



HAL
open science

Neither imperial, nor Atlantic: A merchant perspective on international trade in the eighteenth century

Pierre Gervais

► **To cite this version:**

Pierre Gervais. Neither imperial, nor Atlantic: A merchant perspective on international trade in the eighteenth century. *History of European Ideas*, 2008, 34 (4), pp.465 - 473. 10.1016/j.histeuroideas.2008.08.001 . hal-01487676

HAL Id: hal-01487676

<https://univ-sorbonne-nouvelle.hal.science/hal-01487676>

Submitted on 25 Jul 2017

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Neither imperial, nor Atlantic: A merchant perspective on international trade in the eighteenth century

Pierre GERVAIS¹

In the most literal sense, the "Atlantic world" is a misnomer: in the XVIIIth century, the period for which the term is most commonly employed, the Atlantic Ocean was a forbidding expanse of salt water, mostly empty save for a few islands, and could hardly constitute a world. Even today, supertankers and cruise ships notwithstanding, not much is taking place on the Atlantic proper. What counts, of course, is the land, including the aforementioned islands. But the geographical fact that these lands border the Atlantic or are surrounded by it does not tell us much about what an Atlantic world resembles, either. As a number of authors have pointed out more or less forcefully, the so-called Atlantic community was never strictly Atlantic, and contained many very different communities. What justifies the term for its advocates is that it eventually came to encompass a thick web of relationships, linking a number of people on each side of the Atlantic Ocean, so many in fact that, in some respect at least, it produced what could be called a shared Atlantic world. This world was not a numerical accumulation of empires, defined by national boundaries, or national loyalties; on the contrary, if it had one defining characteristic, it was precisely its web-like structure, created by the free circulation of goods, people and ideas, across national boundaries, such as they were. Whether this process of circulation was oppressive, as with the slave trade, or liberating, as with Enlightenment ideals, is beside the point. The most determinant factor in the success of Atlantic exchanges was the international movement throughout interconnected parts, and the deeper historical evolution associated with it.²

Was this movement in any sense truly "Atlantic," however? The present paper aims at presenting a brief and narrow view of it, but from a crucial point of view, that of the merchant. Commerce, everybody will agree, was at the heart of the Atlantic process. It looms large in every account of the XVIIIth Century, and even larger when one realizes that in many ways commerce was the reason why the European "Atlantic" empires were built — the imperial viewpoint being the other major competitor in the race to offer an analytical framework for Eighteenth-century development in Europe and the Americas, at least.³ Colonial goods and the colonial trade prompted the

¹ CENA-Mascipo UMR 8168, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales / Département d'histoire, Université Paris VIII Saint-Denis. The research for this paper was funded in part by a DRI CNRS grant, as well as by UMR 8168. I want to thank Allan Potofsky for his editorship (and leadership!), and also Jacques Bottin, Dominique Margairaz, Silvia Marzagalli, Philippe Minard, Cécile Vidal and Anne Wegener-Sleeswijk for their insights, provided at various stages in the making of this paper. Of course, none of them must be held responsible for my statements.

² Claiming that no definition will fit Atlantic history, Bernard Bailyn nonetheless goes on to write that "Atlantic history is the story of a world in motion," which sounds a lot like a definition (*Atlantic History. Concepts and Contours*, Cambridge : 2005, 60); see also Alison Games, "Atlantic History: Definitions, Challenges, and Opportunities," *American Historical Review* 111 (3, June 2006): 741-757, especially 745 note 14, and 747. As Games observes, the other promise of Atlantic history, as a path to truly multipolar history, really integrating Europe, Africa and the Americas, is far from having been realized at this point, notwithstanding the hopes expressed by various other authors; see e. g. Cécile Vidal, "The Reluctance of French Historians to Address Atlantic History," *Southern Quarterly* 43 (4, Summer 2006):153-189.

³ Bailyn himself dates the appearance of scientific, empirically sound Atlantic studies from the publication of Huguette and Pierre Chaunu's major Seville study, and Philip Curtin's overview of the slave trade, two works directly focussing on the two major commercial processes over the Atlantic in Pre-Modern times (Bailyn, *op cit*,

great confrontation between England and France; and some economists even credit them with a key role in fueling economic growth in the mother countries, regardless of their relatively marginal volume in the overall trade of these countries.⁴ Merchants themselves were supposedly the quintessential Atlanticists, both at the personal and the professional level. If the concept makes sense at all, then, it should make sense particularly for the activities of these traders, whose breadth of horizon, manic activity, and constant personal intercourse underpinned almost everything significant which took place on the Atlantic Ocean outside of strictly military ventures, and largely provided the stakes and the motives for the latter. Even the one major "Atlantic" phenomenon which could be said to escape the merchant sphere, the multifaceted cross-cultural intercourse generated by constant flows of migrants over and around the ocean, was still technically channelled through merchant-made networks, and merchant-conceived crossing procedures.

*

* *

To some extent, the minutiae of merchant practice have only recently become a topic of historical enquiry. Earlier works were often mainly concerned with aggregate data, the general movement of ships and goods, and changes in economic trends in the Labrousseau structuralist tradition, or with collective political, cultural and social portraits of merchants groups in which account books were only peripherally used. The merchant mind was best read through correspondence and political lobbying, cultural attitudes and social differentiation. None of these areas of research, however, are illuminating for our purposes. To quote Ian Steele, nobody ever fought, prayed and died in the name of an Atlantic community, so that its existence is usually proved through reference to practice — to the circulation of ideas, people, and goods.⁵ Hence the interest of analyzing the forms this circulation took, and here we can rely on a very strong body of recent prosopographies.

32-33). For recent analyses of trade and its importance in the Atlantic, cf. "Trade in the Atlantic World," a special section introduced by John J. McCusker, *Business History Review* 79 (4, Winter 2005), and "The Atlantic Economy in an Era of Revolutions," a special section coordinated by Cathy Matson, *William and Mary Quarterly* 62 (3, July 2005). For narratives stressing imperial structures, while dealing in various ways with an "Atlantic" framework, cf. John H. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492-1830*, New Haven : 2006; the forum on "Entangled Histories" in *American Historical Review* 112 (3, June 2007); and William A. Pettigrew, "Free to Enslave : Politics and the Escalation of Britain's Transatlantic Slave Trade, 1688-1714," *William and Mary Quarterly* 64 (1, January 2007): 3-38.

