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COMMERCIAL CONFLICT AND REGULATION IN THE DISCOURSE OF TRADE IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND*

THOMAS LENG

University of Sheffield

ABSTRACT. *This article seeks to re-examine the intellectual context of commercial policy and regulation in seventeenth-century England. It questions a common assumption about so-called ‘mercantilist’ writers: that they saw trade as in some way finite and therefore won by one nation at the expense of another. Instead, it proposes that the often belligerent attitude of the ‘mercantilists’ towards trade was rooted in an understanding of the nature of international commerce as both communication and competition. Although writers acknowledged the mutual aspect of trade, they did not see this exchange as automatically equal, but saw it as possible for one party to exploit the other. This situation demanded state action to protect national trading interests in the disputed area of commerce, and thus this ‘discourse of trade’ was linked to political and juridical discourses about international relations. The article shows how this understanding of trade influenced debates about commercial governance in the critical middle decades of the seventeenth century, culminating in the attempt to create a national monopoly through the navigation acts, ‘securing sovereignty’ over the nation’s trade. The second half of this article examines this in more detail with reference to the ideas of a prominent defender of the 1651 Navigation Act: Benjamin Worsley.*

I

Although the term is no longer as popular as once was the case, mercantilism continues to dominate our understanding of the commercial ideas and legislation of seventeenth-century England, referring not so much to a distinctive school of economic thought or ideology, as a vague set of assumptions about the belligerent nature of commerce and the inevitable need for state regulation of it.¹ Such an

47 Hooton Road, Willaston, Neston, Cheshire, CH64 1SG, thomasleng1978@yahoo.co.uk

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¹ The historiography of mercantilism is too vast to be fully dealt with here, but certain key works demand mention. The fullest statement of mercantilism as a system of economic policy geared towards the needs of the state is Eli Heckscher, *Mercantilism*, trans. M. Shapiro (2 vols., London, 1935). Many economic historians, however, have questioned whether commercial policy was conducted along such systematic lines, for which see D. C. Coleman, ed., *Revisions in mercantilism* (London, 1969). Generally

aggressive mentality is often explained as a symptom of the belief that there is a 'fixed cake' of wealth or trade in the world, so that 'the gains from trade and the gain of power – each reflected in import of specie – were considered one-sided: what one nation acquired, the rest of the world must lose'.² This interpretation neatly explains the supposed mercantilist neglect of the domestic economy, as the profits which one party made through trafficking with his neighbour were balanced by a corresponding loss, merely circulating wealth within an enclosed system. By contrast foreign trade was the means by which to capture the wealth of other nations, in the form of the bullion which would flow in when exports were in excess of imports, the ruthless logic of the balance of trade. Government regulation of the economy was therefore seen as necessary in order forcefully to capture a share of this wealth, and commercial legislation was almost unthinkingly geared towards this fixed goal.

The notion of a 'zero-sum mechanism' has been criticized by Cosimo Perrotta, who suggests that 'it implies a coherence which, at least on this point, the mercantilists lacked'.³ Despite this, in her recent account of seventeenth-century English economic thought Andrea Finkelstein has argued that 'merchants routinely accepted that one nation's gain must come at another nation's loss. How could it be otherwise in a world of finite resources anchoring a closed universe?'⁴ The 'fixed cake' analogy is therefore portrayed as the economic corollary of a pre-modern worldview dominated by ideas of hierarchy and order, and of a belief in an organic 'body politic' set within a bounded and unchanging Ptolemaic cosmos. These were formidable intellectual barriers which prevented contemporaries from attaining a full understanding of the market, explaining their anxiety about the dangers of commerce, and epitomizing the failure of the early modern mind in the face of change.

This article argues that this analogy is an inappropriate one, which simplifies what was a more complex 'discourse of trade', to use a term more meaningful to

the tendency amongst economic historians is to stress the reactive and short-termist nature of commercial policy in this period: see B. E. Supple, *Commercial crisis and change in England, 1600–1642: a study in the instability of a mercantile economy* (Cambridge, 1959), pp. 225–6; C. G. A. Clay, *Economic expansion and social change: England, 1500–1700*, II: *Industry, trade and government* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 205–6. Recently, however, Ormrod has made a strong case for seeing the period 1650–1770, when the English state began to make increasingly coherent and successful efforts to gain commercial ascendancy over the Dutch, as 'the age of mercantilism'. D. Ormrod, *The rise of commercial empires: England and the Netherlands in the age of mercantilism, 1650–1770* (Cambridge, 2003).

² W. R. Allen, 'Mercantilism', in J. Eatwell, M. Milgate, and P. Newman, eds., *The new Palgrave dictionary of economics* (3 vols., London, 1991), III, p. 448. See also M. Blaug, *Economic theory in retrospect* (4th edn, Cambridge, 1985), p. 17.

³ C. Perrotta, 'Is the mercantilist theory of the balance of trade really erroneous?', *History of Political Economy*, 23 (1991), pp. 301–35, at p. 314.

⁴ A. Finkelstein, *Harmony and the balance: an intellectual history of seventeenth-century English economic thought* (Ann Arbor, 2000), p. 89. Whilst I fully endorse Finkelstein's efforts to interpret seventeenth-century economic writers in terms of the social model of the body politic, I think she assumes too much coherence within the 'greater matrix of political, social, religious, moral, and metaphysical order' through which contemporaries viewed economic activity (p. 256).

contemporary writers than the anachronistic 'economic thought'. Seventeenth-century writers were certainly ambivalent about international trade, but this was not because they were unable to conceive of a world of expanding wealth and commerce, driven by the force of private interest. Rather, their ambivalence was rooted in a more subtle analysis of the nature of commercial relations, both domestic and international, as at once conflict and collaboration. Whilst it was recognized that traffic between individuals or nations linked them together in society, these exchanges were driven by self-interest, entailing competition and conflict alongside co-operation. And just as was the case at home, where the presence of debtor's prisons visibly attested to the failure of some individuals to remain solvent, international trade appeared to create losers as well as winners. Trade was not a finite resource to be won at the expense of others, but its rewards did not fall equally, and in fact seemed to increase inequalities between trading partners. This made it necessary for the state proactively to defend the nation's commercial interests, imposing order on the legislative vacuum in which foreign trade occurred, on behalf of the public good. Thus, we might say that the discourse of trade was primarily ethical, rather than theoretical or metaphysical, encompassing debates about international relations and law as well as more specifically 'economic' issues.⁵

The first part of this article traces the contours of this discourse in several areas of debate, mainly in mid-seventeenth-century writings, petitions, and legislation. It argues that this discourse influenced the fashioning of seventeenth-century commercial policy, which rather than being simply thoughtless and reactive, could be responsive to contemporary debates about trade. Particular importance is attributed to the debates in the years immediately preceding the foundation of the English commonwealth in 1649, when the strategic importance of trade was gaining unprecedented levels of attention. I suggest that these debates represent a critical moment in the history of commercial discourse, when the dilemma between expanding trade and enclosing it reached a head. This provides the intellectual context for the passage of the Navigation Act in 1651, an act which sought to strike a balance between embracing commercial interdependence, and maintaining independence, by literally 'securing sovereignty' over the nation's trade. Thereafter, the state became increasingly committed to defending national commerce, principally by upholding the navigation system, which Ormrod has recently suggested had a positive effect on the growth of English trade in the late seventeenth century.⁶ The second half of the article examines in more detail the connection between commercial discourse and policy in the era of the navigation laws, with reference to the ideas and career of an individual who, as both a

⁵ In fact, the persistence of a 'moral economy' in the thinking of the canonical figure in modern economics, Adam Smith, is now recognized. I. Hont and M. Ignatieff, 'Needs and justice in the *Wealth of Nations*: an introductory essay', in I. Hont and M. Ignatieff, eds., *Wealth and virtue: the shaping of political economy in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 1-44.

