

Afterword

Projectors and the Manipulation of Power/ Knowledge in the Rise of Capitalism

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I'm inevitably something of an interloper in the pages of the *Journal of the History of Knowledge*. Business historians like myself rarely have much to do with concepts such as “power/knowledge”; to give a rough measure, the search term “Michel Foucault” appears in nineteen publications dated between 1981 and 2018 in the *Business History Review*, compared with 692 publications over the same period in the *American Historical Review*.¹ Yet it may well be that an interloper was precisely what the editors of this special issue were looking for, given their awareness of just how useful a bit of intellectual interloping can be. Indeed, one of the editors, Vera Keller, named her most recent book *The Interlopers: Early Stuart Projects and the Undisciplining of Knowledge*. Disciplinary boundaries meant little to those whom Keller terms “interlopers,” and who went about “gleefully transgressing assumed epistemic and natural divides,” including the fundamental notional “divide between art and philosophy” and “the further divide between the liberal... and mechanical... arts.”²

And in using the term “interlopers” in a work on the history of knowledge, Keller knowingly does some interloping of her own. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, seventeenth-century folk most frequently applied the word to mean “an unauthorized trader; one who trespasses on the rights or privileges of any trade monopoly.”³ Just as commercial interlopers illicitly

¹ Search conducted on JSTOR (May 1, 2024).

² Keller, *The Interlopers*, 16.

³ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “interloper.”

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crossed over boundaries in pursuit of profit, says Keller, intellectual interlopers took up “undisciplined emotional, moral, and intellectual positions” that “contributed to [the] further global unleashing” of emerging capitalism.⁴ Lest we be tempted to think that one type of interloper was more influential than the other, we do well to note the not altogether surprising frequency with which interlopers in the commercial sense *became* interlopers in the intellectual sense, and *vice versa*.

A particularly important set of interlopers were the English merchants who scornfully flouted the exclusive trading privileges granted in 1672 to the Royal African Company by King Charles II, and whose commercial attack upon monopoly soon morphed into a legal, political, and intellectual challenge. This single issue, according to Tim Keirn, “generated as much literature as, if not more than, any other economic controversy during this period,” with pamphleteers for both interlopers and the Company seeking to convince the reading public, and ultimately Parliament, that their project for developing the African trade offered far greater gains for the nation than did the alternative proposed by their rival.⁵ The same sort of “competitive projecting,” as we may term it, also was in evidence in the “projecting at multiple scales” noted by Keith Pluymers in his study of the “multiple plans to deliberately inundate the streets of Philadelphia” for hygienic reasons.⁶

The defenders of the Royal African Company’s monopoly could count among their propagandists none other than Daniel Defoe, the very man who dubbed these years “the Projecting Age.”⁷ (Here we might note that Defoe made Robinson Crusoe, his most famous literary creation, a slave-trader by occupation, while Dalby Thomas, the dedicatee of Defoe’s *Essay on Projects*, served from 1703 to his death in 1711 as the Royal African Company’s chief merchant in Africa with authority over its purchases of enslaved Africans.)⁸ While Defoe’s contemporary, Charles Davenant, proved less enduring as a literary figure, he was an even more indefatigable defender of the Company’s perspective. Davenant argued that the Company, by uniting the entire realm’s interest in commerce with Africa, could preserve and disseminate knowledge useful to the trade and make use of ideas from people who did not have the capital to act on them themselves.⁹ The Company’s opponents met Davenant’s claim about its superior production and use of commercial knowledge head-on. Far from helping it to create and employ new techniques in the African trade, its monopoly privilege would actually make it *less* likely to innovate, while the “different Genius” of their rivals, the interlopers, as an anonymous pamphleteer put it,

4 Keller, *The Interlopers*, 14.

5 Keirn, “Monopoly, Economic Thought,” 437.

6 Pluymers, “Regulating the City.”

7 Defoe, *Essay Upon Projects*, 1.

8 Gautier, “Slavery,” 166–67; Porter, “English Chief Factors,” 207.

9 Davenant, *Several Arguments*, 3; quoted in Pettigrew, *Freedom’s Debt*, 108.

will direct them daily to new Experiments for extending the Trade, who will thereby transmit down more Observations and Experiences than any one Body of Men can do going on in the same dull track of their Predecessors, and wedded to their Errors perhaps for want of attempting new Experiences which might discover them.¹⁰

