Introduction


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Contact zones and the linked concepts of brokerage, go-betweens, hybridity, and transculturation have been amongst the most fertile and innovative fields of study in recent years. However, since the classic works by Polanyi and Curtin, the focus has been less on commercial interactions and more commonly on the unequal power relations in imperial and colonial regimes and on the brokerage involved in knowledge production. This volume reintroduces economic history to the study of contact zones. It explores the wide variety of commercial cosmopolitan practices that arose from the global economic entanglements of the early modern era which provided robust alternatives to the universalising western imperial model of the later period. In the early modern era states, societies, and individuals across the globe reacted with a mixture of commercial idealism and commercial anxiety to the hitherto unprecedented levels of economic interconnectedness, seeking at once to exploit new opportunities for growth whilst limiting its disruptive effects. Deploying a number of interdisciplinary methodologies, the kind of ‘methodological cosmopolitanism’ that Ulrich Beck has called for, we provide agency-centred evaluations of the risks and opportunities inherent in the ambiguous role of the cosmopolitan, who, often playing on and mobilising a number of identities, operated in between and outside of different established legal, social, and cultural systems. This introduction sets out these different methodologies and explains the volume’s framework and definitions.

A foreigner who came to trade and settle in one of the many great commercial hubs of the Indian Ocean and China Sea in about 1700 would have had to learn and adapt to various local customs. To be truly successful he would have had to become a cosmopolitan. About 150 years later he (and indeed those traders continued to be almost exclusively male) could usually save himself the trouble. European colonialism and informal imperialism had imposed a much more uniform regime of trade regulations as well as extra-legal status for Europeans. If the nineteenth century was a globalised age, the early modern period was a cosmopolitan one.¹

We define such ‘lived’ or ‘practical’ cosmopolitanism as the ability to adopt, adapt, and operate across two or more different cultural codes or ‘vernaculars’ simultaneously. In his work on cultural linguistics Sheldon Pollock differentiated between periods of cosmopolitanism, based on a universalising lingua franca, and periods defined by bounded vernaculars.² When it came to commercial interactions, the early modern period certainly had its own lingua franca. Francesca Trivellato posited the existence of a ‘truly global mercantile culture’ in this era.³ Cátia Antunes outlined its shared principles as the reciprocity inherent in the concept of exchange, the consequent recognition of debt and compensation to correct imbalances of payment in such exchanges, and finally the role of trust based on notions of honour and reputation.⁴ However, in the early modern period this global commercial lingua franca was rudimentary and limited. Cultural
misunderstandings and different local customs still required translation from one vernacular into another. The willingness and ability not only to master the universal *lingua franca* of early modern mercantile exchanges but to combine and creolise multiple vernaculars defines what we call “commercial cosmopolitanism”.

Commercial cosmopolitans often played on and mobilised a number of identities and operated in-between and outside of different established legal, social, and cultural systems. This could leave them vulnerable. However, as this volume shows, this very fragility was also a source of opportunity and power for cosmopolitan agents. Their ability to draw on different cultural codes gave them immense creative potential. They developed new trade routes, exchange mechanisms, and revenue streams, and inspired new and hybrid objects, artworks, languages, and socio-economic or cultural practices which were themselves cosmopolitan. Cosmopolitan actors, objects, spaces, and institutions were thus not necessarily ‘global’ or ‘transnational’ – an anachronistic term for much of the world in this period. They were however always *transcultural* as they crossed and blurred linguistic, ethnic, and religious boundaries.

What this volume thus showcases is not the philosophical ideal of world citizenship or the intellectual recognition of a universally shared humanity, but rather the lived experience of cosmopolitanism across the world. On the theory much ink has been shed, and, perhaps due to the current rise of militant nationalism, there has been a resurgence of scholarly interest in cosmopolitanism as a normative ideal and applied philosophical project. Though often discussed only as part of the Western philosophical tradition, the ideal of the Weltbürger, citizen of the world or Greek *kosmopolitēs*, exists in many cultures. It is a notable feature of Confucianism and, in perhaps narrower religious sense, the *ummat al-Islām* has shaped a supra-national sense of global Islamic community for centuries. In the West, cosmopolitan sentiment was a notable feature of Epicurean and Stoic philosophy and particularly blossomed in the European Enlightenment and its Republic of Letters, which, it ought to be said, remained well aware of other, non-European versions of cosmopolitanism. On the Enlightenment ideal itself much has been written, and nearly as much on its well-established link to commerce, which aspired to a world united and civilised by the shared give and take of peaceful exchange: a vision that did not survive long amid the brutal realities of global trade.