⁶ Ormrod, *Rise of commercial empires*, p. 337.

participant in this discourse, and a state-employed expert in commercial affairs, demonstrates this relationship in practice. This was Benjamin Worsley, secretary to the council of trade from 1650 to 1651, official defender of the Navigation Act, and promoter of colonial trade in the first decades after the Restoration.

II

Although seventeenth-century writers often stated the principle that the gain of one party in trade was at the expense of the other, suggesting a finite understanding of commerce, they were simultaneously able to envisage how it might expand without resulting in a corresponding loss. Most simply, it was possible to increase agricultural and industrial production alike: English territories contained vast natural resources ripe for exploitation, as reflected in the huge number of agricultural pamphlets of the period, as well as a burgeoning interest in technological inventions, in mining, land drainage, and numerous other enterprises.⁷ And if husbandry could fuel expanded trade, the seas surrounding Britain offered what was believed to be ‘a continual Sea-harvest of grain’, from ‘infinite shoals and multitudes of Fishes’.⁸ The gold and silver which poured into Europe from the Spanish Americas contradicted any assumptions about a fixed amount of specie, which in any case was not equated with wealth in a simple sense. Because of shortages of circulating currency and limited domestic demand in a relatively stagnant economy, money gained from foreign trade did appear to have a role in stimulating exchanges. However, this was not because specie represented a fixed proportion of the world’s wealth, to be hoarded up at the expense of others: rather, seventeenth-century writers argued that currency needed to stay in circulation, greasing the wheels of exchange.⁹ Furthermore, many writers proposed alternatives to gold and silver money, which would transcend the problem of limited currency and allow the potential energies in the domestic economy to be unlocked. Thus William Potter offered as *The key of wealth* a project for a group of traders to introduce their own paper currency by pooling their credit, eventually expanding the circulating currency and speeding up exchanges, which would be like the discovery of a ‘MYNE of GOLD ... in this land’.¹⁰ The effects of this initiative would be ‘not onely to recover our decayed Trade to its ordinary measure, but to multiply it’, by improving domestic trade alone.¹¹

However, given England’s relatively small, mainly agricultural population, the potential profits of the domestic market paled in comparison with those which could be gained by foreign trade, which provided access to resources and markets

⁷ For the discourse of agricultural improvement of seventeenth-century England, see A. McRae, *God speed the plough: the representation of agrarian England, 1500–1660* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 135–68.

⁸ T. Jenner, *Londons blame, if not its shame* (London, 1651), p. 1.

⁹ For understandings of the role of money as economic stimulant, see P. H. Kelly, ‘Introduction’, to P. H. Kelly, ed., *Locke on money* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 40, 72. For the strategic role accorded to foreign trade, see Supple, *Commercial crisis*.

¹⁰ W. Potter, *The key of wealth* (London, 1650), p. 21.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

on a huge scale. Rather than focusing merely on domestic trade, Potter's project had the ultimate end of allowing English merchants 'to ingrosse the Trade of Europe'.¹² But although he assumed that it was possible to capture Europe's trade in this way, this did not mean that the volume of trade itself was seen as static, and throughout the century new trades were being 'discovered', as merchants travelled further afield and transported greater volumes of goods.¹³ Seventeenth-century English writers were certainly able to see the possibilities of expansion and improvement in agriculture, in industry, in currency and in foreign trade.

If this was the case, why then was international trade so often described in the belligerent terms apparently characteristic of 'mercantilist' writers? Although such writers did not see international trade as necessarily finite, neither did they understand its gains as inevitably falling equally between trading partners. Socially, commerce was at once an act of collaboration and competition, bringing people together but also increasing the inequalities between them. This dualistic understanding of trade can be traced as far back as to classical authors, but its significance grew in the wake of the expansion of domestic marketing of the sixteenth century, and the inequalities this created.¹⁴ Craig Muldrew has shown how this expansion was based on credit extended between households, privileging the values of trust and reputation on which credit relied.¹⁵ By 1601, John Wheeler was able to describe human sociability itself as a sort of commerce, 'so that it is almost vnpossible for three persons to converse together two houres, but they will fall into talke of one bargain another'.¹⁶ From this perspective, commerce was a hallmark of the civilized world, promoting communication as well as exchange, for '*While other creatures live free and Independent from one another, only Man stands in need and help of another.*'¹⁷ However, despite the ideal of sociable good-neighbourliness, the strain which market expansion placed on credit relations at the same time highlighted the competitive nature of these exchanges, leading to a new language of social description seen 'not just as the positive expression of social unity through Christian love and ritual as had been the case in medieval England, but increasingly as the cumulative unity of the millions of interpersonal obligations which were continually being exchanged and negotiated'.¹⁸

Muldrew sees Hobbes as the major contemporary observer of this competitive society, but we can perhaps discern a reaction to the same social forces in the works of his contemporary, the digger Gerard Winstanley. Like Hobbes,

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 73.

¹³ For commercial expansion into the Levant and East Indies in the period c. 1580–1640, R. Brenner, *Merchants and revolution: commercial change, political conflict, and London's overseas traders, 1550–1653* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 3–50.

¹⁴ For classical precedents, see D. A. Irwin, *Against the tide: an intellectual history of free trade* (Princeton, 1996), pp. 11–17.

¹⁵ C. Muldrew, *The economy of obligation: the culture of credit and social relations in early modern Europe* (Basingstoke, 1998).

¹⁶ J. Wheeler, *A treatise of commerce* (Middelburgh, 1601), pp. 2–3.

¹⁷ R. Coke, *A discourse of trade* (London, 1670), sig. B1r.

¹⁸ Muldrew, *Economy of obligation*, p. 123.

Winstanley recognized the discordance inherent in commercial competition, which he saw as pitting members of the commonwealth against each other, for 'When Mankinde began to buy and sell, then did he fall from his Innocency; for then they began to oppress and cozen on another of their Creation Birth-right.'¹⁹ But whereas Winstanley's solution to this was for the state to outlaw commerce itself, Hobbes's *Leviathan* would regulate these domestic exchanges on behalf of the public good, institutionally upholding the contracts on which they were based.

The seventeenth-century discourse of trade transposed these tensions about domestic commerce on to overseas trade, which both united and divided the civilized world. On the one hand, international trade was 'that great link of humane society, that golden chain which unites all nations', allowing them to 'participate in each Countries good, and containe vnder one roofo many times the harvests of each Pole, the sweetnesse and delight of every clymate'.²⁰ But it was also, as Sir Josiah Child bluntly informed the Lords committee for the decay of trade in 1669, 'a kind of warfare'.²¹ Although apparently dichotomous, often these two perspectives were voiced by the same writers. Gerard de Malynes, for example, portrayed 'Traffique' both as 'by Art Amiable; being the Sole peaceable Instrument, to inrich Kingdomes and Commonweales', and as a 'Most Dread and gracious Soueraigne', to be feared and respected.²² The merchant John Battie, writing during the commercial depression of the 1640s, described the decay of trade as 'an *Epidemicall* disease', which tended to spread from one nation to another, so that 'it may bee said of the *Body of Trade*, one Part hath such a dependencie upon another, that if any one faile in any remarkable manner, the rest will in time suffer thereby'.²³ However, he went on to argue that England's troubles would be capitalized on by the Dutch, who 'watch all opportunities to Ingrosse all the *Trade* they can into their owne hands', and 'will be ready to take hold of what we let loose, and with great eagernesse pursue what we let goe'.²⁴ The very interdependent nature of the 'Body of Trade' would allow Dutch merchants to beat their rivals, and dominate their partners.

Domestically, such inequalities were not necessarily harmful to the body politic, comprised as it was of the cumulative wealth of its members, but foreign trade existed outside of the reach of the state and its legal jurisdiction, encompassing the contested spaces between nations which remained in a Hobbesian 'state of nature'. As John Locke put it, 'though in a commonwealth the members of it are distinct persons still in reference to one another, and as such are governed by the laws of society; yet in reference to the rest of mankind, they make one

¹⁹ G. Winstanley, *The law of freedom in a platform or, true magistracy restored* (1652), quoted in McRae, *God speed the plough*, p. 127.

