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Geography, Early Modern Colonialism and Central Europe's Atlantic Trade

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Only during the last decade or so has Germany been considered more systematically as a factor in European Expansion from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century. The effects of the Price Revolution – a decline in wages and prices stretching from the Iberian Peninsula to Central and Eastern Europe – favoured the growth of labour-intensive cottage industries, largely in the textile sector. Central Europe's geographic features – reliable precipitation supports forestry and feeds rivers, providing hydro-energy for machines and transport lanes from hinterlands to maritime ports – favoured energy-intensive production of steel-, brass- and glass-ware, all destined for colonial markets and for the barter trade against slaves from the West African coast. Early on, these commodity flows and commercial networks had integrated German territories into the colonial empires of the Western sea powers, laying the groundwork for the colonial adventures of the Wilhelmine Empire.

Introduction

After this Introduction, the second part of this article attempts to recall the close entanglements of Central European regions with the process of European Expansion into the Atlantic world. These points have already been addressed by some German and Polish economic historians living in the twentieth century, but have largely been overlooked since the change to focusing on social history, which occurred (in particular in Western Germany) roughly from the late 1960s to the 1980s. Only recently have the links between the continental hinterlands and the world overseas attracted fresh scholarly interest.[1] The third part of the article will hint at the geographical conditions that favoured the integration of the Holy Roman Empire – or rather of its proto-industrial regions – into the colonial economies of the Western sea powers.[2]

From the perspective of European maritime trade, which developed considerably with the European Expansion into the Western Hemisphere, Central Europe – roughly understood as the territories of the Holy Roman Empire – appears as a rather peripheral region. The process of expansion was driven essentially by the sea powers of Portugal and Spain, and accelerated when the Netherlands, Britain and France also intruded into the Atlantic world. From the seventeenth century, with the creation of East India Companies in Britain, the Dutch Republic, France, and even in smaller countries such as Denmark and Sweden, the hitherto modest commodity flow from Asia also expanded significantly. Nonetheless, the Atlantic basin – with highly lucrative plantation colonies in and around the Caribbean Sea, in Brazil and in British North America, with silver and gold mining on an unprecedented scale in Mexico, Peru and Brazil, and with a large reservoir of workforce available on the coasts of Western and Central Western Africa – continued to be a motor of economic growth for Europe. François Crouzet's dictum that 'the eighteenth century can truly be called the Atlantic stage of European economic development' is probably imprecise in making this claim for the entire continent, but it is certainly correct for a range of specific regions.[3]

Central Europe's Economic Links with the Atlantic World

If the possession of overseas colonies, the maintenance of commercial and armed fleets for transatlantic shipping, and active participation in the transatlantic slave trade were the essential indicators of integration into the Atlantic economy, then German-speaking lands had indeed been widely excluded from this economy. Even if commodities from Central Europe were in demand in Western Europe and beyond, German traders were unable to control their distribution – such is the notion that is still prevalent. Charles Kindleberger (to provide but one example) claimed that, 'apart from those in its cities of Hamburg, Lübeck and Cologne, the Germany of the Holy Roman Empire lacked effective merchants for the marketing of Rhenish cloth, Silesian linens, and East Prussian grain and timber.' Kindleberger explained these shortcomings as being a result of the devastating effects of the Thirty Years War, and he also claimed that the financial sector within the Empire was underdeveloped far into the nineteenth century.[4]

This perception has been contested for more than a decade. Recent case studies on Western Europe's major seaports have shown that significant communities of German merchants were present in all these places, in particular from the second half of the seventeenth century to the end of the period of the Atlantic Revolutions – lasting from the American War of Independence through the French and the Haitian Revolutions to the independence of the Republics in the Spanish Americas. Between 1660 and 1830, London, Bordeaux and Cadiz alone hosted approximately 1000 merchants from German lands. Contrary to Kindleberger's assessment, the majority of them did not come from the Hanseatic cities, but from the predominantly rural hinterlands that produced the export commodities they would redistribute to Western European and transatlantic markets.[5] A closer look at the very beginnings of the Iberian Expansion into the Atlantic reveals that such entanglements date back to the sixteenth, and even to the fifteenth, century. The Ravensburger Handelsgesellschaft – created in the Swabian city of Ravensburg in 1380 for the export of regionally produced linen fabrics – purchased a sugar plantation near Valencia in the 1420s and

