

Going the Distance: Eurasian Trade and the Rise of the Business Corporation, 1400-1700. Ron Harris. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. 488 pp. \$48. Hardcover ISBN: 9780691150772.

Ron Harris, a professor of legal history, has undertaken the task of explaining how, why, and where the business corporation became a viable entity. He posits that during the period between 1400 and 1700, Western European business transactions migrated away from the family firm and close partnership to the business corporation. This shift, one he deems an “organizational revolution,” led to transactions characterized by their impersonal nature and unbound by interference from governments. Safe from defilement by the unscrupulous manager as well, these corporations, Harris claims, overcame the challenges of Eurasian trade by adopting what he identifies as seven core characteristics, among them joint-stock equity finance and protection from expropriation by the state.

Presented chronologically while utilizing specific themes and examples throughout, Harris’s impressive bibliography boasts over four hundred sources from numerous provenances. The narrative is easy to follow and does support Harris’s notion that the business corporation did constitute a revolution.

Despite its ease of read and array of sources, when analyzed as a history, Harris’s book is found wanting. Immediately problematic is the claim the business corporation was not an organizational form that migrated to and transplanted in other regions. In fact, Harris boldly asserts that this mode of conducting business was not adopted elsewhere in the world for at least three hundred years after it emerged in specific locales in Western Europe. What Harris does not address is why this phenomenon remained the property of a sliver of Western Europe exclusively. World historians have for decades noted that European nations were unwilling to share technological advancements outside their borders; could this be true of the means and ways for establishing business corporations as well? In addition, Harris ignores other important factors that assisted the business corporation, including the application and adaptation of technology gleaned from Asia and the Arab diaspora, an example of which is the development of the Caravel, a ship capable of sailing both quickly and multidirectionally due to its combination of Arab and Chinese style sails. Other questions regarding the availability of startup capital and why governments supported the proliferation of the business corporation are also unsatisfactorily answered. In the end, Harris’s conclusions about the nascent business corporation of the seventeenth century leave a bevy of unanswered questions despite the number of sources consulted.

With regard to the sources, Harris claims that the ship logs, invoices, customs records, and port dockets, and others “rarely reveal enough about the organization of trade,” and give the appearance of European bias. To counteract this bias, additional sources such as “Egyptian papyri...contracts from caves in West China...and wills from a German family archive” have been included. The sheer number of sources notwithstanding, Harris is unsuccessful in challenging European bias because instead of using these sources in a meaningful way to confront Eurocentrism, they are used to support the argument that doing business in this way remained an exclusively European one for several hundred years after its appearance.

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of Harris’s book is this continued denial of a Eurocentric bias. In his introduction, Harris claims that the book is not Eurocentric because it “does not use

Europe as a yardstick” to measure how other regions organized long distance trade, and because “it surveys and analyzes trade organizations and their evolution, function, and effect...as a whole.” Harris seems unaware that, by touting the Western European business corporation as a business revolution while largely ignoring the impact these organizations had on other regions of the world by withholding technological advances, disallowing non-European investment, and most importantly by using colonization and enslavement as a means to guarantee investors an income stream, he is indeed exhibiting Eurocentrism as well as upholding the idea of European primacy and all that entails.

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