²⁰ T. Johnson, *A discourse consisting of motives for the englarging and freedome of trade* (London, 1645), p. 1; J. Hagthorpe, *Englands-exchequer* (London, 1625), p. 2.

²¹ J. Thirsk and J. P. Cooper, eds., *Seventeenth century economic documents* (Oxford, 1972), p. 70.

²² G. de Malynes, *The maintenance of free trade* (London, 1622), epistle dedicatory (n.p.).

²³ J. Battie, *The merchants remonstrance: wherein is set forth the inevitable miseries which may suddenly befall this kingdome by want of trade, and decay of manufactures* (London, 1644), pp. 8–9.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.

body, which is, as every member of it before was, still in the state of nature with the rest of mankind'.²⁵ Thus in political discourse there was a pervasive uncertainty about the lack of an agreed international law presiding over the community of nations, as demonstrated by the debate between Hugo Grotius and John Selden on the juridical status of the sea.²⁶ The sea, of course, was also an arena for commerce, and even Winstanley saw the necessity of his communistic utopia passing navigation laws to regulate its trade with 'unfree' monarchies.²⁷

Similar concerns underpinned Gerald de Malynes's campaign early in the century to reform abuses of the exchange rate, which he alleged were responsible for the drain of English coin overseas, where it was valued more highly.²⁸ As 'the *Publicke measure* betweene vs and other Nations', Malynes saw the exchange rate as reflecting the credit of England's currency, but knew also that in practice its value was set by merchants and, more pertinently, those bankers who seemed to exercise an iron grip on currency flows and therefore the course of trade.²⁹ His project to reintroduce the office of a public exchanger, enforcing a state-imposed exchange rate, can therefore be seen as an attempt to regain control of the nation's currency and introduce jurisdiction to this unregulated area. This was particularly important because variable exchange rates allowed some nations unfair commercial advantages: as Malynes's disciple Maddison put it, 'by unequal exchange a gain may be had by over-valuing of our monies beyond Sea, as now they be overvalued'.³⁰ Furthermore, Maddison hinted that the manipulation of exchange rates contravened international law, arguing that those nations who 'draw away their Neighbours coin by enhancing the Denomination, or debasing the fineness by Allay ... do break the Law of Nations, which is a just cause of war among Princes'.³¹ The public exchanger would uphold English control over its coinage, prising back sovereignty from 'strangers, who are the rulers of it'.³²

Because it took place out of the bounds of the body politic, foreign trade aroused many anxieties, therefore, many of which centred on merchants themselves. The trans-national status of merchants meant that they threatened to sacrifice the public good for their own private interests.³³ Mercantile literature subsequently focused on lauding the public qualities of the merchant, as in the

²⁵ J. Locke, *Two treatises of government*, ed. M. Goldie (London, 1993), p. 189.

²⁶ R. Tuck, *Philosophy and government, 1572–1651* (Cambridge, 1993); idem, *The rights of war and peace: political thought and the international order from Grotius to Kant* (Oxford, 1999). For the contested nature of the seas, see D. Armitage, *The ideological origins of the British empire* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 100–24.

²⁷ G. Winstanley, *The law of freedom in a platform or, true magistracy restored* (1652), ed. R. W. Kenny (New York, 1973), p. 142. On the seas as a forum for commerce, see C. Molloy, *De jure maritimo et navali, or, a treatise of affaires maritime and of commerce* (2nd edn, London, 1677); P. Meadows, *Observations concerning the dominion and sovereignty of the seas* (London, 1689).

²⁸ For Malynes, see Supple, *Commercial crisis*, pp. 201–17; Finkelstein, *Harmony and the balance*, pp. 26–53.

²⁹ Malynes, *Maintenance of free trade*, epistle dedicatory.

³⁰ R. Maddison, *Great Britains remembrancer, looking in and out* (London, 1654), p. 9.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 16.

³³ See Finkelstein, *Harmony and the balance*, pp. 24–5; P. Gauci, *The politics of trade: the overseas merchant in state and society, 1660–1720* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 156–94.

long eulogy to the merchant that opened Thomas Mun's *Englands treasure by forraign trade* (London, 1664).³⁴ Mun was a member of the East India Company, which as an importer of luxury items was particularly vulnerable to the charge of wasting the nation's stock: as Carew Reynell put it, such merchants dealt with their 'own Countrymen' as they did with 'those of *Guiny*, to carry them Beads, Looking-Glasses, and such like things, and bring away their Gold'.³⁵ This trade remained controversial throughout the century, and in 1681 one author writing under the patriotic pseudonym 'Philopatris' felt it necessary to present a defence of the East India trade as 'the most National of all Foreign Trades'.³⁶

It is telling that Mun defended the East India trade not by arguing that Europe and the East Indies benefited equally from the trade, but by asserting that 'we make a far greater stock by gain upon these Indian Commodities, than those Nations doe where they grow, and to whom they properly appertain, being the natural wealth of their Countries'.³⁷ His argument focused on the value of purchasing commodities direct from their producer, before re-exporting them for profit, thus gaining from the resources and labour of another nation.³⁸ In this, the Company mimicked the commercial role played by Europe's premier middlemen, the Dutch. In fact, many Englishmen feared that their nation was in danger of being relegated to the position of the East Indies by Dutch merchants. As Perrotta noted, one frequent concern was about the purchase of unwrought English goods for manufacture in Holland and resale, which was seen as retarding native industry.³⁹ Similarly, English reliance on Dutch shipping for imports and exports raised the fear of becoming permanently dependent on a more commercially advanced rival, which thrived by trading with the goods of others.

These fears informed the Jacobean projector John Keymer's analysis of Dutch prosperity, which he argued came 'from these Seas, and this Land; out of which they draine and still covet to exhaust our wealth and coyn, and with our own Commodities weaken us'.⁴⁰ Keymer alluded to the frequent complaint of Dutch herring busses fishing in English waters, and their purchase of white cloths for dressing, but to these he added a sense of how Dutch trading methods allowed them to 'glean the wealth and strength from us to themselves, and become the Traders of the world'.⁴¹ Partly this was because the Netherlands were able to

³⁴ Printed in J. R. McCulloch, ed., *Early English tracts on commerce* (Cambridge, 1954, reprint of 1856 edn), pp. 121–5. ³⁵ C. Reynell, *The true English interest* (London, 1674), p. 12.

³⁶ 'Philopatris', *A treatise wherein is demonstrated, that the East-India trade is the most national of all forreign trades* (London, 1681).

³⁷ T. Mun, *Englands treasure by foreign trade*, in McCulloch, ed., *Early English tracts on commerce*, p. 131.

³⁸ As well as *Englands treasure*, see his *A discourse of trade from England to the East Indies* (London, 1621), in McCulloch, ed., *Early English tracts on commerce*, pp. 1–48.

³⁹ Thus 'in international trade there is an unequal advantage for the parties involved which is dependent on the values in use of the commodities exchanged, or, to be more precise, on the different productive potentials of the value in use'. Perrotta, 'Is the mercantilist theory of the balance of trade really erroneous?', p. 313.