By 1720, each side had produced a projector capable of converting knowledge about the African trade into the power to pursue profits more ambitiously than any Englishman had done before. The greatest of the interlopers was Humphry Morice, who built his system of trade around the recognition that, in order to get African merchants to sell slaves to the captains of his ships on terms as advantageous as possible, the most important thing was to know what the same African merchants wanted to *buy* in exchange.¹¹ As a contemporary of Morice's observed, he kept up "a continual Traffick and Correspondence on the Coast as may furnish the Owner from time to time with quick Intelligence, to be done only by great Merchants, who can keep employed a number of Ships, that like a Thread unites them in a knowledge of their Demands."¹² On the other side was James Brydges, the Duke of Chandos, who in 1720 assembled his genteel and aristocratic friends into an investment group that bought out the Royal African Company. Chandos was no abolitionist, but he believed that Africa had much more to offer than enslaved laborers, drawing on the advice of such scientific luminaries as Sir Hans Sloane in his conversion of the Company into a vehicle for the kinds of botanical and mineral explorations that Kathleen S. Murphy discusses in her contribution to this special issue.¹³

Of course, 1720 was also the year in which the "age of projects" as Defoe knew it reached a spectacular climax and fell into an even more spectacular catastrophe. The South Sea Bubble—the wave of speculation in South Sea Company shares prompted by the government's plan to pay down the National Debt with the expected profits of the Company's sales of slaves to the Spanish American colonies—seemed to exemplify all the dangers that projects gone wrong could present to the proper functioning of the social order. Defoe himself had foreseen that it would come to this, pungently observing that "Stock-Jobbing nurs'd Projecting, and Projecting in return has very diligently pimp'd for its Foster-parent, till both are arriv'd to be Publick Grievances; and indeed are now almost grown scandalous."¹⁴

For the satirist Ned Ward in his "South-Sea Ballad," the "Alchemists of old" (and here we might think of Reut Ullmann's portrayal of Mikhail Lomonosov's chymical projects)¹⁵

10 *Answer to Several Pretended Arguments*, 4; quoted in Pettigrew, *Freedom's Debt*, 109.

11 Mitchell, *Prince of Slavers*, 225.

12 Atkins, *A Voyage to Guinea*, 158–59.

13 Murphy, "Nutmeg and Indigo"; Mitchell, "'Legitimate commerce,'" 544–78.

14 Defoe, *Essay Upon Projects*, 30.

15 Ullman, "Projecting Chymistry."

Could turn a Brazen Kettle
 Or Leaden Cistern into Gold
 That noble tempting Mettle . . .
 Our cunning South-Sea, like a God
 Turns Nothing into All Things.

The “wiser Heads” who “thrive by sober Rules” and who by right ought to rule English society, Ward complained, instead found themselves “struck with Admiration” to see “Successful Rakes... Young Rattles and unthinking Fools... now by Stock brought into Play/And made our Lords and Masters.”¹⁶ Nor was the temporary euphoria confined to South Sea Company shares, for the projectors of more than 200 new ventures offered their shares to the public during the first six months of 1720 before Parliament’s passage of the so-called “Bubble Act” outlawed the formation of new joint-stock firms. Among the projects forestalled by the Bubble Act was Morice’s own attempt to raise £600,000 in new capital for his slave-trading operation by floating it as a joint-stock. For the next century and more until the Act’s repeal in 1825, British projectors could not finance their projects by the sale of shares to the general public, and would have to seek funding and patronage by alternative means.¹⁷

Despite the link that Defoe and others detected between projecting and stock-jobbery, joint-stock companies had been just one among several channels through which projectors could make their projects real, for better or for worse. Indeed, part of the problem during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was, as the prominent scholar of Defoe’s writings Maximillian Novak has argued, “the government itself had turned projector in order to raise money” to carry on the activities of the fiscal-military state.¹⁸ The South Sea Bubble, after all, had begun as a boundary-crossing cooperative project between the state and a joint-stock company to pay down the National Debt, and was one among a series of fiscal innovations known collectively to historians as the “Financial Revolution in England.”¹⁹ And numerous projectors looked to states as the main customers for their “great designs,” as Vera Keller here relates in her piece on Sir Balthazar Gerbier. Indeed, from Gerbier in the 1600s all the way to the “Panatomic Canal” project of the mid-twentieth century that is the subject of Christine Keiner’s contribution, the vast majority of the projectors presented here were selling their projects in the first instance not to

¹⁶ Ward, “A South-Sea Ballad.”

¹⁷ Mitchell, “‘Mr Morice,’” 37–61.

¹⁸ Novak, *Daniel Defoe*, 115; quoted in Pincus, “Revolution in Political Economy?,” 140. Discussion of the British “fiscal-military state” began with Brewer, *Sinews of Power*; more recent thinking on the topic is summarized by Ganev, “Britain’s fiscal-military state.”

