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Citation: Gottmann, Felicia and Stern, Philip (2020) Introduction: Crossing Companies. *Journal of World History*, 31 (3). pp. 477-488. ISSN 1045-6007

Published by: University of Hawaii Press

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jwh.2020.0028> <<https://doi.org/10.1353/jwh.2020.0028>>

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* The editors would like to thank the contributors, the peer reviewers, and all of the participants and audience in the “Crossing Companies: Mobility and Cooperation between National Monopoly Trading Companies” panel at the 2017 annual meeting of the American Historical Association in Denver, CO, that gave birth to this forum. We are also grateful to the journal for their encouragement and support and particularly to Cátia Antunes, Matt Romaniello, Ben Fairfield, and Alicia Upano. Felicia Gottmann’s research has been generously funded by the Leverhulme Trust (ECF-2014-396).

Introduction: Crossing Companies*

FELICIA GOTTMANN AND PHILIP STERN

Abstract

Imperial and world history has revealed much about how chartered companies led early modern European colonial and commercial expansion, as well as the critical role of go-betweens, permeable borders, and transnational networks in shaping that exchange. 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 was forged not by states but by a range of agents that navigated between public and private, not least of which was the organized chartered, joint-stock company. From the fifteenth century onward, European chartered companies facilitated diplomatic, colonial, and of course commercial expansion and connections, first within Europe and then across the Mediterranean, Atlantic, and Indian Ocean worlds.¹ Crucial motors of what C. A. Bayly has

¹ Ann Carlos and Stephen Nicholas, “Theory and History: Seventeenth Century Joint-Stock Chartered Trading Companies,” *Journal of Economic History* 56, no. 4 (1996): 916–924; Ann Carlos, “Joint-Stock Trading Companies,”

termed “proto-globalization,”² 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 the modern, global capitalism.³ 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.⁴

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

in *Oxford Encyclopedia of Economic History*, ed. Joel Mokyr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), vol. 3, 207–211.

² Christopher A. Bayly, “‘Archaic’ and ‘Modern’ Globalization in the Eurasian and African arena, c. 1750–1850,” in *Globalization in World History*, ed. A. G. Hopkins (New York: Norton, 2002).

³ Nicholas B. Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); C. H. Alexandrowicz, *An Introduction to the Law of Nations in the East Indies (16th, 17th and 18th Centuries)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967); C. H. Alexandrowicz, *The Law of Nations in Global History*, ed. David Armitage and Jennifer Pitts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Antony Anghie, *Imperialism, Sovereignty and the Making of International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Martine Julia van Ittersum, *Profit and Principle: Hugo Grotius, Natural Rights Theories and the Rise of Dutch Power in the East Indies* (Leiden: Brill, 2006); Nick Robins, *The Corporation that Changed the World: How the East India Company Shaped the Modern Multinational* (Pluto Press, 2012); Tirthankar Roy, *The East India Company: The World’s Most Powerful Corporation* (Penguin, 2016); Giuseppe Dari-Mattiacci, Oscar Gelderblom, Joost Jonker, and Enrico C. Perotti, “The Emergence of the Corporate Form,” *The Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization* 33, no. 2 (2017): 193–236.

⁴ Philip J. Stern, “The English East India Company and the Modern Corporation: Legacies, Lessons, and Limitations,” *Seattle University Law Review* (2016): 423–445.

⁵ Romain Bertrand, *L’histoire à parts égales: récits d’une rencontre Orient-Occident, XVIe–XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 2011); Cátia Antunes and Amélia Polónia, eds., *Beyond Empires: Global, Self-organizing, Cross-imperial Networks, 1500–1800* (Leiden: Brill, 2016); Simon Schaffer, H. Otto Sibum, Lissa Roberts, Kapil Raj, and James Delbourgo, eds., *The Brokered World: Go-Betweens and Global Intelligence, 1770–1820* (Sagamore Beach: Science History

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.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,

