

Ways of negotiating, social frontiers and Modernity

Maria Leonor García da CRUZ

Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa, Centro de História da Universidade de Lisboa, Lisboa, Portugal

Email: cruzmaria@campus.ul.pt – ml.garciacruz@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0002-8989-4527

Abstract

This text aims to highlight the action and the social appraisal of mainly mercantile and financial negotiators in the early modern period.

The historical background in which they act, that of modernity, leads us to ask questions related to eras and to shifting paradigms, given the promotion of financial and commercial practices in different European regions and their interconnection, and in a much bigger and systematic extension at intercontinental and planetary level.

Hence the highlighting of novelties and continuities in the specific dynamics of merchants and in their inclination to be included in social groups, as well as in the techniques and the way they can promote new social and cultural practices as well as a new mindset.

Keywords: Modernity, Negotiation, Frontier, Merchants, Communities

When talking about modernity and focusing on the onset of modern times (15th and 16th-centuries), one faces the problem of the definition of time by geographical area and community.

Even in Europe the so-called Renaissance, fundamentally a sociocultural and political phenomenon, does not occur simultaneously everywhere.

Modernity, itself, is an even more problematic concept given the continuities and ruptures in different phenomena if we observe a more extended period up to the 17th-century, and address, in particular, practises and instruments related to

mercantile and financial activities.

If some of the tools and techniques were derived from past centuries and were adjusted during the 16th-century, such adaptation (not a revolution) is due to the bigger complexity and scale of business because of the particular amplitude of itineraries and communications and novelties having occurred due to regularity of intercontinental connections both by land and by sea.

Cultural factors are not to be ignored when addressing the development of relationships and negotiations. The merchant operating in long-distance activities depends on geography, astronomy and navigation in his risk estimations and tabulation of timing and conditions related to journeys and transport. But that is not all. Merchandise and quantities are defined according to the knowledge of different zones of the globe and communities with different habits and different cultural values (Braudel, 1992).

In historiographic studies about the dawn of modern times, it has been usual to investigate journeys and activities, kindred, clients and partners in business, merchants and financiers of great wealth and power both nationally and internationally. Bear in mind the Medici (de Roover, 1953; Le Goff, 1990), amongst other Italian families, the Fugger (Ehrenberg, 1956) or the Ruiz (Lapeyre, 1955).

Detailed studies on several facets of the investments of the families mentioned above and other less prominent merchants (Tenenti, 1991), have helped to clarify the network of human relations and business in different zones of Europe and on other Continents (Russell-Wood, 1998). From a shop or small enterprise to a big commercial enterprise with branches spread all over the important business world, the register follows the

merchant action and his use of recording and accounting tools.

Agents and wealthy merchants' associations unite in currency exchange deals and financial transactions. Together with top political figures, they support credit and the banking sector. But that is not all. Exchange of favours with the political sphere and an affinity of interests lead some of them to also organise their activities around productive operations, including the subsoil, slave labour contracts or the acquisition of land or services.

The merchant is thus pushed towards social dynamics which are in part foreign to him, bearing in mind the politics and the social and intellectual environment.

The wealthy merchant's penchant for embodying himself in society's privileged strata leads the historian to broader reflections. Is it a wish to surpass a social border based on status and blood, that is to say, a pursuit for proximity to nobility? Alternatively, is the aim, through expertise and skill, to increase his own business and to integrate himself into a political and bureaucratic aristocracy?

Given the size of the number and type of individuals that live from commerce and business, it would not be possible to classify them in one exclusive group, albeit some groups may constitute privileged social bodies according to places of action and times.

More than a legal definition, the merchant is valued by his role in society. Naturally, merchants in towns and cities with ports benefit more from their use in communications between regions and markets. When they are not, some voices rise in their defence in the midst of the 16th Century (Cruz, 2007).

From the shopkeepers in Rua Nova dos Mercadores in Lisbon, with their selection of merchandise from the whole world to the merchants who receive permits and privileges to travel overseas or to those who establish themselves on those shores and deal with merchants, routes and local circuits, including in Asia, there are, obviously, differences in strategies and in techniques and, who knows,

well defined social and political goals.

Specific trade dynamics and the same goal for profit, nevertheless, lead merchants-craftsmen and commercial capitalists (Mauro, 1966) to compete with other clusters of crafts and to contribute to the development of industrial means of production from shipbuilding to manufacturing.

Business specialisation may lead the merchant to connect with different political bodies, be it the bourgeoisie, nobles or clergymen.

The relationship between the great financiers or merchants integrated into rich communities and political power can bring them enormous benefit, as we pointed out, including not only the opening of new businesses but also the introduction to more distinguished social circles.

If we are to compare the nobility, holders of titles or not, with a business aristocracy, who would be the genuinely privileged group in the 16th Century, in the words of a renowned historian (Mauro, 1966)?

Naturally, in this case, the merchants' coexistence with the upper strata or its effective incorporation (upward social mobility, Pereira, 1998; Loureiro, 2015) depends on the disciplinary rules of a given society (at home and abroad or overseas).

In the Netherlands, in England or the Italian states, the introduction of businessmen in the upper crust of the municipalities or the administration of bodies in republican governments or monarchies may enhance their importance in the business and commercial world bringing with it, in the modern age, profound changes to the dynamics of society, and not only socioeconomic changes.

Important financiers and entrepreneurs will then rise politically, founding dynasties of power in principalities, manorial lands and municipalities. In turn, the investment in property and securities is not necessarily a betrayal to their origins or a "betrayal to the bourgeoisie" as Fernand Braudel put it in his well-known expression, but in contrast, will mirror a growth and the valuation of status and with it a more successful integration in

Modern Society.