⁴ See the idea of a planter / merchant connection in both Paul Cheney's analysis of the underpinnings of French failure, then success in the Caribbean, "A False Dawn for Enlightenment Cosmopolitanism? Franco-American Trade during the American War of Independence," *William and Mary Quarterly* 63 (3, July 2006): 463-488, especially 465; and William Pettigrew's article on the slave trade quoted above. On the potential role of colonial profit as an engine for growth, cf. Guillaume Daudin, *Commerce et prospérité: La France au XVIIIe siècle*, Paris: 2005.

⁵ Quote by Ian K. Steele, "Bernard Bailyn's American Atlantic," *History and Theory* 46 (1, February 2007): 48. Aggregate studies, a specialty of the French historical school, are best exemplified by Paul Butel, *La croissance commerciale bordelaise dans la seconde moitié du XVIIIe siècle*, Lille: 1973; less well-known, Charles Carrière's *Négociants marseillais au XVIIIe siècle : contribution à l'étude des économies maritimes*, Marseille: 1973 is actually more detailed, and bridges the gap with more recent studies. Famous collective regional studies of merchant groups include Bernard Bailyn, *The New England Merchants in the Seventeenth Century*, Cambridge: 1955; Thomas Doerflinger, *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise: Merchants and Economic Development in Revolutionary Philadelphia*, Chapel Hill: 1986; and Cathy Matson, *Merchants and Empire. Trading in Colonial New York*, Baltimore: 1998.

In this respect, a series of works have reshaped our views on merchant activities, particularly in the last twenty years. We now know that merchants were combining multiple activities, integrating all the areas of the Atlantic world, and thereby holding together the many strands which made or unmade the central "adventure:" a shipping expedition. We know that they were impressively flexible, managing a multiplicity of endeavours at once through complex institutional forms, and that they succeeded in carrying on shipping activities in the face of imperial prohibition, and even in the face of Napoleon's Continental blockade. We also know that the same networks which underpinned their trade gave rise to complex "conversations" through which scales of qualities were set, goods defined within these scales, prices debated, and production and transportation processes refined and improved.⁶

The merchant world was thus a networked world, which, on the face of it, would fit perfectly into the model of a transnational community. However, both the motives and the implications of this networked approach to trade may not have received all the historical attention they deserve. For networks played a series of roles, some of which were characteristic of the era, and also had concrete consequences on the way merchants would view their world. First of all, the impact of information was particularly decisive to any society in which goods were far from standardized, and where official standards imposed by state institutions were constantly undermined through widespread imitation and fraud. In a remarkable article, Pierre Jeannin points out that merchants faced vast difficulties in gauging the quality of the wide range of goods they were supposed to sell.⁷ Who could say for sure that a given piece of textile had really been made according to the quality standards of the manufacturing area it purported to come from, that a barrel of flour contained the grade of flour it was sold for, that a jewel from India was what it seemed to be? While any merchant could acquire a competency in any given field, no buyer could hope to master the bewildering range of qualities and nomenclatures characteristic of the eighteenth-century.⁸

Hence the vital role of networks. No merchant could be an expert on everything; but a good merchant would be able to rely on a network of peer experts, who would do the job for him. Indeed, this went beyond product quality, which was merely the visible part of the commercial iceberg. Each level of quality entailed a different marketing strategy, a different clientele, and ultimately different markets at each end of the process. Even (relatively) specialized traders dealt in a whole series of products, with no written and institutionalized nomenclature to help them. But the typical experience was

⁶ David Hancock, "Commerce and Conversation in the Eighteenth Century Atlantic; the Invention of Madeira Wine," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 29 (2, Autumn 1998): 197-219, as well as *Citizens of the World. London merchants and the integration of the British Atlantic community, 1735-1785*, Cambridge : 1995. André Lespagnol, *Messieurs de Saint-Malo. Une élite négociante au temps de Louis XIV*, Rennes: 1997, gives a highly detailed picture of merchant activity; cf. especially his diagram p. 143. For wartime activities, cf. Sylvia Marzagalli, *Les boulevards de la fraude: le négoce maritime et le blocus continental, 1806-1813*, Paris: 1999.

⁷ Pierre Jeannin, "Distinction des compétences et niveaux de qualification : les savoirs négociants dans l'Europe moderne," in *Culture et formation négociantes dans l'Europe moderne*, Franco Angiolini and Daniel Roche ed., Paris: 1995.

⁸ On the issue of quality scales, cf. "Networks in the Trade of Alcohol," a special section introduced by Paul Duguid, *Business History Review* 79 (1, Spring 2005): 467-526; also Pierre Claude Reynard, "Manufacturing Quality in the Pre-Industrial Age: Finding Value in Diversity," *Economic History Review* 53 (3, August 2000): 493-516; most of the special issue on "La sécurité alimentaire," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 51 (3, juillet-septembre 2004): 7-156; and *La Qualité des produits en France (XVIIe-XXe siècles)*, Alessandro Stanziani ed., Paris: 2004. For a fascinating attempt at modeling economically this kind of segmented market, cf. Jean-Yves Grenier, *L'économie d'Ancien Régime. Un monde de l'échange et de l'incertitude*, Paris: 1996.

that of unspecialized traders, such as grocer Thomas Allen of New London, Connecticut whose 1758 account book listed beef, corn, shingles, clapboard, and other local products along with coffee, sugar, raisin, rum, cotton, "stript" (striped cloth), "Oznabrigue" (Osnabrück cloth), and other colonial and European products.⁹ There were thousands of retailers such as Allen, who left hundreds of such account books, each of which testified to a specific set of suppliers, or more accurately to a specific set of goods gathered through one correspondent from many suppliers. When Joshua Green, at age twenty-one, started a business as a grocer in Boston, Massachusetts, he used his father's supplier, one Thomas Lane of London, and bought every year an assortment of Far Eastern spices and shipping products ; his first order brought cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, mace, pepper, tea, starch, "Florence oil," raisins, and Cheshire cheese. Green's first introductory letter to Lane, dated 1752, started with these words : "The Satisfaction you have given in the Business you have done for Mess(rs) Green + Walker (with whom I serv'd my apprenticeship) has induc'd me to apply to you ;" past experience had taught Green that Lane could be trusted to be his expert buyer in London.¹⁰

