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NEW PERSPECTIVES IN GLOBAL ECONOMIC HISTORY (I)

Alka Raman
(Guest Editor)

A. RAMAN. *New perspectives in Global Economic History.*

K. THOMAS. *From slavery to freedom: labour, technological*

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● *and its representation c. 1860–1968.*

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● *in the rise of the British textile trade*

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● *Langworthy Brothers and Co.*







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ARTICLES – ARTÍCULOS

Introduction: New Perspectives in Global Economic History¹

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces the special issue of *Revista de Historia Industrial – Industrial History Review* ‘New Perspectives in Global Economic History’. First, it highlights the emergence of global perspectives and the rationale for comparative and connected approaches in economic history. Second, it outlines the trajectory of global economic history. Finally, it presents the four contributions to the issue. Through case studies centred on salt, raw cotton, ivory, and cotton textiles, the articles included here demonstrate the analytical utility of commodities in tracing global interconnections, the formation of labour and skills, and the circulation of knowledge across regions. Collectively, they underscore the potential of global economic history to reframe debates on long-term economic development.

KEYWORDS: global economic history, comparative history, commodities, sources and methods.

JEL CODES: N01, N10, N70, F54.

1. Introduction

The past two decades have witnessed the consolidation of global economic history as a critical approach within the discipline of economic history. This intellectual reorientation reflects both the wider impact of globalisation on the social sciences and an increasing recognition of the limitations of Eurocentric explanatory frameworks. Following this approach, scholarship has proliferated in multiple directions, including the study of commodities and global trade networks, analyses of migration and knowledge transfer, and interdisciplinary methods that mobilise unconventional sources and techniques.

¹ This introduction is a guest editor’s note and, therefore, has not been submitted to external review. Nevertheless, it has been reviewed by the Editorial Board of RHI-IHR.

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The contributions to this special issue reflect these trends. Centred on commodities, including salt, raw cotton, ivory, and cotton textiles, they reveal how economic phenomena are best understood through the interplay of global connections and local specificities. In doing so, they not only expand the empirical and methodological horizons of economic history but also demonstrate how global economic history provides fresh insights into economic development, interconnectedness, as well as the enduring role of Britain within anglophone scholarship.

The article is organised as follows. After this brief introduction, section 2 examines the rise of global perspectives and the rationale for comparative and connected approaches in economic history. Section 3 illustrates the trajectory of global economic history. Finally, section 4 focuses on the contributions of this special issue.

2. The global turn in economic history

Global economic history, as an approach within the discipline of economic history, has recently gained currency. Since the beginning of the 21st century, not only economic history but social sciences broadly championed a global perspective on the study of themes within their disciplines. Stemming from a wider need to address the challenges posed by forces of globalisation in the 20th century, as well as increasing recognition that the study of society (and within it that of the economy) had been largely motivated by Eurocentric concepts, the adoption of a global perspective was seen to facilitate the incorporation of evidence, and insights, from regions around the world (Conrad 2016; Roy and Riello 2019; Berg 2013). At its core, it entails a widening of the historical academic lens to incorporate the experiences and ideas of non-European societies, their evolutionary trajectories, as well as specific pathways for economic organisation. The rationale motivating such a wide-ranging shift was, of course, that the more we know about different parts of the world, the better we can explain how, and why, economic and social trends developed the way they did, with implications for how economic growth might be organised for the future.

The discovery of the global within economic history stems largely from the historical within economic history. History as a discipline has been attuned to the significance of global connections via sub-disciplines such as ‘world history’, ‘international history’, ‘post-colonial studies’ and ‘material culture studies’, all of which foreground global exchange. Consequences of 20th century globalisation led historians to demonstrate that the world has always been connected, producing works highlighting these connections since antiquity (Bayly 2004; Goldstone 2008; Abu-Lughod 1989). These scholarships stimu-

lated a reorientation of focus within economic history even as history itself moved towards adopting a greater global perspective, not restricting itself to just examining distinct societies but also their interactions with one another (Mazlish 1998; Subrahmanyam 2007).

Challenges of a new phase of globalisation aside, and irrespective of the nature of the evidence, several important themes within economic history cannot be effectively examined without the deployment of comparative and connected perspectives. Studies of imperialism and colonialism, interest in regional inequality, the slave trade, and the impact of growth in one world region on environmental degradation in another are a handful of examples that necessitate a global approach to the study of the past. Several significant debates in economic history, and the historical evidence related to them, therefore, lend themselves readily, and usefully, to a global approach towards their investigation.

3. The trajectory of global economic history

Two methodological developments have been significant in defining the trajectory of global economic history. The first is the emergence of ‘world systems theory’, developed by Immanuel Wallerstein in the 1970s, incorporating a multidisciplinary approach to global history and social change by situating the world (or connections between parts of the world) at the centre of the analysis (Wallerstein 2004). Immediately the lens necessitated refocussing from isolated national economies to global economic connections via concepts such as core-periphery, interdependence and historical continuity. Rooted in the long-run perspective of the Annales School, the world systems approach led to the development of commodity chain analysis as a heuristic tool for unpacking economic connections at the global level (Braudel 1972; Wallerstein 2000). Investigations via commodity studies have contributed extensively to the literature on global economic history, as we also see within this special issue.