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added to it a sugar mill. The company gave it up around 1470, when sugar from the Canary Islands – which had just then come under firm Spanish control – began to pour in at more competitive prices. From 1503, consequently, the entrepreneurs of the Welser dynasty invested in sugar production on Tenerife and La Palma. During the 1520s, the Welser acquired an Asiento contract for providing Hispaniola with 4000 African slaves, and this contract was carried out using Portuguese ships. From around 1530, when plantations in the New World outperformed the Canary Islands' plantations, the focus of their sugar business also shifted to the Caribbean island of Hispaniola. The Fugger dynasty, whose agents were present in Lisbon from 1504 and in Seville from the 1520s, became involved with sugar production in Brazil from about 1530. Both the Welser and the Fugger families had made their way up the social ladder in fifteenth-century Augsburg, one of the centres of Upper Germany's textile regions. With local linen and with cotton imported via Venice and Genoa, this region had been one of the cradles of Europe's early cotton industry.[6] Renaissance capitalists such as Fugger and Welser also became banking magnates and contributed to the rise of Augsburg, to its becoming Germany's financial capital. It was superseded by Frankfurt am Main only after the Thirty Years War. The Fugger and Welser families wielded enough financial power to finance Charles V's election as Emperor (1519), and his colonial project in Venezuela, with its 1529 settlements being named Neu-Augsburg and Neu-Nürnberg (today Maracaibo). In their turn, they were granted the lease of the estates of Spain's knightly orders of Santiago, Alcántara and Calatrava, and of the highly profitable mines of Almadén. This Andalusian mine produced the mercury needed in increasing quantities for extracting the silver from the rich ores dug up in Mexico and Peru. The Fugger, who also held the lease on the major Central European copper mines, and other German merchant-industrialists were channelling huge quantities of copper and brassware into the Portuguese trade with Africa. Orders comprised tens and even hundreds of thousands of items: bangles, necklaces, brass basins, cauldrons, saucepans and massive sheets of copper, to be bartered against gold, pepper, dyestuffs, and slaves.[7]

It is true that Augsburg and its dynasties went into decline with the subsequent bankruptcies of the Spanish monarchy, and with the Thirty Years War. Yet, this is only another indicator of the close entanglements between the Iberian Atlantic and Germany's sixteenth-century sector of export manufacturing, then still concentrated in the Imperial Cities of Southern Germany. From the 1620s, capital from Germany flowed increasingly into the new joint stock companies, which were created in the Netherlands and in England in order to penetrate the monopoly that Spain claimed over all the Americas. The Duke of Württemberg alone invested 30,000 fl. into the Dutch West India Company (WIC), while the Augsburg banker, Marx von Rehlingen, invested a total of 66,000 fl. into the WIC and into the Dutch East India Company. The wars of the following decades caused a significant slump both in such investments and in maritime trade in general, and when Europe recovered, it was the Rhenish regions, Westphalia, Saxony, and provinces as far east as Bohemia and Silesia, that came to the fore as producers of export commodities: linen, metal-ware (iron, steel, brass), glassware, etc. The roles of Hamburg as the Holy Roman Empire's major seaport, and that of Frankfurt as its principal banking city were established. Most of the Imperial Cities in the south were shrinking in size, and older trading routes via the Alps and Genoa were neglected. During the eighteenth century, German involvement with the Atlantic economy became even closer than before the Thirty Years War. Given the process of pacification, which began with the Treaty of Madrid (1670) and was reinforced with the end of the Spanish War of Succession (1714/15), shipping became safer, causing a decline in maritime insurance rates and other transaction costs, and thus encouraging more (and smaller) players to get involved in long-distance trade. This was the period in which the above-mentioned German merchant communities in Western European seaports expanded, and with them expanded the volume of German-made products distributed in the wider Atlantic world.