Large-scale merchants did not operate differently ; according to Silvia Marzagalli, the ship Isaac Roget of New York sent in 1805 for Guadeloupe was filled with goods from five different suppliers, including various silk, linen and other textile products, as well as manufactured goods and wine.¹¹ All these shippers were general merchants, but specialization did not bring about significantly different approaches; ordering a shipment of British textile goods in Boston in 1813 (in the hopes that the War of 1812 would be over soon), merchant Nathan Appleton wrote to his brother in London :

I should like however to have some good merchandize for me should they be reasonably low. Say to am(t) of £ 5000 – if you have not already purchased any for you M. Stone is an excellent judge of goods + I should like to have you get him to purchase them if you do not wish to do it yourself – I have about £ 2500 I suppose in Lodges + [Prother?] hands – but [ill.] they will be glad to accept drafts to a greater am(t) –whilst the goods are in their hands. It is [also?] necessary that I should give a particular order as I wish the goods to be of the most staple kinds say Cambrics Calicoes shirtings gingham +c. to am(t) of £ 3000 or 4000 - + 1 or £2000 in staple woolens as in my former letter [pr?] I + T Haigh for goods in their line – I leave it however to your judgement from the state of the market + the prospect of peace or a continuance of the war to purchase or not at all.¹²

Thus Appleton relied on one M. Stone, and on his brother as a controlling element, when it came to order goods abroad, even though he was specialized in the type of merchandize he was buying. He had some ideas of his own, but was fully ready to defer to those who would actually buy, since they alone would be in a position to judge if the cloth they had in hand was suitable to the Boston market, and whether the price / quality ratio was

⁹ American Antiquarian Society, Allen Family Papers Folio "A" vol. 11, "New London A.. Waste Book Belonging to Thomas Allen Commenc(d) July 1st 1758."

¹⁰ American Antiquarian Society, Green Family of Boston, Mass. Papers, 1752-1870, Folio vol. "A," Joshua Gree Letter & invoice Book, 1752-1762, Letter of October 23rd, 1752.

¹¹ Silvia Marzagalli, "Establishing Transatlantic Networks in Time of War : Bordeaux and the united States, 1793-1815," *Business History Review* 79 (4, Winter 2005): 812-844.

¹² Massachusetts Historical Society, Appleton Family Papers Ms. N-1778 (Hereafter Appleton Papers), Box 2 "General Correspondence, etc. 1791-1814," Folder 25, "1813," Nathan Appleton to Samuel Appleton, September 17th, 1813.

adequate. In other words, even a specialized trader had to rely on others, not only to get the best possible quality for the price, but also, and possibly first and foremost, in order to pick the right type of goods and the proper variety. In any case, the time lag between orders and sales was usually such as to prevent instructions from being too specific. Commissioners everywhere had to exercise their judgements, and merchant correspondence is replete with complaints that an agent had bought too late, or too early, and at the wrong price.

Choosing the right correspondent was thus essential, and even more so if one includes the second major dimension of merchant activity, that of credit. At any one time, little cash changed hands; most of the settlements took place through compensations. Green, for instance, almost never sent any cash to Lane, but "remitted" his debts by sending "bills," i. e. formal I.O.U.s, drawn on London houses. There is no indication on how these bills came into his hands, but in almost every one of his letters in 1752-1754, he apologizes for not sending Lane enough of them to balance his account. The fact that his was a paper debt, based on theoretically open credit, may mean that no interest was paid. Whatever the case in practice, the point is that Green needed Lane's forbearance. Thus a network was also a source of credit, which in turn was assuredly bound up with the personal relationships between creditor and debtor. Of course personal reputation was a decisive element, and it included non-economic ties – Lane had been the supplier of Green's father, after all. Kinship, religion, or any other potential link could become a motive for a creditor to be more tolerant of delays, or to offer better terms of payment, such as lower discounts on exotic commercial paper, for instance. The reverse was true as well, since Lane depended on payments from his customers, Green among them, to pay his suppliers on time.

Much has been written on the delicate timing required by long-distance trade, but timing was always flexible, and dependent in part of the relationship between the actors of the exchange. The same could be said of interest rates and exchange rates, never rigidly fixed, and dependent in part on the relationship existing between the two parties. Networks, in a way, *were* credit, since they underpinned the ability to draw both capital and information on others. The result was in truth a joint venture between individuals who had to trust each other, a venture in which profit was distributed along complex channels of differential participation, again with close attention paid to interpersonal relationships.¹³

In their concrete, day-to-day operations, networks were therefore carefully chosen and nurtured. A merchant's point of view tended to encompass first and foremost a discrete set of correspondents, usually picked among groups with which there were certain affinities. Religious or ethnic networks, or the universal tendency to pick close kin as partners, were simply rational business decisions, aimed at minimizing the risks of network

¹³ Laurence Fontaine, "Antonio and Shylock: Credit, and Trust in France, c. 1680-c. 1780," *Economic History Review* 54 (1, February 2001): 39-57; or William T. Baxter, "Observations on Money, Barter and Bookkeeping," *Accounting Historians Journal* 31 (1, June 2004): 129-139; as well as Cathy Matson's discussion of risk, with trust as an underlying thread, in "Introduction: The Ambiguities of Risk in the Early Republic," "Special Forum: Reputation and Uncertainty in Early America," *Business History Review* 78 (4, Winter 2004): 595-606). On merchant subcontracting, cf. Pierre Gervais, *Les Origines de la révolution industrielle aux Etats-Unis*, Paris: 2004.