Much less work has been done to investigate how the Enlightenment goal of commercial cosmopolitanism did – or did not – work in practice. In the late 1990s and 2000s, a number of works set out to address this: David Hancock, Margaret C. Jacob, and Alison Games all purported to show how early modern European traders were ‘citizens of the world’. Most of these accounts, however, were acutely Eurocentric. Jacob’s cosmopolitans were all Europeans who never even left Europe, whilst Hancock’s ‘citizens of the world’ were British citizens dealing with other British men elsewhere around the world. Games was an exception, analysing how late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth-century Englishmen in the Indian Ocean, Mediterranean, and Atlantic worlds adapted to, and adopted foreign cultures and customs as part of their survival strategy. Their
cosmopolitanism was ‘often a posture derived from weakness’ which waned as soon as the English state grew powerful enough to impose centralised control over its colonial ventures. The centrality of power relations to the deployment of commercial cosmopolitan tactics is confirmed by this volume’s findings. Bringing together scholars working on early modern Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe, we analyse the functioning and characteristics of such strategies from multiple viewpoints across the globe.

Cosmopolitan practice – theories, approaches, and the importance of methodological cosmopolitanism

To write a global history of cosmopolitan practice, such cosmopolitanism has to be reflected in our approach. To overcome what he called ‘methodological nationalism’, the late Ulrich Beck proposed social scientists change both their method and their object of study. He suggested researchers leave their national silos and focus on the transnational actors and processes that define the ‘second’ or ‘reflexive’ modernity of the twenty-first century. He maintained that these could only be grasped when studied across geographies and disciplines, by abandoning the intrinsic ‘provincialism’ that still defines many of our disciplines, in the social sciences just as much as in the humanities. Early modernity, the period this volume focusses on, was characterised by very different kinds of transnational actors and processes, yet their understanding requires the same ‘methodological cosmopolitanism’ that Beck demanded.

To write a genuinely cosmopolitan history of transcultural commerce, we hence need to work across disciplinary and geographical boundaries. We also need to set certain boundaries ourselves when it comes to our definitions and objects of study. Not everybody engaging in early modern global trade was necessarily cosmopolitan. A British merchant for instance, who only traded with other British merchants located elsewhere across the world, and who consequently did not display any ability or willingness to code-switch between different commercial cultures does not fall in that category. On the other hand however, in our definition of cosmopolitanism, people are not the only possible cosmopolitan agents, nor did they have to consciously conceive of themselves in these terms to fall into this category. Practices, spaces, and objects can also be cosmopolitan thanks to their openness to varying interpretations and their ability to move between, and even merge two or more vernacular traditions.

Polanyi and Curtin

Our focus on cross-cultural commerce is not, of course without precedent. Indeed, the older literature on the topic is much less Eurocentric in approach than the later spate of works dealing with purported cosmopolitanisms. Karl Polanyi and Philip Curtin are the giants in this field. Though much criticised, Polanyi’s model of the ‘Port of Trade’ remains ubiquitously cited. Ports of Trade, according to Polanyi, acted as neutrality and security devices for cross-cultural trade under early
state conditions and, unlike competitive price-making markets, consisted of administered spaces in which ‘native inhabitants provided organs for mediation and accountancy’. Before the establishment of true international markets, this was, he claims, ‘the universal institution of overseas trade’, and his list of examples includes several of the spaces under discussion in this volume: Ouidah in the Whydah (later Dahomey) kingdom in modern-day Benin, a central node in the trans-Atlantic slave trade; Madras and Calcutta in India; and Canton in China. Scholars have since criticised his rather Eurocentric view of these regions and, by revealing the agency that commercial cosmopolitan practices could bestow on historiographically marginalized actors, contributions to this volume similarly challenge the rigidity of his assertions, revealing instead the hybrid forms of commercial and market-based exchange at work in Canton (Hellman, chapter 1) or the North American fur trade (Carlos, chapter 8).  

