CHAPTER FOUR

PRODUCTIVITY IN ENGLISH ATLANTIC SHIPPING IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY: EVIDENCE FROM THE NAVIGATION ACTS

Nuala Zahedieh

In the half century after the passage of the Navigation Act in 1651, England pushed back its American frontier with a speed and success which was unique among northern European nations. Furthermore, figures for increases in overseas trade and shipping show that England was able to capture a large part of the benefit of this extensive growth. The success is commonly attributed to the Navigation Acts ‘without which we had not been owners of half of the shipping, nor trade, nor employed half of the seamen which we do at present’ but, despite such claims, it remains uncertain whether the legislation was, in fact, sufficient or even necessary to explain England’s commercial success in the late seventeenth century. Rather than demonstrating the efficacy of protectionist policies, the high levels of compliance with the legislation might be better seen as evidence of improved efficiency in England’s shipping services and this, in turn, raises questions about the sources of the rise in productivity.

Between 1651 and 1700, England massively increased its New World stake and more than trebled its area of settlement, population and output. By 1700, England with a population of five million had a further 400,000 or so subjects in its 17 American colonies and had secured a valuable addition to its domestic resources. France, with a population of 20 million had around 70,000 subjects in eight colonies, and the Dutch Republic had fewer than 20,000 in its three American colonies. England’s expansionary surge allowed it to construct an empire with a strategic edge over those of its rivals. The long, continuous strip of settlement along the eastern seaboard gave most colonists easy access to cheap sea transport and promoted inter regional trade,

---

and specialization within the empire, as well as providing a string of well positioned bases for defence and plunder.\(^3\)

While England made a major investment in planting New World lands, the statistics available for trade and shipping show that it was able to capture a large part of the gains. There are no continuous statistics for national trade in the period between 1651 and 1696 but figures for London, which accounted for three quarters of the country’s overseas commerce, show that whereas overall trade increased by a mere third between the 1660s and 1700, the value of plantation trade more than doubled with sugar and tobacco accounting for over three quarters of the value of imports at both dates (Table 4–1).\(^4\)

In the same period, Ralph Davis has estimated that England’s overseas trading tonnage increased from around 126,000 to 190,000 with the plantation trade increasing its share from 24 per cent to 37 per cent of the total and acting as the main engine of growth (Table 4–2).\(^5\) Although colonial commerce accounted for only around a fifth of the value of London’s overseas trade in 1700, and around a fifth of the volume, the long distances involved meant that it made much heavier demands on shipping than these proportions suggest.\(^6\) Whereas one ship of 130 tons might make eight round trips to France in a year and import 1,000 tons of wine in that period, it would take three ships to import the same volume of timber from the Baltic, and eight or more to import the same volume of sugar or tobacco from America. As Davis warned, ‘a deliberate effort’ must be made to remember distance when calculating the size of the merchant fleet as distinct from the volume of

\(^{3}\) Zahedieh, ‘Economy,’ 51–68.
\(^{4}\) Davis, ‘English foreign trade, 1660–1700,’ 150–166.
\(^{5}\) Davis, *The Rise of the English Shipping Industry*, 17, 175.
\(^{6}\) Davenant, *Discourses on the Public Revenues*, 356.