failure, without suppressing them completely of course.¹⁴ What counted was on whom one could call for credit and information, and the links one relied on delineated a geography which was never universal, nor even Atlantic, but made up of the major nodes in which one's correspondents acted. Over twelve years, from 1763 to 1775, the Bordeaux firm of Schröder and Schyler, one of the few merchant firms for which we have solid information, dealt with only 17 foreign firms on a regular basis. And while it had over 250 other foreign clients from time to time, 47.8% of all consignments made from Bordeaux went to these seventeen firms.¹⁵ It is thus impossible to overstate the importance for a trader of these bilateral relationships (in this case, the term network is slightly misleading; these were chains of correspondents, or at most small groups linearly linked, rather than actual networks). And it is easy to show that they often gave rise to gate-keeping processes. In his first letter to Lane, already quoted, Green felt necessary to explain that "As Mes(s) G + W dont trade in those articles I purposed to write for [I] shall have the Advantage of supplying some of the best of their Customers on a short Credit or for the Cash." Green wanted to establish his credit with Lane, of course, but he was also careful to point out in passing that he was not going to compete with his father's firm; within a given set of trading links, competition was strictly limited. Insiders had preferential treatment, while outsiders could scarcely hope for such special treatment.

This is assuredly one of the more misleading aspects of the current studies on the economic processes commonly associated with the Atlantic area in the XVIIIth century. No merchant operated with utter freedom nor could he easily change his commercial affiliations. Every account demonstrates that any new endeavour, any extensions of earlier channels, or much more rarely any attempt at redirecting these channels, entailed the careful building of new and strong bonds with key players in the desired market. As a rule, no redirection of trade traffic was complete, no business ruptures could be permanent ; all changes were incremental, because it had to be accomplished through the existing channels, and only thanks to them. Even bankruptcies could not shake these constraints, since the practice of settlement with creditors is universally attested in the archives.

Conversely, finding new trading partners was difficult, time-consuming, and possible only to the extent that sound intermediate contacts could be found. In his same first introductory letter to Lane, Green junior was careful to point out that he had been his father's apprentice, and sent a note worth £ 50, the biggest sum he would ever send during his recorded first years of dealing with Lane. Green senior's standing was thus not automatically transferred to his son's new firm, and had to be reasserted. Establishing credit was no easy matter. On the other hand, no trader could operate without the help of other traders, and indeed in many areas of the world, especially in the Far East, but at one time or another in many European countries as well, having local correspondents was not only necessary, but compulsory.¹⁶

¹⁴ David Hancock, "The Trouble with Networks : Managing the Scots' Early-Modern Madeira Trade," *Business History Review* 79 (3, Autumn 2005): 467-491.

¹⁵ Pierre Jeannin, "La clientèle étrangère de la maison Schröder et Schyler de la guerre de Sept Ans à la guerre d'indépendance américaine," in *Marchands d'Europe. Pratiques et savoir à l'époque moderne*, Jacques Bottin et Marie-Louise Pelus-Kaplan ed, Paris: 2002, 125-178.

¹⁶ Cf. for instance the Calcutta intermediaries and their relationship with foreign merchants as described in the contemporary letters of Patrick T. Jackson, Far Eastern trader in the 1800s ; cf. Kenneth W. Porter, *The*

The net result of all these pressures is that the proper unit of analysis for the merchant world was the universe of discrete chains of trading links that structured mercantile commerce. This process had nothing to do with either the Atlantic Ocean or the relationship between "Old" and "New" worlds, since it can be observed in any setting where European-style merchant capitalism was a significant reality. Family solidarities, gate-keeping practices, credit-based dealings were merchant, not Atlantic, characteristics, and they created order in merchant life most everywhere. Commercial connections, far from being set up everywhere and at will, followed lines of least resistance created in constructing this merchant order. Merchant linkages were structured by existing routes and contacts, and were influenced by differential risk. This is where the imperial factor also intervened in international trade, especially during times of war. War was in itself a rejoinder to the very idea of an Atlantic community, which it "vetoed," so to speak, regular intervals. Losses in times of war are an ubiquitous story in the XVIIIth century, and no merchant, however experienced, could trust that he would be protected from international conflict of all kinds. Even such a vaunted meticulous planner as British merchant John Leigh saw his first foray in slave-trading end in near-disaster at the hands of a French privateer off the Coast of Guyana.¹⁷ Of course, proponents of the "Atlantic" framework insist that the barriers created by war were regularly finessed and crossed in various ways, which is quite true. It has been shown again and again that war did not completely cut off communications between enemies, and that trade was not easily enclosed within imperial models. But merchants did not freely redirect their energies anywhere they wanted in the great Atlantic web either, a point which is much less made. Even more than in peacetime, networks in wartime turned out to be highly incapable of adapting or changing to meet circumstances. They engendered dependencies on strict trading pathways, the importance of which can hardly be exaggerated, and which seems to resurface in many historical example.

Thus the illegal Caribbean trade around 1780 underlines the persistent links of the New York merchant community with the Dutch West Indies over a century after Stuyvesant's surrender. A quarter of a century later, the Herculean efforts of Bordeaux merchants to maintain their colonial commerce after 1803 in the face of seemingly universal opposition reveals their inability to develop new trade channels on the continent in spite of their exceptionally famous wine-growing hinterland. Even the growth of neutral U. S. shipping during the same Napoleonic wars was insufficient to prompt Bordeaux retailers to call into question their traditional London-based financial networks even though their confiscated goods occasionally ended up in the warehouses of enemy continental firms. The much vaunted ability of traders to pursue trade in times of war thus may be read also, to a certain extent, as an inability to redirect this same trade along more secure lines, simply because the cost of this redirection was too high, hence the persistent attempt to derive profit from existing networks in spite of adverse conditions. At the very least, the assumption that such contraband trade was preferred because it was more profitable, and developed regardless of the political context,

Jacksons and the Lees. Two Generations of Massachusetts Merchants, 1765-1844, Cambridge [Mass.]: 1937, vol. 1, especially 59, and 591-732.