¹⁹ Use of this term dates back to Dickson, *Financial Revolution in England*.

potential joint-stock shareholders, but instead to sovereigns for their adoption and execution.²⁰

When sovereigns did invest in such projects, were they doing so according to the Machiavellian rule, “Let a Prince therefore take the surest courses he can to maintain his life and state,” or did they hope to serve a more broadly conceived “public interest”?²¹ Keller seems to hint at the former, at least for Sir Balthazar Gerbier during his time in the mid-seventeenth century, who in his sales pitches employed “the register of the reason of state, advising the monarch on how to manipulate the emotions of his subjects.”²² Contrasting with Gerbier’s admission that “only interest was to be believed” is Nehemiah Grew’s later adoption of a pose of “disinterested expertise,” as presented here by Will Cavert. The benefits to “the public” from Grew’s prescribed *dirigiste* approach for dissemination and employment of practical knowledge might also suggest another point of departure from the earlier schemes of Gerbier; indeed, Cavert suggests that improvements mandated by “a powerful regime . . . would dissolve any distinctions between its own interests and the public’s.” Yet we also must note that for Grew, “The people are not the ‘public’”; he instead envisioned a “‘public’ defined exclusively as taxable wealth” to be maximized via state policy,” disregarding the preferences of “the people” or any individual or group among them. This focus on the sovereign’s priorities reinforces Cavert’s claim that projects carry “an ongoing legacy of unequal payoffs that favor the already powerful.”²³

This further suggests that, just as there are those who *project* and those who are projected *to*, there also are those who are projected *upon*—in other words, those who were in some way to be manipulated, victimized, or otherwise exploited by the projectors. Crucially, while the patrons or investors assembled by a projector risked losing their investment if the project failed, this third category of people bore the risk of the project’s *success*. To be sure, many projectors, including those surveyed here, took pains to soften this dynamic. Nehemiah Grew found it expedient to nod to the idea that mandatory cooperation with his proposed “improvement police” would ultimately benefit both “the public” and “the people,” while the leaders of the Panatomic Canal called for “advance preparation” to be done among indigenous Panamanians “by understanding and sympathetic representatives.”²⁴ According to Kelly Whitmer, Leipzig workhouse manager Peter Kretschmer went so far as to argue that the labor of the young people who would work in his forestry project would be essentially “effortless.”²⁵ Yet exploitation there surely was, when we consider the “parachute science” carried out by the Panatomic Canal’s managers in

20 Keller, “Great Designs,”; Keiner, “Nuclear Sea-Level Canal Engineering.”

21 Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 323.

22 Keller, “Great Designs.”

23 Cavert, “Improvement Police.”

24 Ibid.; Keiner, “Nuclear Sea-Level Canal Engineering.”

25 Whitmer, “Youth, Happiness and Institutional Projects.”

the twentieth century; the Royal African Company's similar appropriations of indigenous knowledge in the eighteenth; and certainly Lomonosov's requisitioning of enserfed laborers, or the involuntary resettlement of formerly enslaved women by the American Colonization Society, as related by Meagan Wierda.²⁶

If the distinguishing characteristic of projecting is the building of knowledge/power asymmetries in order to displace risk away from the projectors, then Atlantic slavery was its ultimate expression. Economic writer Richard Ligon recognized this early on in the development of the plantation complex in English America. In his *True and Exact History of the Island of Barbadoes*, first published in 1657, Ligon appealed to the projecting sensibility by offering a scheme for how an individual possessed of £1,000 could invest it in trade with that island and within three years parlay it into £14,000 and buy a plantation with it, complete with a workforce of indentured and enslaved laborers.²⁷ Grouping the latter together with stock animals, Ligon suggested that "though we breed both Negres, Horses, and Cattle; yet that increase, will not supply the moderate decayes which we find in all those." He priced this depreciation at £500 a year, even as he allowed that one African he met in Barbados, to whom he explained the operation of the magnetic compass, was "as ingenious, as honest, and as good a natur'd poor soul, as ever wore black, or eat green."²⁸

The ease with which Ligon incorporated into his projector's gaze the epistemic violence that would legitimize Atlantic slavery for the next two centuries suggests that "slavery's capitalism," to quote the title of a recent volume that makes that assertion.²⁹ Against Karl Marx's contention that Atlantic slavery was a feudal holdover that merely hampered the transition to capitalism, and Eric Williams's argument that Atlantic slavery ushered in capitalism without itself being capitalism, Ligon's notional project along with the very real projects of Humphry Morice and the Duke of Chandos appears to support Stephanie Smallwood's emphatic statement "that slave-trading gave birth to the capitalist mode of production."³⁰ But here it might be advisable to sound a note of caution. Is projecting indeed distinguished mainly by the building of knowledge/power asymmetries in order to displace risk away from the projectors? And if that is the case, does this mean that there is no distinction to be made "between the Honest and the Dishonest" projects, as Defoe attempted to make?³¹ Was—and is—the art of projecting all about making a chosen set of people believe that they were being projected *to* as potential investors, when in reality they were being projected *upon* as marks for the fraudster?

26 Ullman, "Projecting Chymistry"; Wierda, "Population Projections."

27 Ligon, *Island of Barbadoes*, 108–17.

28 *Ibid.*, 50, 113.

29 Beckert and Rockman, *Slavery's Capitalism*.

30 Smallwood, "What Slavery Tells Us."

31 Defoe, *Essay Upon Projects*, 11.

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