International Trade by a Commercially ‘Passive’ Participant

Although much is known about the wider political and economic developments occurring in the Austrian Netherlands during this period, and despite the broad consensus that has emerged regarding the many merits of the nation’s new trade policy, we are still left with only scarce and usually indefinite statements on the nature and the impact of its international trade. The following brief overview underlines the fact that while opinions are less overtly contradictory and distinct than in the international debate on the importance of external (often colonial) commerce, they are also much more confused and hypothetical.

Our earliest notions about eighteenth-century trade derive from authors from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries who recorded their impressions of the state of international trade; in doing so, they illustrated views from the Habsburg period itself. The historian Briavoinne noted in the 1830s that trade had prospered, but his conclusion was drawn only from population growth and the increase in customs revenue. Briavionne attributed the alleged prosperity of trade to the downfall of the Northern Netherlands’ commercial status (and that of a number of industrial competitors) and to the new and coherent customs policy. This policy of moderate Colbertism was pursued, with, however, as its main motive, the fact that customs revenue was very significant for the government. Nonetheless, it contributed to the region’s shift into a commercial nodal point within Western Europe. Merchant Nicolas Bacon, who resided in the Austrian Netherlands’ Auditor’s Office, made regular recommendations about the international trade situation. Although he believed that many measures still had to be taken – including drawing up a trade balance – he insisted that international trade constituted: “The inexhaustible source of public wealth and the strongest support of the state, [so] it

is indispensable to protect it.” Of course his statement stemmed largely from his own self-interest as a trader and was at least as much wishful thinking as actual finding. Henri Delplancq, director of the bureau de la régie, or the customs bureau, from 1765 to 1787, was far less convinced that international trade was faring well. He sought tirelessly for ways to strengthen (export) trade, principally that with the Austrian hereditary lands. The British historian James Shaw viewed the Southern Netherlands via a slightly more neutral perspective; he held that trade had experienced a revival under the Habsburgs, not least due to the country’s newly active authorities. He ascribed the rise of the port of Ostend to the nearby nations being in conflict and to the port being granted free port status in 1781; moreover, the Southern Netherlands were also able to trade via Trieste and the coasts of Africa. Although there was no shortage of conflicting opinions concerning the state of international trade in the eighteenth century, authors were invariably convinced that trade was a potentially tremendous source of wealth and prosperity and that its importance was undeniable. In this respect they differ from many of the previously mentioned present-day authors, who no longer necessarily regard trade as having been the principal cause for economic development.

Unsurprisingly, existing opinions about the impact of international trade on economic development in the Austrian Netherlands are thus more diverse in modern historiography as well. In the early twentieth century, Jules Mees claimed that although agriculture remained the main source of wealth in the Austrian Netherlands – as elsewhere in eighteenth-century Europe – the trade in processed products had already emerged as the second leading source and that it contained the germ of the Industrial Revolution. Around the same time, Lefèvre investigated the bilateral balance of trade with Spain, which he assumed to have been highly favourable (because of the huge export of linen fabrics) and thus garnered the region significant profits. Hervé Hasquin also held no doubts that international trade had played an important role in early modern development. Herman Van der Wee, one of the most prominent

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2 “La source inépuisable de l’abondance publique et par la même le plus ferme appui de l’état, il est d’une nécessité indispensable de le protéger.” NAB, FC, 4279: Letter by Nicolas Bacon, August 1st, 1754.

3 J. Pricken, La Douane Belge sous Marie-Thérèse et Joseph II (Brussels: 1964), 23. NAB, FC, 4289, 4303, 8576, 8580.

4 James Shaw, Essai sur les Pays-Bas Autrichiens (London: 1788).


6 Lefèvre and Lefèvre, Etude, 187.

7 Hasquin, Oostenrijks België.