While Curtin’s *Cross-Cultural Trade* was also a work of ‘historic economic anthropology’, his first commitment remained to history, with the focus on commercial practice. Curtin posited the centrality of diasporas to the functioning of cross-cultural trade globally. He defined trade diasporas as ‘socially interdependent but spatially dispersed communities’ which, following the first rise of urban settlements, formed when commercial specialists removed themselves physically from the home community and went to live as aliens in another town. Members of such diasporas always lived in an asymmetrical relationship to the society surrounding them: they usually remained culturally distinct and politically marginalised, which permitted them to act as cultural brokers. Their very success also made them obsolete over time, as their mediation reduced cross-cultural differences and thereby the need for their brokerage. Curtin’s model was flexible. It incorporated several types of power imbalances between foreign traders and hosts, from the supressed pariah traders, exemplified by much of the Jewish diaspora, to the independent, self-governing communities of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Jahaanke in West Africa, and the aggressive European trading-post empires in Asia. He also included different degrees of cultural blending between a diaspora being completely assimilated and a position of identitarian segregation; and he recognised the important impact diasporas had on host societies, economically, linguistically, and in terms of religious conversion. As such Curtin’s *Cross-Cultural Trade* is one inspiration for this collection. However, a number of historiographical developments and methodological innovations have made a re-examination of the lived reality of cross-cultural trade decidedly necessary. This is what this volume offers.

*Cultural History: Hybridity and Contact Zones*

Contact zones and the linked concepts of brokerage, go-betweens, hybridity, and transculturation have been amongst the most fertile and innovative fields of study in recent years. Emerging from postcolonial critical theory, they brought a new conceptual understanding of plural and hybrid spaces, such as frontiers, the middle ground, third space or the contact zone, in which identities are constantly negotiated and created and which differed completely from Polanyi’s hermetic and controlled Ports of Trade. The theorisation of such spaces has greatly benefitted from scholarship on cultural hybridity more broadly, which has analysed the multiplicity, versatility, and performativity of cultural and social identities. This more nuanced view which understands
cultural identity as a performative act in which one individual can at the same time assume multiple changing and hybridized identities contrasts sharply with Curtin’s static, and undifferentiated classifications, in which ‘diasporic traders’ assumed a fixed identity over time. Recent research in critical theory and cultural history has by contrast demonstrated how the translation and adaptation of different vernacular traditions created new hybrids, be those cultural, religious, or linguistic codes, practices of exchange, consumption, and production, or artistic and stylistic conventions, created new hybrids. The results ranged from carefully negotiated hybrid practices of commercial exchange and the creole languages and cultures of the contact zone to ‘global objects’ and ‘global spaces of imagination’—all products of métissage and transculturation more than simple acculturation.17 With perhaps the exception of global material culture studies, scholarship that investigates such processes of translation, adaptation and hybridization, tends to focus not on commercial interactions but more on the unequal power relations in imperial and colonial regimes and on the brokerage involved in knowledge production.18 Imperial expansion, warfare, and religious missions certainly were central mechanisms of cross-cultural contact in the early modern world, but trade was of at least similar importance and reached populations as yet unmolested by European colonialism. To study the mechanisms of commercial contact zones, cross-cultural economic brokers, cosmopolitan commercial spaces, transcultural objects, and hybrid practices of exchange, production, and consumption, this volume thus bridges the still-divided disciplines of cultural and economic history.

Economic History: Institutional challenges of long-distance trade

In economic history, a more nuanced appreciation of the importance of organisations and institutions in the shape of New Institutional Economics has significantly advanced our understanding of the rules and practices underlying early modern commercial exchange, and offered a compromise in the formalist-substantivist debate that dominated in Polanyi’s, and to some extent still in Curtin’s days.19 Research by economists, sociologists, and historians into the structural underpinnings of early modern long-distance trade has emphasised the persistent problem of principal-agent relations and of the increased transaction costs that came with imperfect or asymmetrical information flows and insufficient or biased formal enforcement mechanisms which could only partially be internalised through the reliance on kinship networks.20 These are analysed by Ann Carlos in chapter 8.

Chapters in this volume pay careful attention not only to organisations but also to the formal and informal institutional arrangements underlying the exchanges they study. This means that legal frameworks are just as important as the socio-cultural norms in which commercial transactions were embedded.21 The advantage commercial cosmopolitans had was their ability to understand, access, and play these different frameworks. As chapters by 11 and 13 by Livesey and Antunes et al. illustrate, the capacity to tap into different commercial networks and markets at once could give them a competitive commercial edge. It also gave them additional escape routes. Unlike the thousands of foreigners employed in armed services across the early modern world, who had to profess allegiance to their new masters, cosmopolitan traders could play both sides. Chapter 9 for example reveals how European East India Company agents in India on the one hand claimed
extraterritorial rights that would exempt them from local taxation and legislation, but at the same time justified their private profiteering to their principals at home citing local customs.

