CHAPTER 8

The Trade in Colonial Commodities

*Introducing the Exotic*

This chapter is dedicated to those goods which, for most people, come immediately to mind when discussing international trade in the eighteenth century; particularly as such goods play the leading role in international literature on the subject. Exotic commodities such as spices, coffee and tea, cocoa and richly coloured dyestuffs, originating from areas that had only recently been drawn into the European trade network, have always been popular subjects for scholarly attentions. These products had been imported in small quantities since the early seventeenth century, but soon thereafter had to satisfy the widespread desires of the masses. It is not surprising that, almost from the start, historians have wondered how this overseas trade influenced mother countries like Spain, France and Great Britain (and other areas involved in the so-called triangular trade). However, for a region like the Southern Netherlands it was always a far less expedient research topic, although even here colonial commodities play on the minds of researchers.¹ Within the aim of this volume, these goods are vital to include, particularly because they represent a case of commerce that rarely offered any viable domestic substitutes and because consumer demand for colonial products supposedly increased dramatically during the eighteenth century.²

It has regularly been argued that colonial trade was the main branch of commerce in the eighteenth century, even for the Austrian Netherlands. However, this assumed standing is likely primarily due to the prestige attached to colonial trade, since the most profitable segments of such trade were owned by foreign companies.³ Nonetheless, some of the indirect yet positive effects of the trade in colonial goods merit examination. Colonial goods may have functioned as substitutes for traditional foods and raw materials and thereby helped to mitigate ecological constraints posed by traditional agriculture. Moreover, these same commodities created new consumption needs and thus encouraged both individual merchants to increase their revenues and at the

same time local industries that offered stand-ins for the imported products. Also, the inhabitants of the Austrian Netherlands did seek to directly control their colonial trade flows in a number of ways. Much has been said about the various failed attempts to establish overseas trade companies here (such as the Ostend Company in the first half of the century, the Company of Trieste (1775–1785) or activities of the Prussian company of Emden), yet it was hardly the case that nobody from the Southern Netherlands was active in colonial commerce. Contraband was, presumably, a common and widespread means by which people participated in colonial trade. Even after abolition of the Ostend Company there remained ‘Belgian’ factories in colonial regions, despite the trade having been forbidden by neighbouring countries. Another option still open to the Southern Netherlands was financial involvement in foreign trading companies. There are indications that sufficient capital and interest in pursuing colonial trade existed in the Austrian Netherlands, and many local inhabitants indeed invested much of their fortunes in foreign trading companies. By necessity, major entrepreneurial capitals emerged in, among other places, Prussia, Denmark and Sweden. Still, since the Southern Netherlands could not risk overt direct involvement in East Indian or other colonial trades (owing to possible retributions from its neighbouring countries) merchants from the regions – faced with growing needs and demands – had to acquire the bulk of these exotic consumer goods via other European trading partners.

For these other countries the central research question usually concerned whether asymmetrical trade relations between different parts of the world would be profitable for the West. For an area with almost no direct trade with the colonies, the question was entirely different. Why did colonial trade expand in a region where political barriers were certainly not diminishing, unlike in Britain, for example? Did the administration of the Austrian Netherlands endeavour to stop or at least restrict the increasing imports of colonial goods? Did supply indeed grow and prices drop, as they did elsewhere? And what were the consequences of all this for what was in fact a rather passive receiver? The arrival of new commodities onto the European market – including cane sugar from the Caribbean and the Spanish and French Americas, coffee from the

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4 References are found in: Houtman-De Smedt, “Charles Proli,” 137.
5 In particular Great Britain and the Dutch Republic. Coppejans-Desmedt, “Economische Opbloei,” 273, Houtman-De Smedt, “Charles Proli,” 136. NAB, FC, 4381, Compagnie impériale des Indes, 1739–1768, questions from widow Merat about the payments to her son who is working on a trading post, also many documents on the importance of setting up a trading company for the Austrian Netherlands (s.n., s.d.) 1764.
7 O’Rourke and Williamson, “After Columbus.”