrastructure for their operations overseas and transfer of goods and profits back to Europe. However, while they made use of corporate or state channels when convenient, both companies and private traders were just as happy to ignore or transcend official regulations when they found them incommodious. Company diplomacy and warfare did not always respect official national policy, and private trade, smuggling, as well as trans-company investment were rife amongst individual company servants. Though the relationship between companies and state or between company servants and companies has often been depicted as parasitic, it was at times more symbiotic, as unlicensed traders benefited companies and states alike. The English East India Company for instance benefitted from private initiatives which opened new fields of useful knowledge, new trading routes, and new markets, while conversely British state building drew significantly on the financial and political power of the EIC.

These essays only, of course, view the tip of an iceberg. Yet, they suggest the need for a much wider research agenda that can reveal how, in an era of intense state building, early modern Europe was constituted by any number of overlapping but unsynchronized political, economic, religious, cultural, and information networks, of which the inchoate
and incomplete post-Westphalian national state system was but one. Especially among those who ventured into the extra-European world, the “nation” was only one option amongst many that could coexist and overlap as bases for identity formation, loyalty, economic expansion, the dispensation of justice, or indeed sovereign authority.

The contributions to this special issue thus reflect on fundamental questions about how individual behavior and action shapes commercial institutions, asking us to be ever sensitive to the ways in which the design of something like a large or small East India Company is determined by the confluences of political and economic pressures, as well as the constant decision-making of those people that not only ran it but also worked for and against it. These articles raise critical issues about the nature of global commerce in this period, and the fluidity of border crossing that many individuals were capable of, both within Europe and especially in its global expansion. They blur any distinctions not only among national categories but between public and private both in the sense of the relationship between states and companies but also in the way the companies navigate between trade and governance. The very theme of “crossing companies” compels us to revisit our historiographies of cross-cultural and cross-border contact to open themselves up to categories well beyond state and nation.

Finally, looking to the incoherent or transnational nature of “Europe” offers another dimension to “provincializing” not only Europe but the host of agents that stewarded its entry into world history through colonial and commercial expansion. As such, companies become both institutions as well as transnational networks, alongside but quite different from Geniza or Mughal-Indian merchants, New Julfa Armenians, or the Sephardic Diaspora.16 Though it would be a step further than is contained in these pieces, these articles also gesture to different ways we might see how the world returned, via these companies, to define European states, institutions, and thus in turn, Europe itself.

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