

Early modern traders circumvented rules of states and companies

June 9 2017



Dutch merchant with slaves, anonymous, 1700-1725, oil on canvas. Credit: Rijksmuseum

Individual traders should be at the forefront of the study of early modern world trade rather than institutions such as states and companies, argues Professor of Global Economic Networks Cátia Antunes. Inaugural lecture on 9 June.

Flourishing illegal trade

Antunes warns against the common but one-sided assumption that European sovereigns and trading companies dictated the terms of the

transatlantic slave [trade](#) in the early modern period. She claims that you miss a lot if you study history from the perspective of states, principalities or companies. These powerful institutions imposed many rules, but individual merchants and even the staff of the companies were often able to circumvent them. This led to a flourishing illegal global trade that cannot be found in the books of these institutions.

Zoom out to study history

Antunes takes a helicopter view in her study of global trade in the early modern period. This enables her to uncover complex global commodity chains. In one example, European traders purchased textiles in India and used them to buy African slaves. They paid for the textiles with silver that they purchased in Japan or Latin America, where the African slaves were put to work in the silver mines. 'If you only look at the trade in textiles or silver, you are unlikely to see the slave trade. Historians often do not zoom out far enough to understand the connections.'

Archive research in 13 countries

Antunes conducts large-scale international archive research to identify these commodity chains. Portuguese by origin, she speaks eight languages, including Hebrew, Arabic, Latin, Italian and Dutch. Together with her research team, Antunes studies the archives of port cities and individual traders in 13 countries. Their 'shopping lists' and financial transactions help her to reconstruct legal and illegal international trade flows.

Traders ventured beyond borders

A typical example is the sprawling empire of 18th-century merchant and banker Jean-Baptiste Cloots. Together with family members, this

wealthy Amsterdammer established trading posts in cities such as Antwerp and Lisbon. The family used cunning constructions to trade illegally in slaves and diamonds, disregarding the monopoly of the Dutch East India Company and the Dutch West India Company. But the family was equally likely to work closely with sovereigns and trade companies if it suited them. Antunes: 'This case study illustrates that despite rules, traders often ventured beyond the borders of cultures and empires.'

Provided by Leiden University

Citation: Early modern traders circumvented rules of states and companies (2017, June 9) retrieved 18 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-06-early-modern-traders-circumvented-states.html>

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