⁴⁰ [J. Keymer], *A cleare and evident way for enriching the nations of England and Ireland* (London, 1650), p. 2.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

‘draw multitudes of Merchant to trade with them’, through offering special privileges, religious toleration, and low customs.⁴² But the Amsterdam entrepôt ultimately benefited Dutch merchants more than their rivals, who became dependent on its services and on Dutch freight. Already advantaged by this, the superiority of Dutch shipping only served to make their merchants even more competitive, so that they came to dominate European trade systematically. Through these methods, the Dutch ‘hoped to get the whole Trade of Christendome into their hands, not only for Transportation, but also the Command of the Seas. To which end they do daily increase their Traffique, augment their Shipping, multiply their Mariners, strength and wealth in all kinds.’⁴³

The Dutch example highlighted the profits to be gained from shipping, and indeed freight rates increasingly came to be seen as ‘not only the most Politick, but the most National and most certain Profit a Country can possibly make by Trade’, as Davenant put it at the end of the century.⁴⁴ The profits of shipping were seen to redound directly to the nation without being diverted into the unreliable hands of the merchant, whilst also financing naval defences. The connection between profit and power implied by the Dutch was carried to its logical conclusion on the eve of the civil war by Henry Robinson.⁴⁵ Robinson warned that without immediate state action, ‘other States will questionlesse bee too hard for us, and whatsoever trade they beate us out of and engrosse into their owne hands, will feede us with a bit and a blow, making us pay for it what they please, which will not only impoverish us, but ruine our Navigation, and subject us to become prey at pleasure’.⁴⁶ Commercial success was the only way to fulfil Selden’s vision of a *mare clausum* or closed sea, and ‘unlesse wee show our selves sole Sovereaigne of the Sea, and with our Trident Scepter give lawes (whilst we may) to all Nations there, wee must receive them from others’.⁴⁷

Concern about becoming dependent on the Dutch reached a peak in the late 1640s, when the contrast between English commercial depression and Dutch prosperity was at its most marked. Following the conclusion of a European peace in 1648, Dutch merchants began to reclaim the dominance which they had lost due to war with Spain, at the same time as English trade was suffering from the effects of civil war. As Dutch freight rates tumbled, a cataclysmic trade depression spread throughout all of England’s overseas markets, from the Baltic to Iberia and the Levant, and across the Atlantic to England’s Caribbean and American colonies, whose increasing reliance on Dutch merchants threatened to cut them

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴⁴ C. Davenant, *An essay upon the probable methods of making a people gainers by the ballance of trade* (London, 1699), p. 155.

⁴⁵ ‘Profit and power’ was of course used by Charles Wilson as the title of his study of Anglo-Dutch relations, still a key analysis of this particular commercial mentality. *Profit and power: a study of England and the Dutch wars* (2nd edn, The Hague, 1978).

⁴⁶ H. Robinson, *Englands safetie in trades encrease* (London, 1641), p. 3.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

loose from England altogether.⁴⁸ This situation endangered the commonwealth, newly founded in 1649, just as it struggled to establish itself in an unwelcoming world.

In fact, over the 1640s, trade had assumed an unprecedented level of attention in public discourse, stimulated largely by commercial depression, which provided fuel for those who hoped to see the privileges of the merchant companies abolished.⁴⁹ The commonwealth responded to these debates by founding an expert council of trade in 1650, to consider how best to regulate trade. The connection between republicanism and commerce was highlighted by many of the regime's defenders, for whom the Dutch Republic served as the model of a commercial society, to be emulated through social as well as commercial policies.⁵⁰ Robinson advocated 'making England the *Emporium* or Warehouse from whence other Nations may bee furnished with forraine commodities'.⁵¹ Similarly, Thomas Violet advised the council of trade that 'Wee must match the *Dutch* at their own weapons, and give them as great privileges, as they have given to our Clothiers ... and by this waie you will make *England* truly the *Empress of the Sea*, when everie *Sea-Port-Town* will bee an *Amsterdam*.'⁵²

Amsterdam provided the inspiration for a project designed to stimulate an entrepôt trade by opening designated 'free ports', which would charge only a nominal custom-rate on goods intended for re-export, and which the council of trade lobbied for in 1651.⁵³ However, the free ports project foundered on the dilemma of whether to open the system to foreign merchants, thus potentially allowing them freedom to gain at England's expense. One way to ensure that the profits made by foreign merchants would remain in the commonwealth was to offer naturalization, an expediency called for by many commercial writers.⁵⁴ Maddison saw this as the only way to open trade to foreigners, arguing that 'those that had the benefits of our Ports as free natural subjects, should become our own subjects and plant their children amongst us, and not to come hither to glean or gather our thyme, and make their hives in another place'.⁵⁵ Similar benefits also applied to a more ambitious project attempted by the commonwealth in 1651, which would overcome commercial rivalry with the

⁴⁸ R. W. K. Hinton, *The Eastland trade and the common weal in the seventeenth century* (Cambridge, 1959), p. 85; J. Israel, *Dutch primacy in world trade, 1585-1740* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 203-4.

⁴⁹ For the history of parliamentary campaigns for free trade from c. 1600 to 1640, see R. Ashton, *The city and the court, 1603-1643* (Cambridge, 1979).

⁵⁰ S. Pincus, 'Neither Machiavellian moment nor possessive individualism: commercial society and the defenders of the English Commonwealth', *American Historical Review*, 103 (1998), pp. 705-36.

⁵¹ Robinson, *Englands safetie*, p. 20.

⁵² T. Violet, *The advancement of merchandize* (London, 1651), pp. 10-11.

⁵³ For free ports, see Hinton, *Eastland trade*, pp. 93-4; J. P. Cooper, 'Social and economic policies under the Commonwealth', in G. Aylmer, ed., *The Interregnum: the quest for settlement, 1646-1660* (London, 1972), pp. 121-42, at pp. 135-7; Brenner, *Merchants and revolution*, pp. 613-25.

⁵⁴ For naturalization, Cooper, 'Social and economic policies', p. 130.

⁵⁵ Maddison, *Great Britains remembrancer*, p. 39.

United Provinces through political union, allowing them access to a free ports system.⁵⁶

Anglo-Dutch union would have created a single economic community from the two rivals, so that the profits of Dutch merchants would not be at the expense of England: the failure of the project ensured that the Dutch continued to be seen as a threat to English commercial independence.⁵⁷ It also strengthened the case of the merchant companies petitioning the commonwealth for new charters, who argued that foreign trade had to be carried out as a corporate exercise, whereby merchants of the same nation competed as one body with foreign rivals, rather than amongst themselves. Company charters, derived from the state, carried at least some measure of English jurisdiction into foreign markets, with more permanent diplomatic representatives often following in their wake, as was the case with the Levant Company at Constantinople, for example.⁵⁸ The Eastland Company's petition in particular emphasized that it had originally been formed precisely to 'vindicate the trade out of the usurped power of strangers', specifically by encouraging English shipping.⁵⁹ However, this had been undermined 'by the loose trading of unskilful persons, who taking advantage of this liberty and our want of power to restrain them', tended to trade at a loss and thus 'give away our native commodity'.⁶⁰ The consequence was a decline in English shipping caused by 'the stranger and interloper aiming only at their present gain, and finding the advantage of an easier freight paid in Flemish bottoms'.⁶¹ A new Eastland charter would 'rescue this trade out of the hands of strangers, ... prevent foreign shipping, and promote the English navigation'.⁶²

The merchant companies could therefore claim to bring order to the inherently disordered world of commerce, and even a vocal critic of the companies like Thomas Johnson conceded that 'there bee Generall Lawes to regulate trade, and to preserve it from confusion; we desire still a government, but not a Monopoly'.⁶³ Henry Parker presented the Merchant Adventurers as a happy medium between free trade and monopoly, and distinguished between 'that sheere, unmixt freedom, which uses to intoxicate us, and to bring detriment, and danger with it; and that allayed, or mixt freedom, which God, and Nature have made so sweet to all Generous mindes'.⁶⁴

⁵⁶ For union, see S. Pincus, *Protestantism and patriotism: ideologies and the making of English foreign policy, 1650–1668* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 15–17. Maddison explicitly highlighted the commercial goals of union, arguing that 'to give equal priviledg to the Dutch to harbours in our Ports' would 'make our Ports their store houses; and become thereby Huxters amongst us, which were too much unless they were incorporated one Nation with us'. Maddison, *Great Britains remembrancer*, p. 38.

⁵⁷ Ormrod, *Rise of commercial empires*, pp. 34–5.