The perhaps most cosmopolitan of all commercial activities in the period was smuggling. Illicit traders sailed through the wide gap between actual commercial practice and the official rhetoric of ‘closed systems’ that insisted on administered and centrally controlled trade, be that in the form of China’s Canton System and Japan’s sakoku or closed-country policy, investigated by Lisa Hellman in chapter 1, or Europe’s mercantilist trade restrictions in the form of monopolies over colonial trade, explored here by Kris Lane in his study of illicit trade networks linking Brazil, New Spain, and West Africa (chapter 4).

Social Networks

One particular socio-cultural structure that has received a much more robust analytical foundation in recent years is that of the social network. With the advent of social network analysis, historians have also adopted a more rigorous and critical use of the term. Networks in the form of diasporas were central to Curtin’s argument, but his diaspora concept lacked the analytical acuity that came with the advent of network studies. He falls prey to what Francesca Tivellato, building on the work of Rogers Brubaker, calls ‘groupism’, that is, the ‘tendency to take discrete, sharply differentiated, internally homogenous, and externally bounded groups as basic constituents of social life.’ Such ‘groupist’ approaches to diaspora studies not only run counter to recent findings on hybridisation and transculturation in the realm of cultural theory, they also impede the study of cosmopolitan commerce. Cosmopolitans frequently act as bridges across networks, mobilizing the creative potential of connections between established networks. They represent what Granovetter has termed the ‘strength of weak ties’, a term that also mirrors our commercial cosmopolitans’ paradoxical position of both strength (as gatekeepers to separate networks they were able to leverage social and informational capital hermetic to those outside of that respective cultural, social, economic or legal system) and of weakness: mediating and moving across various cultures or networks, they did not fully belong to any one of them and thus frequently were objects of distrust and remained vulnerable to rejection or persecution by each one. One role of the cosmopolitan is thus that of the oft-analysed broker, go-between or ‘agent of transculturation’ who serves as a connector between two or more primary groups with internally strong ties. They bridge what Burt has theorized as ‘structural holes’ in social networks and thereby gain social capital and the privileged access to good ideas from the other side of the hole. However, whilst all cross-cultural commercial brokers were practical cosmopolitans, not all commercial cosmopolitans acted as brokers. Many were principals in their own right or simply members of self-organised horizontal cross-cultural economic networks.

Social network analysis thus links with the literature on brokerage and the hybridity of contact zones: both are central to this volume. That the attempt to set up genuinely cosmopolitan social networks was not often successful however, is shown in chapters 9 and 13 on European traders’ relationships in early modern India and East Africa.
Spatial History and Material Culture

The model of the transcultural contact zone also plays an essential role in another field that has made significant analytical advances since its rudimentary use in Polanyi and Curtin: that of spatial history and theory. Space, both physical, social, and cultural, has become much more rigorously theorized in recent research. Critically informed understandings of space enrich this volume’s investigations into the large urban arenas like Canton and Nagasaki (chapter 1), Ayutthaya (chapter 2), but also into smaller spaces, such as an Anglo-Russian warehouse (chapter 5) or an Indian Ocean vessel (chapter 7).

Next to spatial analysis, two further new directions in recent scholarship define this collection’s methodology: global microhistory and global material culture studies. Cosmopolitan institutions, actors, and spaces are not the only focus of this collection. Following in the footsteps of the nascent approach of global material culture studies, we pay close attention to the material objects of commerce, which, polyvalent and subject to symbolic and physical reappropriation, could themselves become cosmopolitan. Certain types of transcultural objects are well known, such as Chinese porcelains adapted for the Middle-Eastern or European market, and once again copied and transformed there. Some are famous to this day, such as the Spanish ‘pieces of eight’, perhaps the first ever global currency (chapter 4 by Lane). Some are less familiar to us, such as cigars rolled with English techniques but Russian tobacco (chapter 5 by Romaniello). Beyond tangible objects, commercial cosmopolitanism also generated new practices of production and consumption, like the new ways of understanding, clustering, bundling, and consuming goods in Atlantic West Africa explored by Bronwen Everill. (chapter 6).

