

# Editor's note – economic history cluster

William G. Clarence-Smith

Unlike some 'clusters' that have appeared in past issues of the *Journal of Global History*, the coming together of this set of articles is serendipitous. The overarching theme of economic history did not emerge from a conference or panel, or through a deliberate desire by a group of authors to make a joint contribution, but rather through the coincidental submission of a number of articles at roughly the same time. Nevertheless, some common preoccupations and themes run through these texts.

All our authors exhibit a strong interest in how states affect economic outcomes. Madeline Woker, in her article on Edwin Seligman's role in the spread of progressive income tax in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, shows how the reform of taxation was preached, in part, as a means to achieve economic development, as well as greater social equality. Woker's piece focuses squarely on the notion of political economy, and on the way in which academic theories can affect policies adopted by states, including those in the Global South. Valeria Giacomini, in her analysis of cooperation and competition between 'clusters' of producers of palm oil in western Africa and Southeast Asia in the twentieth century, weighs up the shifting significance of governments within 'communities of practice', as compared to scientific and other 'experts', multinational corporations, and smallholders. A tendency for a breakdown in the functioning of states was a significant factor in explaining the deteriorating performance of certain economies, whether Indonesia in the 1950s or parts of Africa in the 1960s. Gregory Ferguson-Cradler, in his article on crises in three widely separated fisheries after 1945, concentrating on different species, explores allegations of state failure. This was said to be manifest in an inability to prevent sudden and dramatic falls in numbers of fish. The extension of state sovereignty over the oceans, which resulted in part from these crises, relates to a wider debate about the 'tragedy of the commons', even if Ferguson-Cradler does not employ this specific expression.

More problematic, in terms of the role of the state, is the proposition that official backing for colonialism and slavery played a central role in the growth of Western economies. Klas Rönnbäck puts this forward in his consideration of the impact of the slave complex on Britain's eighteenth-century economy, although he admits that there have been strong challenges to this approach, notably in terms of the multiple inefficiencies of slavery as a system of labour. In their analysis of Britain's nineteenth-century economy, Dimitrios Theodoridis, Paul Warde, and Astrid Kander state this function of colonialism and slavery as a given in their conclusion, although it is unclear how it actually contributes to their analysis, which works in a context of free trade and free labour. Both of these articles are overtly about Britain, and yet their

implications go far beyond this one national economy, in view of Britain's stellar role in the world economy at this time. At the same time, they both raise difficult questions for global historians as to how representative Britain might have been of a wider European or Western economy.

These latter two contributions directly address the hotly debated question of the 'Great Divergence', albeit essentially from the point of view of the West rather than that of the Rest. Rönnbäck estimates that the slave complex came to generate about 11% of Britain's GDP, although he recognizes that there are still many gaps in the evidence, some of which are more serious than others. Moreover, he admits that Britain was in no way typical of Europe as a whole, for which this percentage would have been considerably smaller. Theodoridis, Warde, and Kander concentrate on Kenneth Pomeranz's famous argument about coal and colonies giving the edge to Britain. Recalculating existing figures in terms of 'land embodied in traded commodities', they argue that, whereas Pomeranz tended to favour colonies and cotton, the focus should rather be on coal and wool, with potash as an atypical and temporary anomaly. Neither of these contributions directly addresses alternative views of the origins of the Great Divergence, such as the impact of the Scientific Revolution, or the productivity of free labour.

Questions of commodity history are central to Giacomini's analysis, including the vexed issue of the relative efficiency of estates and smallholdings in the production of crops. Ferguson-Cradler examines how the structure of fishing economies affected the booms and slumps that typified this commodity. Products such as sugar and tobacco loom large in Rönnbäck's consideration of the impact of the slave complex on Britain's eighteenth-century economy. In the case of cotton, he queries Sven Beckert's influential proposition that large slave-worked estates in the Americas had an advantage over Middle Eastern and Asian smallholders. In their analysis of Britain's nineteenth-century economy, Theodoridis, Warde, and Kander give starring roles to coal, potash, cotton, and wool, with a particular emphasis on their inherent qualities.

Ecological concerns flow naturally from a concern with commodities, and they are especially prominent in Ferguson-Cradler's probing of contested perceptions of 'collapse' in fish stocks. Questions about the natural suitability of areas for growing oil palms enter into Giacomini's account, coupled with human interventions to alter natural conditions. Ecological specialization for international commerce plays a part in Rönnbäck's examination of the 'Triangular Trade', as it also does in the contribution by Theodoridis, Warde, and Kander, who further stress the uneven availability of forests to make potash.

All these topics will continue to be debated, hopefully in part in the form of future articles submitted to the *Journal of Global History*. Examinations of the state and political economy feature prominently in rolling back the ahistorical and market-driven views of neoclassical economics. Consensus still eludes historians searching for the roots of the Great Divergence, and the place of colonialism and slavery in this process is a particularly emotionally charged aspect of this debate. Commodity history lends itself naturally to global treatment, in terms of both comparisons and the links established along a *filière*. Ecological phenomena famously know no frontiers, and are thus another natural concern of global historians.