⁵⁸ M. J. Braddick, 'The English government, war, trade, and settlement, 1625–1688', in N. Canny, ed., *The Oxford history of the British empire, 1: The origins of empire* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 286–308, at p. 295.

⁵⁹ Petition dated 10 Dec. 1649. Printed in Hinton, *Eastland trade*, pp. 188–9.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 194.

⁶³ Johnson, *Discourse ... for the enlargement and freedome of trade*, p. 25.

⁶⁴ H. Parker, *Of a free trade* (London, 1648), p. 5.

Because the Merchant Adventurers often traded in partnership with Dutch merchants, Parker actually suggested that the company was ‘beneficiall to the places where we trade, and by resultance beneficiall to ourselves, ... for all these interests are so interweaved, that the benefit of the Stranger is requited with the benefit of the *English Merchant*’.⁶⁵ Other writers, however, stressed that companies served to make English merchants more competitive against their foreign rivals, allowing them to compete as a corporate body rather than amongst themselves. For John Bland, they were ‘the only Foundation and Pillar upon which a lasting Monument of Trade and Manufactories is to be built and preserved: for although Corporations and Companies consist of many Members, they are but one Body united’.⁶⁶ Aware of interlopers infringing on the East India Company, Robinson warned that ‘if the Hollanders can counterminde a whole society, that had so great a stocke, so well settled, so well governed abroad, & full likely to be countenanced at home, what may then be expected from ordinarie private Marchants who have no succession, perishing one by one in their Individuals’.⁶⁷ The conclusion was clear: ‘A Corporation it must be and a powerfull one too’ – and not just in the East Indies, for Robinson also suggested the incorporation of all English merchants. Free trade might ‘much encrease it for the present’, but soon would ‘run on headlong unto our utter ruine, which must needs be the conclusion of all affaires managed of such as observe no good order’.⁶⁸

This argument afforded the companies some protection from their most vigorous critics in the 1640s, but at the same time it was becoming increasingly apparent to many observers that by limiting the number of merchants, monopolies were a clog to trade. As Thomas Johnson put it, ‘The strength of a Kingdome consists in the riches of many Subjects, not of a few, in so much that were this Trade enlarged, it would tend to the multiplying of able and wealthy Merchants, it would disperse it to a greater latitude’.⁶⁹ The force of this argument can be gauged by the changing opinion of Robinson himself, who by 1650 believed that merchant companies had ‘now become the great obstruction, through the private interests and over-swaying of particular men’.⁷⁰ The commonwealth therefore faced the dilemma of ensuring that trade ‘may neither be quite ruined, for want of good Government, nor yet obstructed, no lesse then if monopolized, by colour of a Corporation’.⁷¹

A year later, the commonwealth did indeed find such a means of commercial governance, providing a measure of protection against the Dutch without exclusively relying on companies. This of course was the Navigation Act of 1651, an act which seemed ideally suited to solve that dilemma faced by commercial

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13. On collaboration between the Merchant Adventurers and Dutch merchants, see Ormrod, *Rise of commercial empires*, p. 35.

⁶⁶ J. Bland, *Trade revived* (London, 1659), p. 3.

⁶⁷ Robinson, *Englands safetie*, p. 24.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 39–40.

⁶⁹ Johnson, *Discourse ... for the enlargement and freedome of trade*, pp. 22–3.

⁷⁰ H. Robinson, *Briefe considerations, concerning the advancement of trade and navigation* (London, 1650), p. 9.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

nations: how to expand trade without becoming prey to exploitation by rival merchants. Although it remains controversial, most historians seem to agree that the act was important in marking a move to national, statutory policies, undercutting some of the functions of the merchant companies by creating a national monopoly.⁷² The act itself sought to close the door to Dutch and other potential middlemen by confining imports into England and its empire to English ships, or those coming directly from the exporting country, although the export trade was left open.⁷³ Above all, the Navigation Act sought to create an insulated trading system which would be covered by English law, allowing commercial growth whilst retaining independence, and thus securing sovereignty over English trade. In this new age of international commerce, nations could either close themselves off from the world, minimize foreign trade, and remain independent, but also weak and poor; or embrace commerce, expand their markets, and become as strong as the Dutch, but at the risk of becoming a loser in trade, and dependent on a rival. Although in some ways it was fashioned as a short-term response to the failure of Anglo-Dutch union, the significance that the Navigation Act and its successors acquired over time may be explained by this context. To reveal more about this, the rest of this article will look at the ideas of an individual who defended the 1651 act in print, and continued to promote the idea of an enclosed commercial empire as a state-employed expert following the Restoration: Benjamin Worsley.

III

Although he has since become a fairly obscure figure, in his lifetime Benjamin Worsley was a recognized expert in the field of colonial and commercial governance, finding employment both under the commonwealth (as secretary to the council of trade of 1650 to 1651, the first salaried member of such a body), and the restored monarchy (as member of the 1668 to 1672 council of trade, and as assistant and then secretary of the plantations councils of 1670 to 1673).⁷⁴ As well

⁷² See for example Ormrod, *Rise of commercial empires*, p. 46; C. Wilson, *England's apprenticeship, 1603–1763* (London, 1965), pp. 62–3; R. Bliss, *Revolution and empire: English politics and the American colonies in the seventeenth century* (Manchester, 1990), pp. 58–9; Cooper, 'Social and economic policies', p. 135; Braddick, 'English government, war, trade, and settlement', pp. 294–5, 301–3. For the long-term history of the acts, see L. A. Harper, *The English navigation laws: a seventeenth-century experiment in social engineering* (New York, 1939). Controversy generally focuses on whether the act was mainly to serve the interests of the state (Hinton, *Eastland trade*, p. 90), or that of a particular merchant clique (J. E. Farnell, 'The Navigation Act of 1651', *Economic History Review*, 16 (1963–4), pp. 439–54; Brenner, *Merchants and revolution*). Israel is perhaps more realistic by suggesting that the act was made in response to a general current of mercantile pressure rather than to serve the interests of any particular group: *Dutch supremacy*, p. 208.

⁷³ Harper, *English navigation laws*, p. 48.

⁷⁴ Worsley's career is noted in many of the major studies of this area: see for example C. Andrews, 'British committees, commissions, and councils of trade and plantations, 1622–1675', *Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science*, series XXVI, nos. 1–2–3 (Baltimore, 1908), pp. 1–116, at p. 24; L. F. Brown, *The first earl of Shaftesbury* (New York and London, 1933), pp. 129, 140–2;

as his bureaucratic career, which is documented by several important state papers issued to statesmen such as the earl of Shaftesbury, an additional dimension to Worsley's biography is revealed by his association during the interregnum with the circle of the famed intelligencer and reformer Samuel Hartlib, providing an insight into his interests in natural philosophy and alchemy, for example.⁷⁵

In Hartlib's papers we find also a speculative proposal which Worsley drafted shortly before commencing his public career, which considered how parliament might use its imminent success in civil war as a platform to revive the nation's commercial fortunes. This treatise, 'Proffits humbly presented to this Kingdome', demonstrated the means by which agricultural and fishing improvement could be combined with colonial expansion to reach a goal of self-sufficiency. By thereafter concentrating its productive energies exclusively on exports, England would be able to trade with its neighbours one-sidedly, so that 'Our Nation receiving the wholl benefitt both of *the* Commodities itselſe and monopolizing also *the* trading for *them* into their owne hands, it will bee like as but somewhat more, then if Spaine Italy and those Countreyes which now vent those Commodities were ours by Conquest and possession.'⁷⁶ Furthermore, this prosperity would be at the direct expense of England's rivals, for 'as wee shall and may thus daily raise and strengthen ours: so *the* Kingdoms about us will, and must neccessarily as much decay and weaken', leading to an eventual state of commercial hegemony.⁷⁷ National prosperity would naturally follow.