Microhistory and Subaltern Agency

One of the weaknesses of traditional world history, freely acknowledged by Curtin, was that ‘the price to be paid’ for establishing broad connections and patterns across the globe was ‘a decided neglect of […] the affairs of individual men and women.’ An innovative way of avoiding this high cost is the newly emerging approach of global microhistory. Combining case studies with microhistorical insights allows contributors to this collection to bring back individual agency to global history. Indeed, the agency that marginalised or subaltern actors could reclaim by adopting cosmopolitan commercial strategies is one of this volume’s central concerns. Effective global history, the kind that is empirically evidenced and grounded in lived reality, requires equal expertise in local and regional history. This is especially true of global microhistory. In the best kind of global microhistory, John-Paul Ghobrial claims, ‘the close study of a global life drags us back necessarily to a deep, local history’.
Many of the contributions thus explore on a microlevel the complex relationship cosmopolitan actors had with established socio-cultural, legal, and economic institutions. As Curtin pointed out, alien traders appeared doubly suspicious to their host societies. They evoked both the sempiternal distrust of foreigners and misgivings about merchants more broadly, who, in most societies, combined low social status with high wealth in a high-risk environment.\(^{34}\) In this volume we demonstrate that it was not only the combination of filthy lucre and the whiff of foreignness that made commercial cosmopolitans suspicious: it was their subversive potential. For the opportunities inherent in the ambiguous situation of the commercial cosmopolitan could afford individual actors without any formal powers a greater potential for autonomous agency. Chapters in this volume reveal how adopting commercial cosmopolitan strategies increased the margin of opportunities available to subaltern subjects, such as concubines and prostitutes from low-status ethnic groups in Siam or China (Chapters 1 and 2 by Hellman and Trakulhun).

Power and vulnerability are doubly intertwined in the position of the commercial cosmopolitan. On the one hand, this volume confirms the assertion made by Games with reference to early modern English subjects abroad: cosmopolitanism was a strategy often adopted from a position of weakness. Pursuing cosmopolitan tactics allowed vulnerable actors to increase their margin of action, be these the subaltern groups just mentioned, European agents trading outside direct colonial control in Southeast India and West Africa, independent Sino-Vietnamese trading communities in the Gulf of Thailand, or indeed a Sultanate seeking to navigate the increasing Anglo-American economic and imperial dominance (chapters 3, 7 and 10 by Heijmans, Hang, and Presthold respectively). On the other hand, however, the very in-betweenness that gave commercial cosmopolitans increased room for manoeuvre also made them more vulnerable: they might be able to play both sides, but both sides could also turn on them. The situation cosmopolitans found themselves in thus always remained dangerously fragile. Little wonder then that when conflicts were brewing between Chinese officials and the European merchants in Canton, the Chinese compradors, interpreters, and servants fled from the foreign ships and factories as soon as possible.\(^{35}\)

Taken together global microhistory, global material culture studies, New Institutional Economics, advances in social network analysis, spatial theory and New Cultural History’s theorization of hybridization and transculturation in contact zones provide us with a new methodological apparatus that allows us to push our analysis further than was possible for Curtin and Polanyi. With these analytical tools we are able to discern the operational structures, practices, frictions, and overlaps within and between commercial communities in the early modern world. For the period between around 1500 and 1800 presents a crucial and unique era in the history of world trade and globalisation.

The Early Modern as a period of multiple commercial cosmopolitanisms
What we term ‘commercial cosmopolitanism’ is an age-old phenomenon: next to war, trade is perhaps the oldest cross-cultural connector and it had linked Eurasia and Africa for millennia. For most of this time Europe had not played a particularly important role in early Eurasian and African trade. By the time the Europeans rounded the Cape of Good Hope in 1488, Persian and Armenian merchants had been established in China for centuries, while the commercial nodes of the Indian Ocean World and great trading cities of the Islamic empires, such as Cairo, Aleppo or Constantinople, hosted multinational, multi-ethnic and multi-faith commercial communities as a matter of course. However, the early modern period presents a step change in the history of globalisation. Driven in part by exports of New World silver, the Spanish-American silvers pesos discussed by Lane in chapter 4, this period saw an hitherto unprecedented level of global connections.

While quantifiable economic globalisation in terms of price convergence may only have occurred in the nineteenth century, the early modern period was the first in history in which all heavily-populated landmasses were connected through sustained and systematic trade, with far-reaching consequences for all involved. Following individual commodity chains reveals the interconnectedness of the early modern world. Silver and precious metals, mined in South America by enslaved peoples from West Africa, were shipped to Europe and to Asia to pay for spices, tea, and fine manufactured goods such as porcelain, cottons, and silk textiles, which in turn attracted consumers in Africa, the Americas, and Europe. However, even though it was Europeans who provided the logistics of the transcontinental trade, they did not determine its logic. Rather, this was driven by East Asian fiscal policy and the resulting demand for silver just as much as by the sophisticated preferences of African consumers. In most of the global markets on which the Europeans operated they were unable to dictate terms. What Bayly calls an age of ‘proto-globalisation’ was by no means a world of European hegemony.