¹⁷ The point on contraband is made in Ian K. Steele, "Bernard Bailyn's American Atlantic," *Op.cit.* For John Leigh, cf. Stephen D. Behrendt, "Markets, Transaction Cycles, and Profits : Merchant Decision Making in the British Slave Trade," *William and Mary Quarterly* 58 (1, January 2001): 171-204.

should be challenged, since in practice it turned out to be so often dependent on prior links. Total freedom of choice should have resulted in many more creative endeavours, launched well outside the beaten paths.¹⁸

The complex dialectic between prior relationships and new business opportunities in times of war is well illustrated by the case of John Amory, a Boston merchant, in partnership with his brother Thomas. The two men were from a well-established merchant family, but their father, a Loyalist, had fled to England in 1775. In May 1779, John Jr. arrived in London, but apparently not for political reasons. For the next four years, he would travel ceaselessly between London, Brussels and Amsterdam, organizing a flow of shipments for the benefit of the firm John & Thomas Amory.¹⁹ Most of the shipments for which shippers are specified were made from Amsterdam through a certain John Hodshon, who was, as it turns out, a correspondent of John Amory's father. Indeed, Hodshon was given the same wide latitude as Appleton's agents in London 30 years later, Amory having written him at one point to send "brother Jonathan" "1 Chest of good bohea tea [...] or Same Value in Spice as you may judge - if in spice 1/2 the value in Nutmegs 1/4 in Cinnamon 1/4 in Cloves and Mace." Goods came from both London and Brussels, and the use of a neutral port to ship to the United States was logical, as well as the various precautions which were taken to disguise the true status of the cargo : in the same letter in which Hodshon was left free to choose whether he would buy tea or spices, Amory wrote of "inclosing my letter to Brother Payne to be given Cpt Hayden, desiring the Cpt if taken to destroy it."²⁰

Actually, Amory's venture was probably not a journey to an entirely new territory. His correspondent firm in London was Dowling & Brett, and his first recorded transaction after his arrival in Brussels on July 1st, 1780 was to present a bill on them to the Brussels firm of Danoost & Co., for a grand total of £ 30. This sum in itself was relatively small ; according to the preceding entry Amory had reached Brussels with £ 400 in cash. The most important result of the transaction, however, was to establish Amory's credit by having Danoost & Co. draw on Dowling and Brett, a London firm which may well have been already known in Brussels anyway. In other words, Amory was most probably travelling along a chain of correspondents such as the ones we have described above. The war would slightly modify the order of the links in the

¹⁸ Thomas M. Truxes, "Transnational Trade in the Wartime North Atlantic : the Voyage of the *Snow Recovery*," *Business History Review* 79 (4, Winter 2005) : 751-779; Silvia Marzagalli, "Establishing Transatlantic Trade Networks in Time of War: Bordeaux and the United States, 1793-1815," *Business History Review* 79 (4, Winter 2005) : 811-844; François Crouzet, "Itinéraires atlantiques d'un capitaine marchand américain pendant les guerres « napoléoniennes, »" in *Guerre et économie dans l'espace atlantique, op. cit.* 27-41.

¹⁹ The complex web of family relationships and business partnerships between the various Amorys of Boston is described, if not entirely elucidated, in the Massachusetts Historical Society Guide to the Amory Family Papers, and available online at <http://www.masshist.org/findingaids/doc.cfm?fa=fa0292>. According to MHS records, the "John Amory" whose travels in Europe between 1778 and 1783 are used here must be John Amory Jr. (1759-1823), since John Amory Sr. was already in Europe in 1775. However, the accounts and letterbook from this Brussels trip, which come from the J. and J. Amory Collection (hereafter Amory Collection), Mss: 766, Baker Library, Harvard Business School, vol. 2 ("Journal, John Amory accounts in Europe, 1 Feb. 1778 - 27 Feb. 1783"), and vol. 46 ("Copies of letters sent 1781-1789"), quote several times a "brother Jonathan," which should be either an uncle or a cousin, John Jr. having no brother Jonathan. Since William Payne, a cousin, is also called "brother Payne," we have assumed that the word "brother" here had a religious (Quaker?) connotation, and should not be taken as meaning a sibling, but this may well be a mistaken interpretation on our part.

²⁰ For Hodshon's letters to J. & J. Amory, Amory Sr.'s firm, cf. Amory Collection, vol. 52, Folder 2 "Letters received from Miscellaneous, 1780-1785." Amory Jr.'s letter is in "Copies of letters sent 1781-1789," *loc. cit.*, entry for May 5, 1781.

chain, with Flemish and Dutch merchants inserted as a buffer between London and Boston, but the points of departure and arrival were the same, and even these new intermediaries were part of the original networks. Even more interestingly, the new status of France, allied to the United States, was not enough to prompt new financial networks. On February 8, 1781, Amory credited his Bills of Exchange account with two bills on London houses, for a total of £ 588, "The above bills being the net proceeds of four bills sent me by J. A. for 13998 livres tournois on paris, + w(ch) were rec(d) By MSs Vaden Yver Freres + C(o) on whom I gave my draft in favour of MSs Danoot + C(o) + who paid [ill.] 13944.9 livres." The two British bills were duly deposited in Amory's account at Dowling & Brett's, as the next entry shows. In other words, French commercial paper probably received in the United States by Jonathan Amory was changed into London paper through French and Flemish correspondents. There was apparently no attempt to reduce the discounts and losses entailed by this long chain of intermediaries, through importing directly from France.