If this proposal apparently endorsed the notion of trade as 'zero-sum game', elsewhere Worsley revealed an appreciation of its basis in the fulfilment of mutual needs. Thus, in a discourse possibly drafted for the benefit of the council of trade, 'The ends of forraigne or outland trade', Worsley noted one such end as being 'more plentifully supplied & stored with such Commodities ... at the best & cheapest hand', whether 'for pleasure or necessitie'.⁷⁸ Ultimately, nations traded with each other in order to 'furnish others or themselves alwaies with something or other that they desire'. A more striking deviation from supposed mercantilist orthodoxy occurred in Worsley's pamphlet *Free ports*, which put the council of

C. Andrews, *The colonial period of American history*, IV: *England's commercial and colonial policy* (New Haven, 1938), pp. 11, 59–60; Farnell, 'The Navigation Act of 1651', p. 441; G. Aylmer, *The state's servants. The civil servants of the English Republic, 1649–1660* (London and Boston, 1973), p. 272; Bliss, *Revolution and empire*, pp. 66, 169–171; Brenner, *Merchants and revolution*, pp. 588–90, 605.

⁷⁵ For Worsley's life and association with the Hartlib circle, see C. Webster, 'Benjamin Worsley: engineering for universal reform from the Invisible College to the Navigation Act', in M. Greengrass, M. Leslie, and T. Raylor, eds., *Samuel Hartlib and universal reformation* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 213–33, and idem, *The great instauration: science, medicine and reform, 1626–1660* (London, 1975; 2nd edn, Oxford, 2002); see also T. Leng, 'Benjamin Worsley (1618–1677): commerce, colonisation, and the fate of universal reform' (Ph.D. thesis, Sheffield, 2004).

⁷⁶ 'Proffits humbly presented to this Kingdome', *The Hartlib papers: electronic edition* (2nd edn, Sheffield: HR Online, 2002) (HP) 15/2/62A–B.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, HP 63B–64A.

⁷⁸ 'The ends of foreign or outland trade stated', HP 66/1/1A.

trade's case for this project, and which denounced an excessive reliance on the balance of trade:

Wherefore all Consultations whatsoever about Trade if *Free Ports* bee not opened, and this Whole-sale or General Trade bee not encouraged, do still but terminate in som Advice or other about Regulating our Consumption, and have no other good at farthest, but preventional; *that our Balance of Import exceed not our Export*: which to confine our selvs to alone, is, on the other side, a Cours so short, as it will neither serv to rais the Strenght of this Nation in Shipping, or to Govern the Exchange abroad; nor yet to avoid the Damage and Mischief the Subtiltie of the foreign Merchant will hereby bring upon us.⁷⁹

Worsley had visited Amsterdam from 1648 to 1649, and had seen the benefits of an extensive re-export trade. However, his visit coincided with an upturn in Dutch commerce which threatened English commercial integrity, a lesson which he carried with him when returning to England to take up the post of secretary to the council of trade formed in 1650. Thus Worsley was called on to write the commonwealth's defence of the act intended to answer the Dutch threat – the Navigation Act – in the pamphlet *The Advocate*, under the evidently popular pseudonym 'Philopatris', and proudly bearing the coat of arms of the council of state.

Although in terms of theory *The Advocate* contained nothing which could not be found in Keymer or Robinson, it certainly served its primary purpose, demonstrating the threat to English commercial independence posed by Dutch shipping. It even found approval overseas, as Worsley's Hartlibian ally John Dury found when he visited Sweden in 1652, from where he reported that the pamphlet was 'extremely well liked, ... I haue imparted it to the Lord Chancelour Oxenstiern who finds it a solid peace; the Queene also spoke of it yesterday unto me; & told me that shee had seene it transcribed into the Swedish tongue.'⁸⁰ *The Advocate* began by citing the recurring fear of zealous English Protestants before the civil war, namely 'the Design of *Spain* ... to get the Universal Monarchie of Christendom'.⁸¹ Of greater danger, however, were Dutch designs 'to laie a foundation to themselvs for ingrossing the Universal Trade, not onely of Christendom, but indeed, of the greater part of the known world'. Their hope was to 'poiz the Affairs of any other State about them, and make their own Considerable, if not by the Largeness of their Countrie; yet, however, by the Greatness of their Wealth; and by their potencie at Sea, in strength and multitude of Shipping'.⁸² For evidence of these designs, Worsley cited the complaints of various commercial interests, incorporated and interloping alike.⁸³

Worsley's account of how the Dutch came to exercise this domination comprised a systematic analysis of how one nation was able to govern trade so that its merchants were able to undercut their rivals in foreign markets, dominating the carrying trade and making other nations reliant on their shipping. Dutch

⁷⁹ B. W[orsley], *Free ports, the nature and necessitie of them stated* (London, 1652), p. 8.

⁸⁰ Letter, John Dury to Samuel Hartlib, 14 May 1652, HP 4/2/19A.

⁸¹ *The Advocate* (London, 1651), p. 1.

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 1–2.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.

commerce was rooted in a society uniquely hospitable for trade, relying on a low rate of interest, the presence of a bank, careful regulation of the standards of manufacturing, and the vigorous political defence of commerce by the state – ‘making this their Care and Protection of Trade abroad in all places their Interest of State’.⁸⁴ However, Worsley identified the principal reason for Dutch success as ‘the great number of Shipping they have constantly built; and ... the manner of managing their Trade and Shipping, in a conformitie and direction to their Grand End’.⁸⁵ Worsley therefore presented an account of the efficiency of Dutch shipping, which benefited from state-sponsored convoys and was often insured in England. By such means, Dutch freight rates were able to undercut English ones by as much as 20 per cent, providing a similar advantage over English merchants abroad. Ultimately, this had ‘Compelled our Nation ... to hire and freight the *Holland* shipping’, a practice which had quickly spread amongst English merchants.⁸⁶ Although freighting Dutch ships allowed them to continue to trade overseas, this was at great cost to English shipping as well as the competitiveness of English merchants and exports:

For this method and manner of managing their affairs, daily adding to *their* stock, and answerably diminishing the Stock and Treasure of *this Nation*: and by laying it so, as it *run* thus in a Circle, each part of it ... strengthening another part: it would unavoidably have tended to a greater and greater disabling us to hold anie Trade with them: and to have made themselves, for Wealth and Shipping, the Masters over us.⁸⁷

International trade did not happen on a level playing-field, and profit and power were inseparably linked: ‘it is by a Knowledg of Trade and Commerce, and the Cours of it, that one Nation or State know’s perfectly how to straighten and pinch another’. Thus the Navigation Act, ‘so happily and timely established by the Parliament’, was intended to rescue the nation from a dangerous condition of dependency.⁸⁸

The Advocate was certainly jealous of Dutch prosperity, but this jealousy did not merely lead to policies of destruction. Its sister pamphlet, *Free ports*, again published with an official frontispiece, was also based on an analysis of the Amsterdam entrepôt, but drew a much more optimistic conclusion about how this example could be applied in England. Its publication in 1652, after the passage of the Navigation Act, reveals that at least some members of the council of trade still hoped to see the design fulfilled. Nations, Worsley began, were divided into those which relied on others for their shipping, and those which provided this service: from this situation ‘doth arise the wisdom of som Nations in fetching Commodities from the places of their Growth at that fit and seasonable time, and storing them up till the Necessitie of other Nations to call for them’.⁸⁹ By mastering this trade, the United Provinces had become ‘a rich and general Magazine or Store ... for other Nations’.⁹⁰ Carrying the commodities of northern

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁸⁹ Worsley, *Free ports*, p. 1.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

and north-east Europe into England, France, and Portugal, and then bringing back goods from southern Europe and the East and West Indies northwards, the Dutch were able to place 'their whole Interest in the encouragement and sagacious Managerie of this Cours and Circle of Traffique'.⁹¹ But they were no better situated to perform this re-export trade than England, which had the advantage of far greater stores of native and colonial commodities, and 'the Freedom and Independencie that our Shipping have upon the Ports of any other State', and excellent coasts and harbours.⁹² Unfortunately, the current basis of English trade was 'onely for Consumption', and therefore 'confined to a Stock, and such a Stock as must not exceed its own expence'.⁹³