Even where limited by European colonisation, subaltern agency persisted: African slaves cultivated and traded new world foods, both in the Americas and in Africa, while Asian lascars were indispensable to the functioning of European ships trading the Indian Ocean. Moreover, in most parts of Africa and Asia where Europeans sought to trade, their position remained fragile and contested. They faced difficulties inserting themselves into the regional trade networks, markets, and long-established commercial cultures in Asia and the Indian Ocean world but also in satisfying the demands of discerning consumers in East and West Africa. Whether in Africa, the Levant, or East Asia, Europeans were usually forced to abide by the terms set by the local rulers, bankers, and merchants. Just like the many other trading communities they met there, they had to develop various different cosmopolitan strategies and behaviours to be able to ply their trade. In such spaces, Europeans were just one of many groups and individuals who sought to exploit the risks and opportunities inherent in cross-cultural trade. Given this multipolar character of the early modern world, the period thus saw different types of commercial cosmopolitanism, which differed substantially from those deployed under the later regimes of European imperialist hegemony. The assumption of this hegemony was geographically and temporarily uneven. It certainly coincided with the rise of Russia and the decline of the Safavid, Mughal, and Ottoman Empires, but it was not
universally established until well into the nineteenth century – as illustrated by Jeremy Prestholdt’s chapter, a study of Zanzibar’s independent cosmopolitan commercial missions of the 1830s and 40s, which provide the end point to this volume.

If cosmopolitanism was frequently born out of vulnerability and was always an act of mediation or compromise, it ceased as soon as the willingness or ability to compromise diminished. This could be due to a rise in sectarianism, as Livesey detects in Ireland (chapter 13), but it could also be a simple question of power balance. Michael Talbot shows in chapter 12 how insufficient institutional infrastructure, the lack of consular representation, left North African merchants in a vulnerable situation in eighteenth-century European courts. Talbot’s case studies forms part of a wider trend also evident in Romaniello’s chapter: once Western Europeans attained a dominant economic, military, and colonial position, their willingness to adapt to local commercial institutions diminished drastically. As soon as European powers had the ability violently to impose their own preferred modes of exchange together with the associated legal, political, and diplomatic institutions, they did so, be that in eighteenth-century North America and Bengal, or in nineteenth-century China and Japan. The economic institutions Europeans imposed were by no means solely those of free-market exchange and production. Monopolies persisted and were sometimes even strengthened under European control, particularly in Asia. Just as the Dutch VOC had jealously controlled export and production of spices on the Moluccas, the take-over by the British East India Company in Bengal, for instance, led to sustained attempts to impose monopolistic control over textile production.

The great diversity of forms of production and exchange in the early modern period makes it impossible to apply clear labels such as ‘capitalist’, ‘free-market’, ‘administered’, ‘trade’ or ‘tribute’. Polanyi already acknowledged that the commercial centres on the Malabar coast did not fit into his model of either free-market exchange or administered Ports of Trade. In this volume Carlos and Hellman demonstrate that, thanks to the cosmopolitan commercial conventions in place, neither did Canton and Nagasaki, or the North American fur trade (chapters 1 and 8). Before the advent of Western imperial hegemony, the early modern world was a multipolar one, with a plethora of different commercial practices and institutions, which in turn engendered diverse commercial cosmopolitan strategies. Today, when debates about free trade, fair trade, protectionism, and the sustainability of capitalism are raging once again and the world is again becoming increasingly multipolar, it is vital to understand such strategies.

This Volume

Rather than providing mere narrative accounts of the various characteristics of commercial cosmopolitanism in different geographical, cultural, and political settings, the volume analyzes the operational structures, practices, frictions, and failures of commercial cosmopolitanism in the early modern world. We do not argue that there was a single discernible type of cosmopolitan strategy but instead seek to appreciate them in all their complexities. Common to all forms of commercial
cosmopolitanism, however, were two things. The first was the creative potential arising from the combination of various vernaculars. The result were new avenues for profit-making and value creation as well as new and hybrid objects, practices of consumption, production, and exchange. The second was the fundamental paradox of cosmopolitan practice: the cosmopolitan actor’s ability to bridge two or more commercial cultures afforded them a competitive edge, and those in vulnerable or subaltern positions often found adopting cosmopolitan commercial strategies an effective means to expand their margin of opportunity. At the same time, the very hybridity and institutional in-betweeness that empowered commercial cosmopolitans, also left them particularly vulnerable. The power and fragility of commercial cosmopolitanism at the same time as its – often unrealised – immense creative potential are at the heart of this book.