It is also necessary to value, in turn, certain attitudes of the open nobility such as in England or typical figures of the social hybridism like the knight-merchant of the Portuguese Empire (Godinho, 1975) notably present in the East.

Cultural education can define, for its part, the rise to high places. I refer to the attendance at universities or studying accompanied by great masters in given subjects, such as commercial law (P.Jeannin, 1986), who educate the sons of merchants in their fathers' profession, thus qualifying them to pursue and develop the family business.

They may also specialise in branches of humanism and law which ensure they rise to functions probably in international political circles that separate them from their roots but that are dignifying. Baquero Moreno (1985), Virginia Rau (1984) and Silva Dias (1969; 1988) drew our attention to some itineraries in the Portuguese milieu.

Also as protectors of the arts, commissioners and patrons, wealthy merchants and businessmen, they meet clergymen and nobility thus incorporating the elites.

Be such merchants and businessmen city noblemen or an open nobility, they tend to merge better in the society that supports them and tend to better influence the course of History.

The daily life of a merchant naturally mirrors and affects, on the other hand, secular and/or spiritual experiences. Being a believer as much as individuals and communities from different walks of life (Febvre, 1971), he mingles, according to historical circumstances or social tensions, with groups from one or another political or religious faction, be it in the Catholic or the Protestant world (Delumeau, 1965; Tawney, 1977rp).

The secularisation that marks, towards the end of the Middle Ages, both the political world and ecclesiastic administration itself seems to, paradoxically, revitalise the European's spiritual worries, his anguish towards death and eternal salvation. Rich or poor it will not only be in his death bed that worries will appear, although at that moment

there will be, whenever possible, more donations to the church, wills that order more prayers and masses and increased public displays of charity (Le Goff, 1987).

This man projects artistic programmes, he reads, and he trades secular works along with the translation and new comments on holy writings and works of moralization reveal how much the medium-sized and big tradesman is someone who seeks cultural improvement and goes along with the new trends (Puigarnau, 2002).

The Church itself becomes mercantile in a way and through writings and the debate of treaties by clerics about business, currency and interest benefits commerce, thus legitimising, not without natural boundaries, both church and civil businesses masking activities that could be considered morally reproachable.

It would now be appropriate to recall the existence of rules and institutions, some old some new, that condition, albeit not always favourably, the merchant's activity. I am referring to religious tribunals that in their fight against heresy reach in their mesh of suspicion converts and communities of merchants of Jewish origin or from a different creed, whose business and partners naturally suffer a loss (Shaw, 1992).

It is also necessary to face value judgements on the relations between Christians and non-Christian merchants, fundamental for the operation of circuits, for the trading of merchandise, for the crossing of borders, these being seen as physical and psychological limits.

The valuation of commercial and financial practices in different European zones and their interconnection, and at a much larger and systematic scale at an intercontinental and planetary level inevitably brought with it paradigm shifts in the dawn of the Modern Era.

The relationship between different communities required observation and understanding of the other's gradual process (not without prejudice, oversimplifications and misunderstandings) (Rubiés, 2005; Ptak, 1998). With time, in various circumstances,

persuasion seems to increase in relation to strength, with clear advantages.

In vast areas, along with confinement and communication with communities and cultures, forms of negotiating are developed, some more formal (diplomatic forms, albeit not always successful), some more informal (and more long-lasting) between merchants and native communities. Interaction in everyday life was obvious and reached fields from navigation and war techniques to cartography, mathematics, pharmacology and press.

It is possible to speak of socioeconomic and sociocultural borders be it in Europe be it in and with different world zones. In addition, it is possible to see borders not as the limit that allows for a dialogue and negotiation or not only as a limit but also as an area of penetrability or interconnection (Boccaro, 2005; Disney, 2010).

From this point of view, phenomena of cultural, political, social, economic miscegenation are created, noting how many commercial agents and local communities become different entities, as much as such merchants are not only economic but also religious, political and cultural agents too.

However, even when a businessman uses specific utensils and these are developed for a human market that is more profoundly interested, profound alterations do not always take place regarding financial techniques. Some of the financial instruments come from a long time ago.

What is new is the power of trade and the location of some markets, as well as the generalisation of the bill of exchange and the unfolding of its use (endorsement, for example), mainly the planetary dimension of the route of people and goods.

If simple records are replaced by more sophisticated methods for the immediate knowledge of the state of affairs, such as, for instance, double-entry or Venetian writing, historiography has concluded that such techniques do not define the modernity of the accounting of groups, of manors, state or church bodies, or financial management bodies, in different periods up to the 18th

Century.

In contrast to what was commonly thought until recently, they are only the necessary solution to a timely occurrence. Those were, in fact, the conclusions drawn from the important convention that took place in Nanterre in June 2010, entitled *Les comptes publics: enjeux, techniques, modèles 1500-1850* (org. A. Dubet S. Kott e Marie-Laure Legay, Y. Lemarchand e N. Platonova). It is confirmed that such technique was unnecessary for a long time in the Portuguese merchant milieu, even if in contact with other European business environments and even the Italian one.

We may conclude from all this that business people in their specific subtleties as well as in their tendency for social climbing integrate themselves in times and spaces of stability and renovation.

If in their specificity they may have contributed, due to their social and technical connections, to an arithmetical rendering of reality (Almeida, 1994; 1997), unquestionably backing the pre-conditions of the qualitative leap in scientific thought of centuries to come, surely, they also promoted a new mindset with their activities and relations, along with new social and cultural practises on a global scale.

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