There are only two explanations for such a continued reliance on London-based houses in the middle of the War of Independence. Either John Amory, as the son of a Loyalist, gave precedence to his political leanings over his Atlantic impulses, and stuck with his original London friends for political reasons. Or, much more plausibly, he considered that the war was no sufficient reason to reorient his trade links, because the costs of such reorientation would be too high in comparison with the expected profits. When one considers how risky it was to use new, unknown suppliers who could easily take advantage of a newcomer with no previous connections, and also how difficult it was to gain the acceptance of fellow merchants for whom one was an unknown quantity of dubious credit, it becomes obvious that entering new business territory unbidden was very costly indeed. By far the most practical solution was to find some respected guarantor who would ensure his fellow traders that their new acquaintance was in good standing. The better known the guarantor, the more trusted one would be, and credit would flow accordingly; bills would be endorsed, orders filled with quality goods, since doing otherwise would be offending the fellow trader who had pledged his word. The upshot of this basic Greifian mechanism was a strong built-in tendency for merchant networks to reproduce themselves regardless of changes in political conditions, and to spread only slowly and cautiously. This could be taken as a proof of the resilient character of these networks, and of the irrelevance of imperial orders to their exercise, in a word of their truly "Atlantic" character. But such a reading glosses over the fact that Amory's links to London were in and of themselves the result of empire-building, not a free association generated in the course of free merchant exchange. Moreover, his lack of interest in any direct contact with France, which anticipated the subsequent failure of the Franco-American trade alliance after 1783, points to the same reality: networks themselves, far from being conceived in a vacuum, were in large part the results of empire-building processes in the first place.²¹

²¹ On the dismal trade record between the two erstwhile allies in spite of the so-called "Treaty of Amity and Commerce" of 1778, cf. Paul Cheney, "A False Dawn for Enlightenment Cosmopolitanism? Franco-American Trade during the American War of Independence," *William and Mary Quarterly* 63 (3, July 2006): 463-488, and Allan Potofsky, "The Political Economy of the French-American Debt Debate: The Ideological Uses of Atlantic Commerce, 1787 to 1800," *William and Mary Quarterly* 63 (3, July 2006): 489-516.

This is not to say that no merchant community ever took advantage of changed circumstances, of course. The Dutch in the XVIth century, the British in the XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries did seize opportunities from time to time. But even these takeovers may have had an element of concurrent business contacts in them. According to recent research, the Dutch at least gained entry into the Mediterranean at the end of the XVIth century in part through their (politically determined) alliance with Antwerp networks, already well established in Italy also for political reasons.²² On the whole, though, Amory's cautious approach may have been more representative of standard merchant procedures than the brazen attempts of the Dutch in the Baltic, or of the British in Spanish America. In this case, we should picture an "Atlantic" world as not only partly non-Atlantic, but also markedly less "new" and innovative than assumed in current historiography. Certainly Nathan Appleton, the already quoted Boston merchant and soon-to-be textile magnate, took a similar position during the War of 1812. On November 14, 1813, he wrote to his brother Samuel in London that « if the war should continue I should think a great many articles [ill.] of English produce or manufacture, might be shipped here to great advantage in neutral ships via Lisbon or Gottenburg – by our treaty with Sweden + Spain – English property on board their vessels are secured against our privateers – as we have in them recognized the principle that free ships make free goods. » Again, traditional London links were not easily forsaken.²³

Like Amory, incidentally, Appleton had no qualms about trading with the enemy. One could see this as an expression of the often cited Anglophilia of Boston and New England in general, which, in a traditional political narrative, would eventually lead to the ill-fated Hartford Convention and the demise of the Federalist Party. I believe, however, that Appleton's flippancy in a time of war cannot simply be explained in terms of a rejection of Federal policy. There is no reference to politics in the statement above, which is couched in strictly commercial terms. It is an observation of fact, not an affirmation of dissidence. If contraband had been seen as a political activity, not an economic one, it should show somewhere in Appleton's statement. Our Boston magnate did end up having dealings with Great Britain, as shown by this excerpt from a letter dated September 2, 1813 ;

« Capt Prince has given us his bill for the balance of this a/c say £ 110.14 which I send to Mess(r) Lodges + [B]ooth by this conveyance for your acc(t) as the 3(rd) of £ 1650. – 1 + 2(d) forwarded via Halifax one half on your acc(t) other half on my own – viz: Leon Jacoby and Francis Jacoby on Sam [Balkiny?] + Sons £ 1100. Jos. + [Jon(a)?] Hemphill on Tho(s) Dory + Isaiah Robert 550 – »²⁴

Three notes of hand, totalling the hefty sum of £ 1760 s 14, were sent, apparently by three different ships, from the United States through Halifax, that is through enemy (British Canadian) territory, onto London, and into enemy hands.

Of course, correspondence and remittances were generally accepted in time of war, and in fact even private citizens could, under certain circumstances, travel through enemy territory. Only the movement of goods

²² Pierre Jeannin, "Entreprises hanséates et commerce méditerranéen à la fin du XVIe siècle," in *Marchand du Nord. Espaces et trafics à l'époque moderne*, Philippe Braunstein and Jochen Hoock ed., Paris: 1996, 311-322.

²³ Appleton Papers, Box 2, Folder 25, "1813," Nathan Appleton to Samuel Appleton, November 14, 1813

²⁴ *Ibid.*, Nathan Appleton to Samuel Appleton, September 2, 1813.

was restricted, and in ways which were open to debate.²⁵ Even on this latter point governmental policy itself was often haphazard and vacillating, as exemplified by the recently analyzed case of the British smugglers invited by Napoleon in Gravelines, or the secret instructions sent by London to open the British West Indies to the Spanish American trade.²⁶ All in all, Appleton, like Amory, seems to have faced little moral pressure when choosing wartime strategies, and actually Amory makes one cryptic reference to a letter to John Jay, which seems to imply at least that he was in contact with the rebels besides or beyond his commercial ventures.²⁷ That both men chose to stick with the known approaches is all the more striking. Precisely because, as many historians have argued, enforcement of imperial policies was so haphazard, merchant relationships should have mutated much more freely and frequently than reflected by the historical record.

Appleton did end up entering the French market, but after the end of the war only, in 1815, and in a way which in itself confirms how much merchants relied on preset chains of known correspondents. On March 11, 1815, He wrote his brother that :

In revolving in my mind what course to take to avoid the necessity of laborious personal attention to business for which I am becoming too [ill.] and the other extreme of having no regular established business – I have finally concluded a partnership concern with the two M(r) Ward – B C + W. [...] M(r) W(m) Ward goes to England in the Milo with the intention of proceeding immediately to Paris for the purpose of purchasing French goods – + being well acquainted with this market I think he will be able to select such as will pay a profit – I have agreed to put a £5000 sty to be the same on 60 day bills drawn [ill.] – and I wish you to see this arrangement completed by placing the amount to credit of the new firm Benj C. Ward + C(o) with yourself if you have established yourself as you propose in your last letter to me as a commission merchant – if not with Lodges + [Booth?] or some house in London"²⁸

One needed an entry into the French market, and that entry would be the young Ward. Appleton himself had no intention to go to France, but sought to obtain a surrogate more competent than himself. It is worth pointing out, moreover, that the transfer of funds from London to Paris was left to Ward's initiative. The choice of the merchant house that would serve as Ward's correspondent in Paris was up to Ward, quite logically, as this was the most crucial choice the young associate would have to make in order to crack open the French market – and he was the expert, after all.