To explore this double aspect the contributions centre their analysis around five poles of investigation: cosmopolitan spaces, actors, objects, practices, and institutional arrangements. Drawing on recent advances in spatial history, cultural theory, global material culture studies, and microhistory, chapters in part I, ‘Cosmopolitan Spaces, Objects, and Actors’ investigate the multifaceted material objects of commerce which, symbolically and physically reappropriated, were themselves cosmopolitan. Some of these are the type of goods well-known to historians of global and intercultural trade such as textiles, ceramics, or tobacco. Some are much less obvious: North American furs, Dutch family portraits, or Chinese bibles. Finally, some objects become cosmopolitan only in their local use and combination: as Bronwen Everill demonstrates, practices of clustering certain globally-traded and locally-produced goods allowed consumers along the Upper Guinea Coast to turn their homes and bodies into sites of a distinctive commercial cosmopolitanism. Spaces can be just as cosmopolitan and hybrid as objects. The often highly contested spaces in which the multicultural commercial interactions took place have previously been theorized as frontiers, contact zones, third spaces or ‘middle grounds’ and defined as loci of hybridization and transculturation. As chapters in this section demonstrate, such spaces were characterised by the agency not only of cosmopolitan objects but also of individual actors whose subaltern status has so far eclipsed their commercial interventions: slaves, servants, concubines, prostitutes, and wives, all found strategies to leverage their intercultural and material capital.

In Part I, scholars working on early modern global trading routes and centres with multinational commercial communities thus investigate how their cosmopolitan spaces functioned, how they were policed, subverted, and exploited by the authorities, the individual actors and the objects they traded. Lisa Hellman’s chapter focusses on the enclosed but cosmopolitan commercial spaces of eighteenth-century Canton and Nagasaki, offering a multi-group comparison that evaluates the difficulties of balancing stability and profit, all the while paying close attention to the polyvalent material objects that underlay and accompanied this trade.

Similarly sensitive to the politics of space, Sven Trakulhun’s contribution analyses the role of Dutch East India Company (VOC) merchants in the vibrant cosmopolitan capital of Siam, analysing in particular the writings of the Company official, Jeremias van Vliet, which provide a unique
insight, not only into the history of early modern Thailand, but also into the various social, political and economic entanglements that shaped his life.

In chapter 3 Xing Hang investigates how Hà Tiên, located on what is now the Cambodian-Vietnamese border, came to flourish under the leadership of the Sino-Vietnamese creole Mạc Thiên Tứ in the eighteenth-century, not only as a multi-ethnic entrepôt for international trade but also as a site of cultural production and political intermediation.

Kris Lane traces the entangled story of perhaps the most cosmopolitan of all traded goods: the Spanish piece of eight. Minted in Spanish America and in peninsular Spain beginning in the late sixteenth century, the silver peso of eight reals or 'piece of eight' became a truly global currency early in the seventeenth century. However, just like any other cosmopolitan actor, cosmopolitan objects like these coins could prove untrustworthy, causing immense damage to all who relied on their intermediation. When word spread of a huge fraud in the Spanish Empire’s most important money supply, the royal mint at Potosí, modern-day Bolivia, the impact on trading networks stretching from Italy, to India and the Philippines was immediate.

Still focussing on objects of trade, on tobacco in general and cigars in particular, in chapter 5 Matthew Romaniello explores the history of a failure of what could have been a productive space of commercial cosmopolitanism. Early modern Russia had a long history of inviting foreign experts to establish commercial concerns within its borders. The tobacco workhouse set up by English traders to produce cigars in early eighteenth-century Moscow could have served as a cosmopolitan space of technological exchange between English specialists and a Russian labour force. Instead, the English government’s instructions to recall the specialists in questions and destroy all tools, reveals how easily political and diplomatic concerns could overrule commercial collaborations.

From the consumption of tobacco, grown by enslaved Africans in America and exported by English merchants to Russia, the next chapter turns to the bustling port cities of eighteenth-century West Africa, which, as Bronwen Everill argues, experienced the development of a newly Atlantic-inflected material cosmopolitanism. The region’s engagement with global trade led to the incorporation of new consumer goods, arranged in characteristic combinations, into daily formal and informal rituals.