Publications, 2009); Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815*, 20th anniversary ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel writing and Transculturation*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2008); Philip D. Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Francesca Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Sebouh David Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: The Global Trade Networks of Armenian Merchants from New Julfa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); Paul Arthur Van Dyke and Susan E. Schopp, eds., *The Private Side of the Canton Trade, 1700–1840: Beyond the Companies* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2018); Ashin Das Gupta, *The World of the Indian Ocean Merchant 1500–1800: Collected Essays of Ashin Das Gupta* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004); Eliga H. Gould, *Among the Powers of the Earth: The American Revolution and the Making of a New World Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra and Erik R. Seeman, eds., *The Atlantic in Global History, 1500–2000* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007).

⁶ See above as well as George E. Brooks, *Eurafricans in Western Africa: Commerce, Social Status, Gender, and Religious Observance from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2003); Filipa Ribeiro da Silva, *Dutch and Portuguese in Western Africa. Empires, Merchants and the Atlantic System, 1580–1674* (Brill: Leiden, 2011); Tobias Green, ed., *Brokers of Change: Atlantic Commerce and Culture in Precolonial Western Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). Karwan Fatah-Black, *White Lies and Black Markets: Evading Metropolitan Authority in Colonial Suriname, 1650–1800* (Leiden: Brill, 2015); Linda M. Rupert, “Contraband Trade and the Shaping of Colonial Societies in Curaçao and Tierra Firme,” *Itinerario* 30, no. 3 (2006): 35–54; Jesse Cromwell, “More than Slaves and Sugar: Recent Historiography of the Trans-imperial Caribbean and Its Sinew Populations,” *History Compass* 12 (2014): 770–783.

⁷ Maxine Berg et al., eds., *Goods from the East, 1600–1800: Trading Eurasia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Julia Adams, *The Familial State: Ruling Families and Merchant Capitalism in Early Modern Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); Philip J. Stern, *The Company-State: Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundation of the British Empire in India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); H. V. Bowen, *The Business of Empire: The East India Company and Imperial Britain, 1756–1833* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Margot C. Finn and Kate Smith, *The East India Company at Home, 1757–1857* (London: UCL Press, 2018); William A. Pettigrew, *Freedom's Debt: The Royal African Company and the Politics of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1672–1752* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Felicia Gottmann, *Global Trade, Smuggling, and the Making of Economic Liberalism: Asian Textiles in France 1680–1760* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Michael Kwass, *Contraband: Louis Mandrin and the Making of a Global Underground* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

military, print, and of course commercial transnational networks not only among the overseas empires of Western Europe but also with Central and Eastern Europe, Scandinavia, and the Mediterranean.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.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 “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 and thus, again, in turn helped make Europe itself.

⁸ Manuel Herrero Sánchez and Klemens Kaps, eds., *Merchants and Trade Networks between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean (1550–1800): Connectors of Commercial Maritime Systems* (New York, Routledge, 2017); Polonia and Antunes, *Beyond Empire*; Felix Brahm and Eve Rosenhaft, eds., *Slavery Hinterland: Transatlantic Slavery and Continental Europe, 1680–1850* (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2016); Klaus Weber, *Deutsche Kaufleute im Atlantikhandel 1680–1830: Unternehmen und Familien in Hamburg, Cádiz und Bordeaux* (München: C. H. Beck Verlag, 2004); Margrit Schulte Beerbühl, *The Forgotten Majority: German Merchants in London, Naturalization, and Global Trade, 1660–1815*, trans. Cynthia Klohr (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2015).

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).