*

²⁵ There is very little secondary material on civilian movements in time of war during the 1700s. Numerous examples of safe passages can be found in various accounts of the time : see e. g. G. R. de Beer, "The Relations between Fellows of the Royal Society and French Men of Science When France and Britain were at War," *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London* 9 (2, May 1952): 244-299; also Garland Cannon, "Sir William Jones and Anglo-American relations during the American Revolution," *Modern Philology* 76 (1, August 1978): 29-45. On the other hand, civilians seem to have been routinely captured and jailed, cf; e. g. Betsy Knight, "Prisoner Exchange and Parole in the American revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly* 48 (2, April 1991): 201-222.

²⁶ Gavin Daly, "Napoleon and the 'City of Smugglers, 1810-1814,'" *Historical Journal* 50 (2; June 2007): 333-352; John J. McCusker, "Introduction," special section on "Trade in the Atlantic World," *Business History Review* 79 (4, Winter 2005) : 697-713.

²⁷ Amory Collection, vol. 46 ("Copies of letters sent 1781-1789"), Letter dated January 1, 1781.

²⁸ Appleton Papers, Box 3 "General Correspondence, etc. 1815-1825", Folder 1, "1815, Jan-June," Nathan Appleton to Eben Appleton, March 11, 1815.

* *

The most striking element in both Amory and Appleton's stories, and in countless other merchants' tales, is that they took place in a mercantile world which does not fit well into such categories as "Atlantic or "imperial". Because the concerns of these two men were structured by a flow of goods which never came close to imitating the free, unfettered market Adam Smith's utopian work made famous, they never thought on an Atlantic scale. Their view was economically both narrower and wider, encompassing a patchwork of fellow traders from whom they derived the goods they would send hither and thither, or the accesses to the customers who would buy these goods. But these networks were highly dependent on professional strategies, and narrowly constrained by the necessities entailed by the maintenance of these strategies. Thus Bordeaux traders would view their world as a set of correspondents, some in the Americas (the Caribbeans, some ports on the North American seaboard, South America sometimes), many in Europe, from their own region of Bordelais to London, Amsterdam and the Baltic sea, and maybe others in Asia and Africa, Calcutta, the Gold coast, or the Ile Royale. A Saint-Malo trader would have its own world as well, but it would be significantly different, with more focus on Newfoundland, on Normandy, on the Spanish empire. Boston would be a different story again, with London and the Caribbean looming large, but also the inner valleys of the North American continent, whence furs came, and the households of the Eastern seaboard, with their farmers and retailers. Even London at the height of its power, after the end of the Seven Years War, would have its own provincial outlook, and its own particular networks, or rather chains of relationships, centered on the British Caribbean Islands, the Yorkshire, the Bordeaux wine region, the slave-producing areas of Africa, the Indian dominion. And these are merely statistical orientations, dominant specializations which a few mavericks would always belie, since each trader had his own mix. From a merchant's eye view, the world was both wider and smaller than the Atlantic Ocean, but it never really corresponded to the Atlantic Ocean.

The issue here is not merely a question of geographic precision. It has often been pointed out that no trade was ever specifically Atlantic. First of all, most commercial activity took place within the land masses of Europe. In volume, and possibly in economic import as well, short-distance carting of grains may have been more crucial than gold, silver, or even the slave trade, in determining the economic health of an area.²⁹ Only a minority of European trade routes were prolonged across the Atlantic, and all of them were part of longer sets which reached well beyond the ocean. In Isaac Roget's already quoted cargo to Guadeloupe, part of the textile came from Central Europe, and there was silk which may well have been Chinese, or at least from Lyons; potential return cargoes could include the usual colonial goods, sugar, coffee or tobacco, but also more complex routes involving intra-Caribbean trade, a shipment of slaves to the Southern United States, the loading in North American ports of wheat, timber or flaxseed to bring back to Europe, or of

²⁹ Cf. Michel Morineau, *Incroyables gazettes et fabuleux métaux. Les retours des trésors américains d'après les gazettes hollandaises*, Paris: 1984. Even for export industries, the impact of Atlantic markets could be highly variable, cf. Claude Cailly, "Guerre et conjuncture textile dans le Perche," in Silvia Marzagalli and Bruno Marnot dir., *Guerre et économie dans l'espace Atlantique du XVIe au XXe siècle*, Bordeaux : 2006, 116-138.

fur as part of a venture toward the Far East. Even in the biggest Atlantic seaports, coastal shipping and liaisons with the hinterland, as well as long-range contacts to the Far East, were as much part of the business equation as the Atlantic crossings. But what should be underlined here is not only that merchant activity was spatially complex ; a much more important point is that it was a single process, regardless of where it took place.³⁰

For what united British and French and American and other merchants was their common socio-economic practice, not some potential attachment to a peculiarly trans-Atlantic enterprise which, as such, was very far from their mind. Admittedly, the individuals through whom these networks came into being never formed some general, transactional, transnational community. Market segmentation brought division and competition, and these were forces at least as powerful as political-ideological convergences or polite sociability. Geographical choices were shaped by possible business relationships, which themselves were heavily determined by kin, religion, and national loyalties. In particular, the core activities of most trading groups would develop within imperial boundaries and alliances, if only because it was easiest and most cost-effective ; inter-imperial exchange would take place of course, and necessarily so, but making them one's focus was unwise, as Bordeaux traders eventually found out the hard way. No merchant could be unmindful of such constraints, and trade flows were directed accordingly, even though inter-imperial borders were crossed all the time, including in times of war. Imperial strictures were thus only one parameter in a much wider set, and it would be equally misleading to grant them the status of monocausal explanation as it would be to ignore them entirely. But the variegated nature of the resulting trade relations should not hide their underlying identity. Each particular merchant relationship, be it local, regional, worldwide, or transatlantic, was the expression of the basic merchant act of forging a link in a commercial chain which would eventually make possible the opening of a conduit between two separate, segmented markets and the transportation of one or more goods from one to the other. In other words, the sets of relationships each merchant created were geographically diverse, but identical in nature and function wherever they came into being.