Within this assortment of goods, linen textiles came first. Comfortable to wear in hot climates, and with its fibres four times sturdier than those of cotton fabrics, the coarser German linens became the standard workwear for slaves and indentured servants all over the New World. The better qualities – softened and bleached – were in demand for shirts, bedding, table cloths, etc. On African coasts, linen from Central Europe contributed to the enormous mass of textiles bartered for slaves, along with fustians and woollens, and Asian and European-made cottons, silk, etc. Throughout the five centuries of the Atlantic slave trade, textiles made up about 50% of all the commodities sent to Africa. A variety of eighteenth-century sources from England and from France reveal that more than half of the cargo of many slave ships leaving Europe consisted of German-made goods, mostly linen.[8] The volume of Silesian linen shipped by the Company of Royal Adventurers of England Trading with Africa, oscillating between 1500 and 5000 pieces p.a. during the 1680s, increased steadily during the following decades, reaching 17,000, 22,000 and 30,000 pieces in 1721, 1722 and 1723, respectively. The total amount of linen from Central Europe distributed on Atlantic markets in the early eighteenth century equalled several million metres annually.[9] It is difficult to establish the total share of these fabrics in the commodity flow going to Africa, but it certainly kept pace with the boisterous growth of the slave trade during these decades. Behind this commodity flow there were countless workers producing the goods, and smaller and larger entrepreneurs orchestrating production and distribution.

Heinrich Carl von Schimmelmann (1724-1782) is the only more widely known player in this field. He made his way from being a Prussian military purveyor and financial advisor to the Danish crown to becoming the owner of plantations on Danish Caribbean islands, a slave trader and manufacturer of guns, textiles and alcohol for barter operations, as well as obtaining a noble title and the landed estates to go with it. But there were in fact many Schimmelmanns. The Harmensen family from Hamburg, established in Bordeaux since 1708 and maintaining ties with Saxon cotton manufacturers, acquired a plantation on Saint-Domingue and a Polish noble title. By the mid-eighteenth century the Münch family, merchant bankers from Augsburg, held a number of plantations in Georgia. Johann Jakob von Bethmann (1717–1792), whose brothers ranked among Frankfurt's leading merchant bankers, settled in Bordeaux in 1740 to make a fortune in shipping between this port and the French Antilles, and to serve as consul to the Emperor. The largest slave trading company in Bordeaux at the eve of the Revolution was Romberg, Bapst & Cie, created by Friedrich von Romberg (1729–1819), an entrepreneur from the iron-manufacturing town of Iserlohn in the Rhineland. In scope, his commercial empire resembled that of Schimmelmann. It included cotton manufacturers in Brussels, a slave trading company in Ghent, a maritime insurance company in Bruges, and a linen bleaching plant near Iserlohn. His slaving company in Bordeaux also held plantations on Saint-Domingue, mostly producing the textile dyestuff indigo. Both Johann Jakob von Bethmann and Friedrich von Romberg received the title of Knight of the Empire ('Reichsritter') from Emperor Joseph II. Romberg's bankruptcy during the Haitian Revolution sent shockwaves through Europe's financial world, and the losses (amounting to a total of 34 million Livres tournois) also affected the Bethmann bank. Close links between Central European linen production, Atlantic trade and the financial sector are also evident among the Germans settled in eighteenth-century London. They are typified in the Baring brothers from the Hanseatic City of Bremen (a major outlet for linen), and in the Schröders from Westphalia. Both families made their way into the small group of leading merchant bankers in the City of London. During the 1750s, the Barings figured among the shareholders of the Company of Merchants Trading to Africa, and well into the nineteenth century bankers and Members of Parliament from their family figured among the pro-slavery lobbyists. Bernhard Heinrich Schröder arrived in London only in the late eighteenth century. Jointly with family partners from the following generation, he created sugar refineries in London, Hamburg and St Petersburg, and maintained intense commercial relations with Cuba. Quakenbrück, the Schröders' place of origin, is situated in the bishopric of Osnabrück, the core of the Westphalian linen region. Merchants from this region were also prominent in eighteenth-century Cádiz. The most successful among them were the Ellermanns, originating from a village near Osnabrück, and present in Spain since the 1720s. Their business partner, Johann Jakob Schlieper from Alsace, created familial and financial ties with Prudencio Delaville from Nantes, one of the founders of the Compañia Gaditana de Negros, created in Cádiz in 1765 as part of the (largely futile) effort to expand Spain's hitherto meagre share in the slave trade. Next to Hamburg, with around 80 merchants, the single biggest region of origin for the Germans established in Cádiz was Bohemia, with almost 50 merchants. Bohemians traded not only in glassware produced by their family members in the mountain villages of their origin, but also in linen and metal-ware produced in Bohemia and elsewhere. Despite the restrictions on foreign trade in Spanish colonies, they opened branches in Lima in 1784 and in Mexico City in 1787.[2]

