

Ron Harris, *Going the Distance: Eurasian Trade and the Rise of the Business Corporation, 1400-1700*. Princeton, NJ: [Princeton University Press](#), 2020. xiii + 465pp., maps, figures, tables, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth; ISBN: 9780691150772, US\$39.95.

Ron Harris' book *Going the Distance: Eurasian Trade and the Rise of the Business Corporation, 1400-1700* contends that the corporation was the ultimate and quintessential form for a business organization interested in pursuing long-distance trade. This institution emerges in the Anglo-Germanic world during the seventeenth century. It ascends to become the optimal business structure for maximizing profits for companies and maintaining commercial networks. In a comprehensive introduction, Harris promises to demonstrate this all too familiar Weberian stance over four parts. The reader will instead find a book dedicated to the global history of business organizations concluding with a brief historical introduction to the British and Dutch East India companies.

Harris only dedicates the last of four book parts to demonstrate his thesis. The first part outlines the method, the second uses legal frameworks to illustrate how judicially backed prescriptions are the optimal way of understanding the operation of a business and the third explores the precursors to the joint-stock company. The third part detracts from the argument by showing that long-distance trade is, in fact, a relative concept and that legal entities were operating under the legal title of the corporation before the formation of joint-stock companies.

Due to content imbalance, the demonstration of the core argument feels incomplete. One gets an excellent comparative history of business structures, but not one focused on proving the efficiency of corporations per the thesis. Additionally, there is an exclusive reliance on secondary literature, tendencies to rely on broad conceptual definitions, and an unwillingness to acknowledge historical continuities between the idealized corporations and their institutional precursors contributing to the overall weakness of the book's argument. Long-distance trade is the primary benefit imparted to commerce by the corporation according to the author. However, the author does not provide a consistent definition of long-distance trade. If the reader hazards an inference, it is that long distance trade is any commerce which crosses several bodies of water where at least two seas are on different tectonic plates. This premise appears despite prominent long-distance traders of the premodern world such as Arabic, Chinese, Hanseatic, Indian, and Northern Italian merchants appearing in Harris' 'microstudies' throughout the book. Using the maximum possible distance as the measure of long-distance ignores the fact that it is historically a relative term. In-depth use of secondary literature could have overcome this issue. Fernand Braudel, who is featured in the bibliography, contends that long-distance trade was relative in commercial terms and that its practice does not correlate with commercial success. Just because one went the distance, did not mean that one's business was more lucrative. Closer consideration of arguments like these would have refined the term and presented an appropriately nuanced historical reality. Regarding proto-corporations before the romanticized joint-stock companies, Harris uses his ambiguous long-distance metric in conjunction with the ability to turn massive profits as sufficient conditions to claim that guilds and other corporate forms of civil society in Europe were not truly corporations. This downplaying of the corporate nature of guilds is a significant historical misrepresentation. The author goes as far as to say that these were solely regulatory bodies, not commercial entities. A cursory glance at the history of many northern Italian communes during their urbanization in the High Middle Ages demonstrates that guilds were commercially inclined organizations which negotiated with landowners to direct the

economic activity of communities and to form governments around commercial ambitions.

Ultimately, Harris' work is hampered by omitting an exploration of historical mindsets and relying heavily on results instead of processes as indicators. Medieval merchants from across Europe would have found that trading along the East-West axis from London to Novgorod a great distance given the technology of the time and the geopolitical challenges of the route, just as Hanseatic merchants did between their *kontors* in Novgorod and London. The Mediterranean world had a complex trade network of varying distances that from antiquity had supported some of the largest economies of the preindustrial era and those distances were much shorter than what Harris envisions as long-distance. Many of these routes were highly profitable for their merchants. Success in this commercial environment did not require the corporation as an institutional form. There is also a tendency to assume that long-distance trade needs to be a one-stop direct transaction between business contacts. If a commodity must stop at multiple geographically distinct markets, is the network then not long-distance? Venetian merchants trading in spices may have purchased their goods in the comparatively nearby Middle East, but the products were just as likely to have travelled from India to arrive where the Italian bought them as the last purchaser before selling them to consumers. Such a network is long-distance despite the possibility of shorter trade distances within it. The commercial connections between places remain even though the transaction routes are not direct.

With respect to defining corporations, Harris weds the definition too closely to the joint-stock company which should be considered a subtype of the legal entity rather than the archetype. Guilds which dominated much of the European and Middle Eastern trained labour markets were successful corporations. Focused foremost on establishing an economic peace with their financial benefactors and other secondary industries in cities, guilds should be acknowledged as some of history's most stable and responsible corporations who, while not necessarily engaged in the longest distance trade, were nodes in long-distance networks all the same.

Harris' book is not a history of the corporation or of the perfection of European oriented long-distance trade. It is a historiographical synopsis of approaches to the history of corporations and an assessment of their relevance to the history of the English and Dutch India companies. Despite the book's drawbacks that make it ineligible for consideration as a definitive work on the subject or a core historical text, it does offer an interesting *longue durée* account of the invention of the joint-stock company in Germanic Europe, connecting it to older and contemporary institutional forms in a perhaps forgivable Weberian light.

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