Free ports would allow 'this Nation to undertake the like general Mart, as hath the Hollander'.⁹⁴ They would have multiple benefits: 'to the Quickning of Trade; to the Imploiment of the poor throughout the whole Common-wealth: to the making of all Forreign Commodities more cheap, and more plentiful ... and to the making other Nations more dependent upon this'.⁹⁵ This complex, multi-lateral trade would substantially change the commercial base of the nation:

For a Nation to deal or traffique in Wares and Merchandizes for its own expence and consumption, as countrie Gentlemen, or ordinarie Trades-men; And for a Nation to make its self a shop, and to buy and sell for the furnishing and provision of other Nations; as a man that keep's a Ware-hous, or Store-hous; which latter Trade is that wee speak of.⁹⁶

Of course free ports were not realized, as the advent of the Anglo-Dutch war ended normal commercial relations (although later laws included provisions to encourage an entrepôt trade by channelling colonial trade through England, allowing 'drawbacks' on re-exported goods).⁹⁷ However, the Navigation Act and its successors did provide a framework in which commerce could expand without the danger of exploitation, particularly with the colonies. After the Restoration Worsley became a notable advocate of the benefits of colonial trade, which, he argued, should be the focus of England's commercial energies, in a number of important papers written for statesmen such as Shaftesbury and Buckingham.

This conclusion rested on an appreciation of England's recent commercial history, beginning with the time of Worsley's youth, when 'our wollen manufactures were soe greate that we supplied not only Hambrough with other of the Hanse townes ... But further accomodated all the Eastern Countries of Danmarke, Sweden, Prussia, Poland, Russia', and even 'Holland itselife'.⁹⁸ But

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁹⁷ N. Zahedieh, 'Economy', in D. Armitage and M. Braddick, eds., *The British Atlantic World, 1500–1800* (Basingstoke, 2002), pp. 51–68, at p. 53. See also the eighteenth-century system of warehousing for re-exports: Ormrod, *Rise of commercial empires*, p. 184. Free ports continued to attract interest – Pepys, for example, owned a scribal copy of Worsley's pamphlet. Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson MS A473, pp. 53–64.

⁹⁸ Memorandum on 'The peculiar advantages which this Nation hath by the trade of our plantations', addressed to Lord Ashley (later the earl of Shaftesbury), 14 Aug. 1668. The National Archives, London, Shaftesbury papers, 30/24/39, fos. 221v–222r.

since then, the cloth trade had declined, just as the Dutch had become ‘manifestly risen in their trade beyond us and wee sensibly growne to a decay’.⁹⁹ At the same time, ‘*the Interest of Commerce*’ had been adopted as ‘an *Expresse Affayre of State*’ by France and Sweden, as well as Holland, so that trade was now ‘more *Conducing toward an universall monarchy* (eyther for *the* gayning or preventing of it) then eyther an *Army or Territory*’.¹⁰⁰ The decline of cloth exports, combined with the actions of England’s neighbours, meant that ‘nothing offers it selfe to view by *which* wee may recover our trade again, if we shall pursue the same methods of trade now that we have formerly been accustomed unto’.¹⁰¹ Worsley did not doubt that Europe had entered into a new commercial era which offered the opportunity for unprecedented enrichment and national power, but this consideration filled him with ‘some Anxiety’, for it was no means sure whether this would be to his nation’s benefit.¹⁰² Fortunately, one factor had ensured that trade had not ‘totally sunck’, namely ‘the providence of God by supplying about the same time a new trade and acquisition from our plantations’. It was even the case that the plantations did not ‘soe much depend upon the interest of England, as the interest of England doth now depend upon them’.¹⁰³

Colonial enterprise had of course long been intended to create a trading system which would benefit only Englishmen, but it took the Navigation Act to attempt to make this into reality. Thus Worsley presented a detailed account of the benefits of trading within an enclosed market:

Noe trade can be had with any other Countries; But both the Trader & the trade it selfe is necessarily subject to all such Lawes rules Impositions & Restrictions in the *said* trade as the Government of that Countrey (what ever it be) shall for its owne interest thinke fit to lay upon it; whereas in our own plantations The trade being wholly within his Majesty’s dominions It is subject to noe other law or Imposition then what shall upon due deliberation be thought best for the publicke Weale of the nation nor can any that are forraigners trade at all in Them, without leave first had from his Majesty which his Majesty having prudently thought fitt to debarr them of.¹⁰⁴

The benefits of colonial trade were ‘appropriated to *ourselves* & alone exclusive to all others’, so that ‘The freight both outward & homeward of all the whole trade be it never soe great, is still within ourselves.’ As well as producing commodities which could not be grown in England, the colonies provided a market for English products. Although the balance of trade presented imports as consuming national wealth (unless re-exported), colonial consumption provided a market for numerous English manufactures which were uncompetitive in Europe, enriching merchants and producers alike. As for consumption, Worsley recognized the

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, fo. 222r.

¹⁰⁰ ‘Some considerations about the *commission* for trade’, c. 1668–72, probably addressed to Lord Ashley. Copy in Worsley’s hand. National Archives (Shaftesbury papers) 30/24/49, fo. 86r.

¹⁰¹ Memorandum on ‘The peculiar advantages *which* this Nation hath by the trade of our plantations’, National Archives (Shaftesbury papers) 30/24/39, fo. 222r.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, fo. 225r.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, fo. 221v.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, fo. 221r.

ineffectiveness of sumptuary laws for curtailing the people's appetites.¹⁰⁵ Elsewhere he noted the 'wantoness and Luxxe' of his countrymen, who were positively addicted to those goods 'that they have got the habitt or Custome of' – currants, spices, wine, tobacco, and sugar.¹⁰⁶ But the problem would disappear if the colonies were able to supply these needs, thus simultaneously enriching themselves whilst preventing the export of bullion, and even tipping the balance of trade in England's favour if these commodities were exported.¹⁰⁷

As prosperity increasingly came to be identified with population, colonies were often accused of draining productive hands which would otherwise be put to use in domestic industry or agriculture.¹⁰⁸ To counter this, Worsley stressed the unity between England and its colonies: rather than being a drain, colonial emigration thus redistributed labour to where it could be most productive, so that 'it is the Empire of England likewise that is hereby rendered more August formidable & Considerable abroad'.¹⁰⁹ Only colonization was able to advance the trade and territory of England at once, expanding its borders into vast empty lands. Colonial trade exercised a similarly good influence on the health of the domestic body politic: unlike other trades, its benefits were confined neither to companies nor the capital, and so 'doth not as some other trades swell one part of the Kingdome and make the rest feeble & leane'.¹¹⁰ Culturally, too, there were benefits from trading with other Englishmen rather than foreigners. Partly these were a matter of convenience, avoiding linguistic differences or the need to recruit foreign factors. More pertinently, merchants who resided in foreign states were 'subject to the Customes & Lawes of the said Country ... how uncouth, strange, or disagreeable soever those Customes are'. Despite the efforts of merchant writers to identify themselves as good patriots, Worsley's allegation that those who resided abroad would eventually become 'aliens in their owne Country & by degrees contract an Interest & affection that is forreigne' suggests that they were far from secure members of the commonwealth. By contrast colonial

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, fo. 222r.

¹⁰⁶ Paper to the duke of Buckingham on Jamaica, 24 Feb. 1669. National Archives (Shaftesbury papers) 30/24/49, fo. 45r.

¹⁰⁷ Memorandum on 'The peculiar advantages which this Nation hath by the trade of our plantations', National Archives (Shaftesbury papers) 30/24/39, fos. 221r–v. In 1686, imports from America into London amounted to almost £900,000, whilst exports from London to the colonies were over £200,000. N. Zahedieh, 'London and the colonial consumer in the late seventeenth century', *Economic History Review*, 47 (1994), pp. 238–61, at pp. 242, 250–1.