It is surprising that all these far-flung personal networks of German export trade have hardly been mentioned in the studies written (mostly by German scholars) on the very proto-industries that produced the export commodities. The seminal books on this rural mode of commodity production focused mostly on the internal structures of the cottage industries, concentrated in Swabia, Westphalia, Lusatia (in Saxony), Silesia, Bohemia and other provinces. These works dealt with the impact of the growing sector on demography, nutrition, family structure, distribution of wealth and property among the villagers, and their (in)dependence with regard to the entrepreneurs ('Verleger'), who organized the supply of the workers with raw material and the marketing of the finished products – but they did not deal with the distant markets as such, and they did not consider the geography of the very provinces where proto-industries thrived.[10] One of the causes for such neglect probably lies in the contamination of the concept of space (or rather 'Raum', in the German context) with national romanticist and then with national socialist ideology.[11] The post-war generation of German historians preferred to focus on local socio-economic aspects.[2] The following paragraphs (as much as the previous ones) are building on the works of these historians, but intend to combine these works with a fresh look at geography.

Geographical Preconditions

It fits into the picture that it was the Czech-born social and political scientist Karl Deutsch who alluded to an interconnection between the peculiarities of geography and socio-economic development in Europe, with an emphasis on 'rich territorial articulation', 'water supply' and 'woods and metals', and on a 'wood-charcoal-metals complex'.[12] Geography is crucial to the understanding of proto-industrial modes of production in particular, because in this pre-steam world, both the operation of advanced machinery and the transport of bulk commodities depended on rivers and streams, which ideally maintained a satisfactory water level all year round. Furthermore, all energy-intensive sectors of production – metal and glass in particular – in this pre-coal world depended on extensive forests, which had to be exploited in a sustainable way, making them a resource for the continuous production of timber and charcoal. The climate and geography of Central Europe meet these conditions probably better than any other region in the world. Deutsch's claim shall be substantiated with regard to the larger rivers as waterways for transport, and with regard to the mountainous regions with their vast forests and fast- flowing streams.