What, then, should be made of the "Atlantic" label? By focussing descriptively on a geographical area, rather than on any specified historical social development, the historiographical move toward "Atlantic" studies has unwittingly shifted the attention away from the causes of this development. Somehow the "Atlantic world" happened, along with empire- and / or community-building, but for no particular reason except maybe as the

³⁰ The point that Atlantic history is a mere part of a wider history, and should not be separated from it, is repeatedly made in the various papers by Alison Games, Philippe J. Stearn, Peter Coclanis, and gathered in the forum section "Beyond the Atlantic: English Globetrotters and Transoceanic Connections," *William and Mary Quarterly* 63 (4, October 2006). But focalizing on the whole world does not tell us why this world became unified, any more than Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra's proposal to focus on the Americas as an area of "entangled" histories tells us why these histories became entangled in the first place. ("Entangled Histories. Borderland Historiographies in New Clothes?," the concluding paper in the already quoted forum in *American Historical Review* 112 (3, June 2007): 787-799. On this specific point, Bernard Bailyn's insistence on entirely rejecting Braudel's structural approach (*Op. cit.* 61) in favor of a purely narrative approach is intellectually coherent in its uncompromising empiricism; whether Atlantic or worldwide, unification happened because it happened. On the difficult issue of causality vs. description in Anglo-American historiography, cf. Pierre Gervais, "L'histoire sociale, ou heurs et malheurs de l'empirisme prudent," *Chantiers d'histoire américaine*, Jean Heffer and François Weil dir., Paris : 1994, 237-271.

serendipitous subproduct of a host of impersonal economic and social forces. And precisely because it happened in the most neutral space one could imagine, far from any specific shore, it tended to lose its European, elite, merchant and imperial administrator overtones. This is a misleading presentation, at best. From a merchant's point of view at least, and maybe from a variety of other vantage points too, the XVIIIth-century world was unified by the powerful tool of trade, backed by state power. These forces in turn defined a worldwide sphere of European expansion and market intensification of varying intensity, but with socio-economic consequences common to all the geographical places in which they were manifested. The increasingly dominant economic role of merchants, the expansion of a market economy, and the political tensions these phenomena generated, was what the "Atlantic," (and the Pacific, and Central Europe, and the Western Hemisphere, and large swaths of Africa and Asia) was all about. What was at work was a general social process, much more than a technical tendency to cross boundaries and oceans. Moreover, these evolutions, on the Atlantic Ocean and elsewhere, were brought about through the deliberate efforts of a very specific, and quite narrow human subgroup, with definite economic, social and political goals.

When we shift the focus toward these efforts and their nature, Atlantic history becomes again what Fernand Braudel argued it was all along, part of the wider history of the development of a specific social organization, European merchant capitalism, a model with a definite expansionist streak, which in turn elicited a wide range of complex reactions, from unyielding resistance to enthusiastic adoption, from the individuals and groups which had to face its encroachments or carried them out, until the eventual collapse of this model in the XIXth century with the advent of industrial capitalism. This was hardly an "Atlantic" story, since it can be traced just as well in the plains of Eastern Germany, in the Rocky Mountains years before the first French *coureur des bois* ever appeared, in African kingdoms which did not even have access to the sea, or in remote villages of India for which Europe was still barely a distant rumor. This was not world history, either; this so-called first globalization was widely uneven, and left a good deal of the world population untouched, including in many regions of Europe. Neither was it purely European, though, accusations of Eurocentrism notwithstanding, the power relationships it entailed were clearly centered in Europe. There were centers and peripheries, mother countries and colonies, imperial capitals and client States or plantation economies. The space of European expansion was not homogenous, a fact which "Atlantic" history has never denied, but is hard put to explain with consistency beyond some general statements on unspecified profit motives or inherited prejudices. A history of market expansion, because such an expansion is of necessity a direct attack on other forms of social organizations, would naturally include the stories of its promoters, its opponents, their multi-faceted battles, and their winners and losers.

And last but not least, this history would not be one reserved for sea captains, pioneer migrants and cosmopolitan-minded traders; tavern-keepers, transporters with their oxen-carts, village retailers, and ordinary farmers apparently mired in their routine were also a part of it.³¹ Giving up on the sea as a peculiarly significant focus is the only way to restore these latter groups

³¹ Alison Games cogently raises this issue, along with many others, in her already quoted "Atlantic History" paper.

to their proper status as key players in eighteenth-century economic growth, the only way to free ourselves at last from the *gemeinschaft / gesellschaft* dichotomy. Rather than opposing the modern, roving denizens of Atlantic History to both their hapless victims in Africa and the New World and to the traditional, not to say backward people who stayed put in the Old World, we can see all of these groups as fighting – not always bloodily – over the shape and form European market-driven expansion would take. Demonstrating that this same market expansion weakened rural society and pushed impoverished inhabitants to leave the European countryside, wrought havoc with traditional inter-tribal relationships in Africa, and brought about a massive reorientation of production toward exports in parts of Asia and in the Americas, would be the best way to ensure that all migrants, and non-migrants as well, would truly become part of the same story. Moreover, placing merchants and market forces at the center of our narrative enables us to starkly differentiate the eighteenth-century Atlantic world from our own. For we live in an age of producers, not of merchants ; the ideals and practices of merchant communities, on the Atlantic or elsewhere, were developed for a very different world. This world, structured as it was by long chains of interpersonal relationships, has long since been lost, a fact which we should keep in mind a little more when assessing the relevance these ideals and practices may still have for us.