¹⁰⁸ See e.g. [S. Bethel], *An account of the French usurpation upon the trade of England* (London, 1679), p. 16; Coke, *A discourse of trade*, pp. 8–13.

¹⁰⁹ Memorandum on 'The peculiar advantages which this Nation hath by the trade of our plantations', National Archives (Shaftesbury papers) 30/24/39, fo. 224r.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, fo. 222v. For the actual composition of the Atlantic trade, see N. Zahedieh, 'Making mercantilism work: London merchants and Atlantic trade in the seventeenth century', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser., 9 (1999), pp. 143–58. For the way in which colonial merchants integrated the disparate parts of empire in the eighteenth century, D. Hancock, *Citizens of the world: London merchants and the integration of the British Atlantic community, 1735–1785* (Cambridge, 1995).

merchants, living amongst their countrymen, were immune from such contamination.

In fact, perhaps the greatest advantage of trading within this English empire was its status as a single legal entity. The navigation laws – ‘the Sea Magna Charta’ – created a *mare clausum* in the sense that they extended English law over the seas, so that from the point when they were loaded up until they finally reached foreign ports, colonial goods were legislated for.¹¹¹ Rather than being surrounded by the state of nature, the imperial state was sovereign of its surrounds: *Leviathan* could swim in safe waters. This allowed a more holistic approach to commercial legislation than possible elsewhere, which Worsley outlined in the second half of his paper. Despite belonging to England, the plantations had not been well managed: ‘the trading part is left to itself; noe order, method or Council otherwise then for every mans private advantage being used or observed in it’.¹¹² From this disorder arose a litany of defects, including the overproduction of staples, and the failure to diversify production or fully enclose lands.¹¹³ However, whereas other trades relied on companies for order, the state could directly regulate colonial trade, maintaining ‘an authority to whom all the plantations should in their Customes & Governments be subject unto’, which would act to ‘improve that trade ... for the benefit of the whole & of his Majestyes Government in generall’.¹¹⁴

There is no doubt that for Worsley, ‘the benefit of the whole’ included the colonies as well as the metropolis. Fuelled by the appetites of Englishmen for colonial produce, the colonies would be able to grow and prosper, in the process providing a market for English goods: a mutually beneficial relationship which was fuelled, at heart, by consumption and demand. Here, trade was clearly not limited by a ‘zero-sum game’, but rather created wealth for all parties involved. Whereas in other trades this appetite for luxury and demand for imports could be exploited by foreign merchants to render a nation dependent and ‘underdevelop’ its economy and commerce, colonial trade was insulated from such dangers. The crucial ingredient here was jurisdiction, by which the private interests of traders could be regulated on behalf of the public good. The flaw in this system, of course, was that in practice it relied on relegating the colonies to a state of institutionalized commercial subservience, the very position which they were fashioned to ensure that England did not succumb to.¹¹⁵ As the colonial economies did indeed grow, as forecast by Worsley, there was always the danger that their citizens might eventually demand commercial independence for themselves.

¹¹¹ F. Brewster, *Essays on trade and navigation* (London, 1695), p. 92.

¹¹² Memorandum on ‘The peculiar advantages which this Nation hath by the trade of our plantations’, National Archives (Shaftesbury papers) 30/24/39, fol. 223r.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, fo. 223v.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, fo. 225r.

¹¹⁵ For an extreme example of this attitude, see J. Cary, *An essay on the state of England, in relation to its trade, its poor, and its taxes* (Bristol, 1695), pp. 65–74.

IV

It can be easy to downplay the significance of so-called ‘commercial policy’ in the early modern period, which so often seems to fall short of the expectancy of what policy should entail: consistency, coherence, and the pursuit of long-term goals derived from theoretical analysis rather than immediate circumstances.¹¹⁶ Thus the Navigation Act of 1651 may be seen as a punitive measure based on jealousy of the Dutch, which survived almost by accident. Its significance however rests not so much on its fairly unremarkable formula, as the fact that unlike so many previous measures, future governments sought to uphold, maintain, and strengthen this act: a sign that it carried a greater significance than those which had gone before. Of course the career and ideas of an individual like Benjamin Worsley cannot demonstrate this alone, but the recent findings of Ormrod have supported the contention that from the 1650s onwards the state was increasingly committed to maintaining a proactive commercial policy centred on the navigation acts, at a time when ‘economic thought and administrative practice were shifting towards the establishment of public institutions which might reflect national interest in commercial matters’.¹¹⁷ The navigation laws could still of course attract criticism, and Roger Coke alleged they ‘exclude the Trading Part of the World from Trading with us’.¹¹⁸ Thus it could be argued that they actually contradicted the example of Holland, which did not rely on its own navigation acts, as critics frequently pointed out. But in answering this objection, Sir Josiah Child aptly highlighted the aspect of the acts most valued by contemporary legislators. The Dutch, he explained, had no need for such measures, but only because they were ‘Masters of the Field in Trade, and therefore have no need to build Castles, Fortresses and places of Retreat’.¹¹⁹ In this era of commercial conflict, the navigation laws provided such a fortress for embattled English trade.

English merchants, in due course, would themselves become masters in the field. As the memory of being a commercial underdog receded, the fears of seventeenth-century writers seemed to be little more than prejudice, a mentality which David Hume found both distasteful and illogical:

Nothing is more usual, among states which have made some advances in commerce, than to look on the progress of their neighbours with a suspicious eye, to consider all trading states as their rivals, and to suppose that it is impossible for any of them to flourish, but at their expence. In opposition to this narrow and malignant opinion, I will venture to assert, that the encrease of riches and commerce in any one nation, instead of hurting, commonly promotes the riches and commerce of all its neighbours; and that a state can scarcely carry

¹¹⁶ See, for example, Supple, *Commercial crisis*, pp. 225–30.

¹¹⁷ Ormrod, *Rise of commercial empires*, p. 46. See also K. Morgan, ‘Mercantilism and the British Empire, 1688–1815’, in D. Winch and P. K. O’Brien, eds., *The political economy of British historical experience, 1688–1914* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 165–91.

¹¹⁸ Coke, *A discourse of trade*, p. 28. ¹¹⁹ J. Child, *A new discourse of trade* (London, 1693), p. 92.

its trade and industry very far, where all the surrounding states are buried in ignorance, sloth, and barbarism.¹²⁰

Thus Hume and his contemporaries began to re-conceptualize commerce as a free-flowing, self-regulating system based on mutually beneficial exchanges, which the acts of navigation increasingly seemed to clog. Ironically, the position of commercial superiority which these acts had helped make possible allowed contemporaries to view them as unnecessary, hangovers of a primitive age.¹²¹ Those accounts of seventeenth-century economic thought which implicitly have as their teleological goal the apparent liberalism of Adam Smith reach a similar conclusion, so that any form of state regulation appears backwards, conservative and anti-commercial.¹²² But with its focus on matters such as the inequalities inherent in international trade, the concurrence between commerce and power, and the difficulty that states face when seeking to govern markets and organizations that transcend national borders, the seventeenth-century discourse of trade resembles a very modern discourse, that of globalization. This suggests that far from being fixated on the outdated values of a finite universe, prevented from fully comprehending the emerging world of expanding wealth and trade by intellectual obstacles such as the idea of a 'zero-sum game', the authors of the 'mercantilist' era were already beginning to grasp those tensions which would characterize global commerce for some time to come.

¹²⁰ D. Hume, 'Of the jealousy of trade', in E. Rotwein, ed., *Writings on economics* (New York, 1972), p. 78.

¹²¹ For the important role of the state in laying the grounds for English commercial hegemony, see Ormrod, *Rise of commercial empires*, especially pp. 307–33, 338–9.

¹²² This criticism can be levelled at Joyce Appleby's *Economic thought and ideology in seventeenth-century England* (Princeton, 1978). See D. Winch, 'Economic liberalism as ideology: the Appleby version', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 38 (1985), p. 288.