The second significant development involved a new way of approaching comparative historical analysis of distinct economies. Inverting Eurocentrism and asking why Britain did not go the Chinese way, Kenneth Pomeranz’s famous volume *The Great Divergence: China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy*, published in 2000, set the groundwork for reciprocal comparison by overturning the critical presumption that the European path was the only natural and logical track for economic development. While the title of the work, and hence the motivation, ostensibly emerged from the inclination to examine why Britain-Europe developed and China-Asia did not (hence the idea of the ‘divergence’), the work’s more significant methodological in-

tervention was the fresh approach to the study of global economic history, one unencumbered by the notion that the European trajectory alone embodied the pathway to economic prosperity. Unfettered by this millstone of Eurocentrism, it opened the gateway for economic historians to not only consider divergent paths to economic growth shaped by unique combinations of factor endowments as well as environmental components and transnational dynamics, but also to better explain the European experience itself by situating it within a global context (Allen 2011; Sugihara 2013; 2019).

The trend towards the adoption of a global perspective within economic history has been neither linear nor absolute. It has, however, been significant, producing pioneering works focussing on approaching the global from a variety of perspectives, using a diverse range of methodologies. Two broad strands become discernible as we begin to explore recent scholarship in global economic history. The first approach seeks to map the experience of the various parts of the world, bringing to the fore evidence from regions previously underexplored, allowing us to better determine the jigsaw of regional economic development that ultimately shapes the global. Seeking to situate different parts of the world more robustly within economic history, this strand does for non-European societies and economies what has been historically done for European societies, providing us with increasingly improved estimates and in-depth understanding of the economic histories of the regions in Asia, Africa, Oceania and the Americas (Boldizzoni and Hudson 2015; Baten 2016; Pamuk 2018; Bin Wong 2018; Gupta 2025; Frankema 2025).

The second strand is more interested in exploring an inter-continental perspective, oriented towards extracting connections between regions via trade, migration, the transfer of knowledge/ideas or the impact (economic, social or environmental) of economic growth in one region on another. Instead of focussing on one nation or region, this approach unpacks what the interaction between two, or more, regions delivers economically to those involved. Trade and its myriad networks are particularly well suited to such forms of investigation, as are commodity analyses, migration studies, as well as studies focussing on the transfer of knowledge – especially technological – from one part of the world to another (McNeill 1991; Riello 2013; Zahedieh 2010; Berg 2013; Parthasarathi 2011; Irigoien 2009). Often emerging from new questions, or old ones reassessed through new sources or methods, global economic history examining interconnections offers fresh insights into the interconnected past, effectively restructuring the discipline of economic history via new questions, perspectives, sources and methods (Lemire 2018; Roy 2025; Finn 2018; Gardner and Roy 2020; Raman 2022; Berg and Hudson 2023; Broadberry and Gupta 2006).

As an academic exercise, connections need not be identified solely geographically. New scholarship within global economic history has also over-

come disciplinary boundaries to incorporate interdisciplinarily connected ways of approaching old questions through unconventional sources and methods from adjacent disciplines. Recently, measurable characteristics of historic textile samples have been used to track the material evolution of the British cotton industry vis-à-vis pre-modern Indian cottons, to develop a causal inference of the influence of the imitation of Indian textiles in Britain and mechanisation in the British cotton industry (Raman 2022; 2023). Textile sources are traditionally the domain of textile/material historians or museum curators and conservators. Technological advances and an interdisciplinary approach, however, allow economic historians to extract ‘data’ from these material sources, expanding the source-range and repertoire of methods at our disposal and, in turn, our multidimensional knowledge of the past. New methods, such as historical reconstruction, have also been deployed to provide new insights into themes of knowledge transfer and technological change crucial to global economic history – impossible through conventional methods (Raman 2025).

4. Contributions of this special issue

The four papers that form part of this special issue illustrate this new approach to the study of global economic history. They are geographically and methodologically diverse and incorporate several characteristics of the academic trends connected to global history discussed above. Two fundamental elements tie them together. First, they seek to examine economic phenomena through commodities – salt (Thomas 2025), ivory (Bennett 2025), raw cotton (Dixit 2025) and finished cotton cloth (Appleton 2025). Second, they seek to highlight connections, about the role of the colonial state in implementing policy in the colonies (British Caribbean and British India), about a commodity shaping skill in a location entirely unfamiliar with said commodity (ivory in Britain), and about the role of the merchant in coordinating knowledge transfer and commercial activity between two geographically and culturally distant locations (British merchants in Brazil).

