

De tekst is een beetje uit de losse pols geschreven en lijkt soms op een journalistieke samenvatting van recente krantenkoppen (de aanslagen van 11 september 2001, de moorden op Pim Fortuyn en Theo Van Gogh, de politieke fratsen van Geert Wilders, enz., krijgen allemaal een plaats in het relaas). Gezien de taal waarin het werk verscheen, zal de niet-Nederlandse lezer quasi exclusief een Vlaming zijn; die buitenlandse lezer kan in dit werkje in beknopte vorm kennis maken met enkele essentiële feitelijke gegevens over de geschiedenis van de Nederlandse derde wereldbeweging. Zo zal hij of zij bijvoorbeeld snel te weten komen wat er schuilgaat achter de talrijke, vrij ondoorzichtige afkortingen als NOVIB, NIO, NCO, NCDO, KPA, Cossen, IKVOS en *tutti quanti*. Voor een diepgravende, echt wetenschappelijke analyse zal die lezer elders moeten aankloppen.

Guy Vanthemsche (Vrije Universiteit Brussel)

Christof Dejung, *Die Fäden des globalen Marktes. Eine Sozial- und Kulturgeschichte des Welthandels am Beispiel der Handelsfirma Gebrüder Volkart 1851-1999* (Köln etc.: Böhlau Verlag, 2013), 516 p., ISBN 978-3-412-20986-5

Over the past decade we have been witness to a growing number of studies into global commodity production and trade. These publications yield some important insights in the rather contingent relationship between empires and the global trade in colonial commodities. Merchant networks were remarkably multinational in character and some of the most important trading houses in colonial dependencies originated in countries that had no colonies themselves. Two notable examples are the Greek Ralli Brothers and the Swiss house of Volkart, which both played a dominant role in the commodity trade both from and into British India. Ralli Bros., for example, was an important link in the substantial sugar exports from Java to India in the early years of the twentieth century. While these houses benefitted from the infrastructure developed by colonial powers, their success depended upon their ability to respond to the increasingly tight conditions of the world market and their capabilities to extend their influence into the colonial hinterland. Dejung explains, for example, how the expansion of the telegraph network in India after the Great Mutiny of 1857 as well as India's rapidly growing railway network speeded up communication and transport. Better market information narrowed the margins for the trading houses and this in turn drove them to specialization. In addition, the standardization of the commodities like coffee, cotton and sugar forced firms like Volkart to tighten their control over Indian producers to ensure a stable quality of supplies.

As a study on the role of mercantile houses in global commodity trade Dejung's book is not unique, but it is exceptional for its thoroughness and clarity in describing the inner workings of a family firm that held together offices in a dozen countries and instilled its multinational crowd of employees with a filial affection to its leadership. The history of this trading house defies the Chandler thesis that family firms were doomed to disappear once the global economy advanced into the twentieth century and the PLC (Public Limited Company) became the business model. Volkart was the exception to the rule also in India, where the British firms, the so-called managing agency houses, as a rule refused to become PLCs and were hence outcompeted by better capitalized Indian business in the 1920s and 1930s.¹ In that respect British business culture in India was markedly different from that of the Dutch in the Netherlands Indies, where both plantations and banks shifted to the PLC model around 1900, and did so even in cases where the families were wealthy enough to continue their enterprise without attracting fresh capital.

A widely accepted explanation for the fact that in the realm of mercantile capitalism family enterprise proved to be more resilient than in other sectors is that these trading houses did not require long-term investments. This in contrast to industrial enterprises or commercial banks. For their short-term capital needs, Volkart relied on the shroffs, the Indian bankers, who were highly dependable (p. 69). In addition, the Dejung explains Volkart's remarkable survival as a family business up to the very end of the 20th century, by invoking the thesis of Mark Casson that in a volatile environment personal loyalties provide the best survival mechanism (p. 176). This is not to say that the family-character of the firm remained unchanged throughout its existence. Ownership stayed firmly in family hands, but by about 1900 the professionalization of management introduced men from outside the Volkart family and its Reinhart in-laws in leading positions. Meanwhile, a spatial shift of gravity took place: by the late 19th century most of Volkart's business was conducted in London and in India. This evolution towards a global player, a transnational corporation, with a management that was no longer exclusively in family hands motivated the firm to stress its Swiss identity. This was enhanced by the fact that after World War I, Volkart's leadership realised that the neutral position of Switzerland was an asset to a firm that maintained branch offices throughout Asia, the US and Europe. It adopted a corporate policy to keep Swiss nationals in the leading positions in order to preserve the firm's Swiss character. In addition, it employed discursive practices to ensure the loyalty of its Indian employees. The iconification of Salomon Volkart, the founder of the firm (p. 194) was a key element in this. The Swiss nationality of the firm made it also less vulnerable for boycotts by Indian nationalism in the 1920s and 1930s.

Dejung's book is consistently global in its approach. It perceives capitalism not as a process emanating from a European centre but as a result of an increasing

global interaction. Dejung refers to Bayly's *The Birth of the Modern World* in this respect, and he is keenly aware of entanglements. He points out, for example, how via Volkart's role in shaping banking institutions in Switzerland, colonial commodity imports could impinge positively upon the banking infrastructure in the metropolis. Here, we can draw an interesting parallel with the Dutch Trading Society (NHM), which in the course of its existence became increasingly engaged in banking activities in the Netherlands. Comparisons with the NHM may be fruitful for still another reason. Like Volkart, the NHM gradually developed into a multinational with branch offices all across Asia, in New York and Jeddah. However, an important difference is that while the NHM drastically reduced its involvement in commodity trade and shifted its activities to the financing of commodity production and trade, Volkart continued to be one of the largest cotton and coffee trading firms in the world. It was only in the final year of the twentieth century, in 1999, that Volkart was forced to surrender. The profits of its core business were squeezed by high oil prices and dwindling margins because of overproduction of cotton.

Again, the almost 500 page book is remarkably thorough but still a pleasure to read. Apart from the extensive company archive of Volkart in Winterthur a dozen additional archives in India, Britain, the US and Latin America have been consulted. Thanks to its consistently global perspective Dejung's moves far beyond the perspective of most publications about trade and empire and provides us with fresh hypotheses for the study of global commodity trade.

Ulbe Bosma (International Institute of Social History)

Note

1. A.-M. Misra, 'Business Culture' and Entrepreneurship in British India, 1860-1950', *Modern Asian Studies*, 34, 2 (2000) pp. 333-348 and here pp. 338, 348.

Lucy Bland, *Modern women on trial. Sexual transgression in the age of the flapper* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 246 p., ISBN 978-0-7190-8264-1

Dat rechtsgeschiedenis niet stoffig hoeft te zijn wordt meestal bewezen door Britse historici. De cultuurhistorica Lucy Bland is er daar een van: zij presenteert in haar nieuwste boek vijf spannende Engelse rechtszaken uit de periode 1918-1924, waarin vrouwelijke seksualiteit ter discussie stond. Sommige vrouwen werden van moord beschuldigd, zoals Edith Thompson, die samen met haar jongere minnaar haar echtgenoot uit de weg geruimd zou hebben, en Marguerite Fahmy, een Française die haar Egyptische echtgenoot dood had geschoten. Beide processen waren *causes*