Antonella Alimento and Koen Stapelbroek (eds.), *The Politics of Commercial Treaties in the Eighteenth Century. Balance of Power, Balance of Trade*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, 472 pp., ISBN: 9783319535739, € 106.00.

This collection of essays has a double programme. First, it seeks to explore the relevance, contents and perception of commercial treaties in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Secondly, it purports to bridge different approaches towards the theme and in so doing to expand the understanding of commercial treaties. The rich introduction, written by the volume's editors, provides an overview of the literature thus far and of the different perspectives from which commercial treaties have been analysed. It embeds the topic within the history of ideas (economic thought) and political history, with additional references being made to new institutional approaches. This interdisciplinary outlook yields interesting results. The paper by Moritz Isenmann highlights that the common reading of Colbert's economic policies is superficial due to a usual focus on tariffs. When considering events from the viewpoint of the economic ideas of his age, Colbert's training and background, as well as the contents of the treaties and legislation that he initiated, evoke a more nuanced picture. Isenmann convincingly argues that Colbert's approaches were not as backward as has often been thought, nor did they result in the breakdown of France's trade. In combining political history with legal history, Eric Schnakenbourg describes how in the eighteenth century attempts to establish a doctrinal common law of interpreting sections of commercial treaties dealing with wartime trade were unsuccessful.

One of the focal points of the volume is concerned with commercial treaties under the Utrecht Peace system. Several commercial treaties were signed in the aftermath of the Utrecht Treaty and they categorised France, Britain and the Dutch United Provinces as preferred nations. Papers by Ahn Doohwan on the political strife in Britain over the Treaty, and also the paper by Olga Volosyuk on the position of Russia in the Utrecht constellation, add new views to 'balance of power' arguments. One of the most interesting red threads of the volume relates to the malleability, compound nature and contextual features of 'free trade' and '*doux commerce*'. Arguments in favour of reciprocity or a balance of power could be aimed at – inevitably restricted – participation in the adversary's colonial trade. This is for example demonstrated in the paper by Virginia Léon Sanz and Niccolò Guasti, which addresses the efforts of the British to acquire access to the Spanish colonies resulting in the Treaty of Asiento. Normalisation of relations did not prevent subordination, even when both parties to a bilateral trade agreement benefited from the treaty. The

Anglo-Portuguese Methuen Treaty of 1703 is analysed along these terms by José Luis Cardoso.

Another characteristic of the papers in the book is that they are concerned with the interactions between economic and political discourses and diplomatic activities. Koen Stapelbroek's paper on the debates relating to the Treaty of Ryswick in the early eighteenth-century United Provinces, Marco Cavarzere's chapter on Prussia's negotiations with France over a commercial treaty in the middle of the 1700s, Paul Dupuy's text on the French perceptions of the 1786 Franco-British Commercial Treaty, and Marc Belissa's paper on the trade policy under the French Revolution are most exemplary in this regard. Commercial treaties and bilateralism were laden with different meanings and connotations in different periods. At times treaties were conceived of as being the backbone of peaceful commercial relations, whereas at other times more reservations were made (e.g. Adam Smith, the early physiocrats). Of course international realities resulted in the prevalence of some nations over others. As a result, enthusiasm over 'trade diplomacy' could give way to more sceptical views. This collection of essays is highly inspiring. Although a pioneering volume, it encompasses a lot of approaches and provides food for thought on a wide array of issues. It can serve as inspiration for further historical study into commercial treaties.

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