In this section’s closing chapter Jeremy Prestholdt investigates how in the 1830s, in a time of increasing Anglo-American hegemony, one particular commercial practice – the trading voyage – and one particularly cosmopolitan commercial space and object, the Indian Ocean vessel that sailed from Zanzibar to New York in 1840, served to leverage the economic and political capital of the Sultanate of Oman and Zanzibar.
The volume’s second part, ‘Institutions, Practices, and Agents’, focusses on the underlying structures of early modern cosmopolitanism, drawing on advances in business history, New Institutional Economics, and social network analysis. Institutional and legal frameworks were crucial to the functioning of international trade. In line with recent scholarship emphasising the role of strong states in economic development, Talbot demonstrates how the lack of diplomatic back-up left North African traders in a vulnerable position vis-à-vis European courts. At the same time, cross-cultural commercial interactions could offer new opportunities for risk-takers thanks precisely to the lack of institutional control. Chapters in Part Two analyse how different types of firms, networks, and business organisations evolved to exploit legal loopholes and commercial in-between spaces in Europe, Asia, the Middle East and Africa. Commercial cosmopolitans could exploit their weak links to multiple and fragmented networks to access new markets and opportunities, bridging national and religious divides while innovating and adopting more advanced practices in the process, as Antunes et al and Livesey illustrate. Not all of these practices were crowned with success: next to inevitable principal agent problems, tensions between different legal frameworks and established cultural groupings meant that failures of cosmopolitan interactions and ideals were at least as prevalent as their success.

In chapter 8 Ann Carlos investigates the workings of the multinational trade in furs, sourced in sub-Arctic Canada and made into hats in Europe. Providing an institutional analysis of the structures used by the Hudson’s Bay Company to manage the classic agency problems of any long-distance trade, the chapter argues that the taste, preferences and demands of native actors structured the trade not merely in terms of their cultural practices but more importantly in terms of the prices received for their products. Native traders, Carlos concludes, must be seen as equal partners in this trade.

The typical principal-agent problems of cross-cultural long-distance trade are also a central concern of chapter 9. Using the example of the multinational team in charge of the first trading voyage sent out by the 1750s Prussian East India Company to Bengal, the study employs a mixture of thick description and social network analysis to investigate the specific challenges a small multi-national trading enterprise faced when operating across different legal frameworks.

The prevalence of cross-imperial networks and the necessity for European commercial agents to adapt to local political and legal frameworks are also a prevalent concern of Elisabeth Heijman’s chapter which compares the operational structures of French commercial agents on the Coromandel Coast in India and the Bight of Benin in West Africa. Both chapters 8 and 9 find that opportunistic inter-imperial collaboration between European agents abroad did not automatically entail genuine commercial cosmopolitanism.
The same cannot be said of the Dutch firm De Bruijn & Cloots operating from Lisbon that forms the subject of chapter 11 jointly authored by Catia Antunes, Susana Münch Miranda and João Paulo Salvado. The Dutch traders’ commercial cosmopolitanism, that is their ability to adapt their comparatively advanced mercantile knowledge and ways of conducting business to the workings of the Lisbon market, gave them an edge both over the Portuguese competition whose methods were less sophisticated and over their Dutch rivals who did not have the same access to Portuguese overseas colonies and markets.

The last two chapters however, tell stories of the failures of cosmopolitanism towards the end of the early modern period. Using documents from the French, British, Ottoman, and Algerian archives, Michael Talbot’s chapter charts the later eighteenth-century erosion of commercial cosmopolitanism in the Western Mediterranean. The articles of Algerian treaties, concluded between the Ottoman regencies of the Barbary coast and European powers such as Britain and France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had instated multi-layered legal and diplomatic frameworks facilitating peaceful commerce even in wartime. However, increasingly these were challenged and ignored by northern European powers intent on asserting their power in the region.

The final chapter by James Livesey investigates eighteenth-century Ireland, whose commercial elites’ cosmopolitan strategies allowed them to operate across both the Catholic Empires of France and Spain and, via representation in London-based banks, also in trade with protestant North America and the European continent. Livesey analyses how Irish elites nevertheless represented themselves as culturally divided and ultimately lost the cosmopolitan – and extremely profitable – ability to bridge different cultural spheres.

These final failures demonstrate how ‘anti-cosmopolitanism’ whether expressed as sectarianism or xenophobia, impoverishes societies: not only economically, but, by foreclosing the immense creative potential inherent in sustained peaceful transcultural interactions, also socially, culturally, and intellectually.

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6 Alison Games, The Web of Empire, p. 10.
9 For a brief overview see Peter Burke, Cultural Hybridity (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).


25 Mark S. Granovetter, ‘The Strength of Weak Ties’, *American Journal of Sociology* 78 no. 6 (1973): 1360-80


31 Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade*, p. x.