The hydro-geography of the continent offers most favourable conditions for transportation using water routes: Central Europe's dominant mountain ranges all stretch along an east–west axis, and they are all situated in the continent's more southern regions: the Alps, the Erzgebirge (the 'Ore Mountains' on the Saxon-Bohemian border), and the Carpathians. All the rain that falls north of this watershed washes through the vast plains stretching from there to the coasts of the North Sea and the Baltic Sea, forming large and mostly navigable rivers: Maas, Rhine, Weser, Elbe, Oder, Vistula, Daugava (or Western Dvina) and Neman (or Memel). Even the Massif Central in the South East of France might fit into this pattern, sending the waters of the Seine, Loire, Dordogne and Lot to the shores of the Atlantic. These French rivers were navigable, at least on their lower tracts. Central Europe and much of France are further endowed with precipitation that is spread more evenly over the year than in Southern Europe, where heat and lack of rain turns many rivers into small streams during summer. Spain and much of South-eastern Europe is, on top of that, criss-crossed with mountain ridges that render the waterways unnavigable. There are longer and mightier rivers in the world than the Rhine and Vistula: the Mississippi and the Amazon, the Niger, the Congo and the Yangtze, but the vast territory each of these rivers and their tributaries cover is provided with one single estuary. None of these can cover coastal regions with port city topographies in the same even way as do the rivers of Central Europe, and therefore they do not provide the same opportunities for transport and trade. The geography of Central Europe provided its coasts with significant estuaries every 200 or 300 kilometres or even less, lined up from the Channel to the Baltic. This encouraged medieval Hanseatic and Dutch merchants to integrate the North Sea and the Baltic regions into one 'économie monde' (speaking in Fernand Braudel's terms). Jointly with the Teutonic Order, and benefiting from the Prussian Crusade of the thirteenth century, they developed an agricultural economy of scale in the lands east of the Elbe River, producing grain for export into the already urbanizing regions of Western Europe. Hanseatic Cities were created not only on the estuaries (Bremen, Hamburg, Lubeck, Gdańsk, Riga, etc.) but also upstream: Magdeburg on the River Elbe, Breslau (Wrocław) and Frankfurt an der Oder, Toruń and Kulm (Chełmno) on the Vistula, etc. It is true that valuable commodities (e.g. linen) were preferably sent via land routes even in pre-modern times, but for bulk commodities (grain, timber, canvas, and so on) waterways were the only economically viable transport routes from hinterlands to the sea. Most nodal points of commerce evolved where such bulk and staple goods were handled: at sea and river ports.

Dependable rainfall not only made sure that inland waterways could be used throughout most of the year, but also secured an environment favourable to a sylviculture, which was shaped to supply industry and building sectors. In Central Europe, deforestation had never become as devastating as in the Mediterranean world, Britain and Ireland. Ample forests, with their capacity to store excess rainfall, helped to tame streams that would have otherwise been too violent in winter and spring, and probably too weak in summer, to drive mills. At the same time, they provided the timber needed for mines and machinery, for shipbuilding – and for producing charcoal for all sorts of furnaces. The authorities saw to it that these natural resources were not exhausted. From at least the fifteenth century, countless regulations for the rational exploitation of forests were issued, in particular in mining regions. The term 'sustainability' ('Nachhaltigkeit') was in fact coined by the forestry and metallurgy expert Hans Carl von Carlowitz (1645–1714) in his *Sylvicultura oeconomica*, first published in 1713. Carlowitz was the head of the Saxon forest administration in the Erzgebirge, then one of Europe's leading mining regions.

Reliable precipitation not only made the trees grow, but it also secured the provision of hydraulic energy. On hundreds of larger and smaller streams and rivers, watermills were driving headgear and pumps for mines, bellows and hammers for steel mills, sawmills, and other early modern machinery. Mountainous landscapes made sure that downward slopes provided sufficient drive. Detailed descriptions and pictorial representations of such machinery were provided by the Saxon mining

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expert Georgius Agricola (1494–1555) in his book *De re metallica libri XII*, first published in 1556 and immediately translated into many languages.