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 of these came in multiple iterations, and 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

¹⁰ Felicia Gottmann, “French-Asian Connections: *The Compagnies des Indes*, France’s Eastern Trade, and New Directions in Historical Scholarship,” *The Historical Journal* 56 (2013): 537–552; G. P. Insh, *The Company of Scotland Trading to Africa and the Indies* (London: Charles Scribner, 1932); Andrew Mackillop, “Accessing Empire: Scotland, Europe, Britain, and the Asia Trade, 1695–c. 1750,” *Itinerario* 29, no. 3 (2005): 7–30; Philip J. Stern, “British Atlantic and British Asia: Comparisons and Connections,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 63, no. 4 (2006): 693–712. There is an older literature, dedicated to a “comparative company history” which serves as an excellent starting point for seeing the wide range of companies for overseas expansion emerging out of early modern Europe. See, most notably, Furber, *Rival Empires of Trade*; Leonard Blussé and Femme Gastra, eds., *Companies and Trade* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981); James D. Tracy, ed., *The Rise of Merchant Empires: Long-Distance Trade in the Early Modern World 1350–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

¹¹ Hanna Hodacs, *Silk and Tea in the North: Scandinavian Trade and the Market for Asian Goods in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Meike Von Brescius, “Private Enterprise and the China Trade: British Interlopers and Their Informal Networks in Europe, c. 1720–1750” (PhD Thesis, Warwick University, 2016); Gottmann, *Global Trade, Smuggling*.

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 “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.¹² 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 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

¹² Antunes and Polónia, eds., *Beyond Empires*; Anna Winterbottom, *Hybrid Knowledge in the Early East India Company World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Emily Erikson, *Between Monopoly and Free Trade: The English East India Company 1600–1757* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

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 West Indies Company (WIC). 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 countries 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, Scottish, Jacobite, or Irish; those who had been unable to make it to the top of the Dutch East India 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 also rather continued through the eighteenth century to find other European outlets to Asian trade and service.¹⁴ Any number of Scottish or Irish “interlopers” on the English trade shopped their services around Europe, from Austrian Netherlands to Poland to, perhaps especially, as Hanna Hodacs shows in her article, Scandinavia. As potential competition and outlets for

¹³ Cátia Antunes, “Cross-Cultural Business Cooperation in the Dutch Trading World, 1580–1776,” in *Religion and Trade: Cross-Cultural Exchanges in World History, 1000–1900*, ed. Francesca Trivellato, Leor Halevi, and Cátia Antunes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁴ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Andrew Mackillop, “Accessing Empire: Scotland, Europe, Britain, and the Asia Trade, 1695–c. 1750,” *Itinerario* 29, no. 3 (2005): 7–30; Mackillop, “A North Europe World of Tea: Scotland and the Tea Trade, c. 1690–c. 1790,” in *Goods from the East*, ed. Berg et al., 294–308.

refractory 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.¹⁵ Thus, as Felicia Gottmann puts it in her article, despite the continued reputation of the East India Company (EIC) and VOC 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 the 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 incommensurate. Company diplomacy and warfare did not always

¹⁵ For a good overview over the particularities of these small comps see Markus A. Denzel, Jan de Vries, and Philipp Robinson Rössner, eds., *Small is Beautiful? Interlopers and Smaller Trading Nations in the Pre-Industrial Period* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2011); and on the East India Companies in particular Holden Furber, *Rival Empires of Trade* and Louis Dermigny, *La Chine et l'Occident; le commerce à Canton au XVIIIe siècle, 1719–1833*, 4 vols (Paris: S.E.V.P.E.N., 1964). On Cadiz see von Brescius, “Private Enterprise;” Weber, *Deutsche Kaufleute*; and Ana Crespo Solana, *Entre Cádiz y los Países Bajos: una comunidad mercantil en la ciudad de la Ilustración* (Cádiz, Fundación Municipal de Cultura, Cátedra Adolfo de Castro, 2001).

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 corporate and political experience of the EIC.¹⁶

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.¹⁷ Though it would be a step further than is contained in

¹⁶ Winterbottom, *Hybrid Knowledge*; Erikson, *Between Monopoly and Free Trade*.

¹⁷ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Jessica Goldberg, *Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean: The Geniza Merchants and their Business World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Stephen Frederic Dale, *Indian Merchants and Eurasian Trade, 1600–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean*; Trivellato, *Familiarity*.

these pieces, these articles also gesture to different ways in turn we might see how the world returned, via these companies, to define European states, institutions, and thus in turn, Europe itself.