Through the lens of salt raking in the British Caribbean Turks Islands, Thomas (2025) connects labour, technology, institutional economic history and British colonial policies to assess the impact of the abolition of slavery on salt pans in the Atlantic world. Historiography on the use of slave labour within the early-modern Atlantic economy has focussed largely on sugar and cotton. Thomas uses the processing of salt to examine forms of coercive labour before and after emancipation. Contributing directly to the debates surrounding slavery as well as land use, ownership and the colonial state, the findings suggest the deeply entrenched nature of land control and labour exploitation

irrespective of the conditions of slavery or freedom. Focusing on the transition from enslaved to waged labour, Thomas finds institutional transference, with exploitative practices embedded in sugar production transitioning to those in salt. It throws light on the role of colonial state policymaking and the motivations for abolishing longstanding ‘commons’ land usage rights for salt processing in favour of maintaining and solidifying white colonial dominance in the sector as late as 1845, several years after the abolition of slavery, ensuring labour conditions altered little from those under slavery.

Another commodity, this time raw cotton, is the focus of Dixit’s (2025) paper investigating access to it in two Asian economies – India and Japan. Intervening within the literature on India’s slow economic development during the 19th and 20th centuries via a comparative assessment against the Japanese case, Dixit argues that in the case of the sluggish growth of mechanised cotton manufacturing in India, a decisive role was played by the British colonial state. Colonialism has been cited as the anchor holding back the growth of economic development in modern India in the past. The originality here lies within the role of the state in narrowly supporting, or hindering, economic development via international access to a specific raw material – in this case long staple raw cotton essential for mechanised spinning. For the Japanese case, Dixit shows a trade organisation propelled by the state, enabling local firms to access all varieties of raw cotton at competitive prices. In the Indian case, domestically produced short-staple cotton was unsuitable for mechanised spinning. Evidence shows that the British colonial state constrained access to long stapled raw cotton via high import costs, disincentivising its use in the colonial Indian manufacturing sector. This restrained access, the paper argues, was crucial for the delayed take up of mechanisation, resulting in long-term consequences for industrial development in India.

Contributing to the large literature on commodity trade and commodity chains, and connecting it to labour history, Bennett’s (2025) ‘Port labour, global commodities, and material skill development’ addresses the often-overlooked problem of labour skill development via an understudied commodity – ivory. The paper examines material skill development within the British labour force in the warehouse of the Port of London. This skill was for the material examination of ivory from east Africa arriving in Britain, developed within assessors working in the warehouse – workers who had never seen an elephant in their lives. Using documentary and photographic sources, Bennett locates this skill within global trade and its ability to radically connect and transform workforces in distinct locations via commodity transfer. The materiality of ivory as the source of a new form of skilled labour underscores the significance of material analysis and its importance to global economic history. In this, Bennett brings us closer not only to the material and the sensorial – an aspect of product quality rarely acknowledged let alone examined – but also

to the physical space of the port as a unique spatial link enabling global exchange.

Shifting our focus to finished cotton textile products and directing our attention to the issue of consumer demand in Latin America, Appleton's (2025) article uses merchant correspondence and archival records to demonstrate how British manufacturers customised textile goods for Brazilian markets between 1820-1840. Addressing directly the literature related to industrialisation in the British cotton industry within economic history, and that of merchant networks and business development/strategy, the paper zeroes in on the role of the merchants as connectors of distant landmasses and carriers of useful knowledge. The evidence narrows the focus on to qualitative aspects of textile products – colours and designs – to show how textile merchants and manufacturing firms organised knowledge flows conducive to commercial success. Crucially, this knowledge was fundamentally global, with the bulk of the historical evidence suggesting Brazilian customers demanded Indian and French patterns on cotton textiles, consequently forcing recalibration of this aspect of product quality by British cotton manufacturers in line with Latin American consumer demand.

Closer inspection reveals commonalities as well as differences between the papers. While the use of commodities is common to all four articles, each approaches its specific commodity from a distinct direction. For Appleton (2025), the commodity is a means of extracting market intelligence and relates to the transfer of this knowledge to the manufacturer to shape business strategy and output. For Bennett (2025), a natural commodity shapes labour skill and generates employment, impossible without access to the specific commodity via global trade. Thomas (2025) links technologies as well as policymaking to the commodity, its characteristics shaping both; while Dixit (2025) presents lack of access to the commodity as critical to long-term economic development. These papers highlight the significance of commodities as vehicles of global interactions and economic development and underscore the importance of material investigations and commodity studies within economic history.

The papers also bring distinctive approaches and sources to the study of global economic history. While all four are connected to commodities, their investigations have led the authors to archives in different parts of the world for the extraction of evidence in a variety of forms. Merchant correspondence, trade data, autobiographical accounts, official accounts, photographic evidence, slave registers and archaeological remains – all have made their way into the articles of this special issue, ensuring a remarkable expansion of sources as evidence. Every incorporation of new evidence brings new insights, and simultaneously forces the historian to develop new methods, or devise creative uses of pre-existing ones, for the investigation of new sources.