These were the indispensable natural conditions for pre-industrial commodity production within the energy-intensive sectors. But even the most favourable geographic and climatic conditions alone will not motivate commerce and trade. These will only thrive if raw material, labour, products or services available in one region are lacking in another, or if they are more expensive there. A driving factor for all the mercantile activities described here was the decline in wages (measured in silver or gold) from areas that are well-provided with precious metals (e.g. West Africa and Spanish America) to areas that were less well-endowed with natural resources (Central and Eastern Europe, Asia). The less well-endowed regions always tend to attract labour-intensive trades, of which textile production is the ideal example (even today). Profits from this trade can be maximized if the product is sold where the highest prices (measured in silver or gold) may be obtained, which tended to be in the Western hemisphere. This explains the long continuity of textile production in Central Europe, and of its export to markets further west. It also explains the early integration of Upper Germany into the 'économie monde' of the medieval Mediterranean world. Gold from Africa and relatively low wages north of the Alps made even transalpine trade a lucrative business. With the expansion into the Atlantic, this European 'économie monde', which had already integrated the North Sea and the Baltic regions, also swallowed up West Africa and the Americas. After the Spanish conquest of Mexico and Peru, American silver increased inflation in the Iberian world, as described by Earl Hamilton in his classic study on *American Treasure and the Price Revolution in Spain, 1501–1650* (1934). It also increased the attractiveness of Central Europe as a location for labour-intensive industry. These macro-economic conditions – the uneven spread of ore deposits over the globe, the hydrography of certain world regions, etc. – help to explain the success of all the above-mentioned German merchants in Western European port cities. The impact on specific proto-industrial regions was significant, and contemporaries were well aware of it. By the end of the eighteenth century, the exports of manufactures per capita were at 11 Taler in the Rhenish iron-manufacturing Duchy of Berg and at 10 Taler in the Westphalian linen-producing County of Ravensberg (not to be confused with Ravensburg in Swabia). The former was an exclave of Bavaria, the latter an exclave of Prussia. In Bohemia and Saxony, the rate per capita was at 2 and 3 Taler, respectively. In the poorer developed Bavarian and Prussian core lands it was at 0.25 and 0.2 Taler, and in some regions even lower. All these regions exported predominantly to the Western hemisphere, as here exemplified by Silesia, which sent 75% of linen exports to the ports of the Western sea powers, or even directly to the Americas. Hessian economists boasted that their linen trade was the 'Hessian Peru and West India', the 'major canal through which gold and silver is flowing into our coffers',[13] and in 1776 Frederick II claimed that the Silesian linen trade was the 'Peru' of his kingdom.[14] In Silesia the Spanish silver peso was so much in use among merchants that they even considered making it an official currency.[15]

Conclusions

The powerful grip of nature on economic decision making (or the power of factor endowments, to put it in more scholarly phrasing) only slackened with the introduction of coal in metallurgy, and with the Transport Revolution. Railways and steamboats allowed for the transport of coal and other bulk commodities to urban conglomerations, where labour was more readily available than in mountain regions. Glassworks could now be set up, for example, in England or the Netherlands, where a lack of solid fuel had not allowed this before. Metal industries (and others) could now be concentrated in ever larger plants outside the narrow valleys so typical of the pre-industrial world, while many of the smaller sites of production had to be given up because they would not fit into the economies of scale now emerging. Having access to the railroad or not became a matter of survival for many locations. For the smaller sites (e.g. metallurgy in the Eiffel region) it was more probable that they would not benefit from the 'annihilation of space' that came about with the Industrial Revolution and the Transport Revolution.

These revolutions released social and economic energies which contributed to Germany's National Revolution: the creation of a nation state by the Prussian chancellor Otto von Bismarck in 1871. Only then did Germany establish its own (albeit very short-lived) colonial empire overseas, a substantial merchant fleet and a powerful navy, thus fuelling imperial rivalry among the European nations, and ultimately contributing to the outbreak of the First World War. In retrospect, the earlier approach of German export manufacturing to maritime trade seems to have been much wiser, introducing products into existing empires, without making much fuss about it – and externalizing the cost of maintaining these empires and markets. Nonetheless, there are structural and even personal continuities reaching from the pre-modern to the modern nation-based system of maritime trade from the European hinterlands. These are worth exploring in order to put Germany's colonial empire into a wider, Central European context of space and time.[16]

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