

GERMAN MERCHANTS IN THE  
NINETEENTH-CENTURY ATLANTIC

This study brings to life the community of transatlantic merchants who established strong economic, political, and cultural ties between the United States and the city-republic of Bremen, Germany, in the nineteenth century. Lars Maischak shows that the success of Bremen's merchants in helping make an industrial-capitalist world market created the conditions of their ultimate undoing: the new economy of industrial capitalism gave rise to democracy and the nation-state, undermining the political and economic power of this mercantile elite. Maischak argues that the experience of Bremen's merchants is representative of the transformation of the role of merchant capital in the first wave of globalization, with implications for our understanding of modern capitalism in general.

**Lars Maischak** is a lecturer in the history department at California State University, Fresno. This study is based on his dissertation, for which the Friends of the German Historical Institute awarded him the Fritz Stern Prize for the best dissertation in the field of German-American History in 2006.

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# *German Merchants in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic*

LARS MAISCHAK

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GERMAN HISTORICAL INSTITUTE

*Washington, D.C.*

*and*



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Glossary

<i>Bremische Bürgerschaft</i>	See <i>Bürgerschaft</i> .
<i>Bürgerkonvent</i>	Name of the <i>Bürgerschaft</i> until 1848.
<i>Bürgerschaft</i>	“Citizenry,” legislative organ of Bremen.
corporation	1. In the context of Bremish politics: a public organ, often enjoying political and juridical privileges, representing a group the membership of which is defined by status and/or economic activity. For example, a guild. 2. In the context of German and American law: a private business enterprise enjoying the legal status of a natural person.
corporatism	The ideas and institutions that uphold an <i>economic</i> order based on corporations (1).
estate	A body of people defined by their function in the general division of labor of a society, often enjoying political and juridical privileges, membership in which may be inherited (e.g., in the case of the Prussian nobility) or granted by the sovereign (e.g., in the case of the Bremish mercantile estate).
estatism	The ideas and institutions that uphold a <i>political</i> order based on estates.
<i>Handelskammer</i>	“Chamber of commerce,” corporate body representing Bremen’s mercantile estate.
<i>Hanseat</i>	Here, a long-distance, wholesale merchant from the Hanseatic City of Bremen. Generally, a person from a Hanseatic City.
<i>Last</i>	“Load,” a Bremish volume measure for a ship’s loading capacity. 1 Last = about 1.5 Register-Tons.
<i>Nationalverein</i>	“National Association,” movement organization of German nationalism founded in 1859 by bourgeois notables.
<i>Rat</i>	Name of the <i>Senat</i> until 1822.
<i>Senat</i>	Executive organ of Bremen. All italicized derivations ( <i>Senator</i> , etc.) refer to this organ.

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*Glossary*

Senate                      American legislative body. All derivations in regular type  
                                      (Senator, etc.) refer to this organ.  
*Zollverein*                Customs Union.

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It would have been impossible to write this book without the help of many friends and colleagues who generously gave their time and thoughts to make this a better work. To all of them I feel the deepest gratitude. Some particular individuals, whose efforts have left more of a trace on the following pages than those of others, should not remain unmentioned.

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## Prologue

### GLOBALIZATION AND ITS ENEMIES

The end of the Cold War brought the spread of free trade and globalization at the same time that it reinvigorated nationalism.<sup>1</sup> Rather than seeing a universal victory of liberal, Western democracy, we found ourselves bracing for the attacks of fundamentalists who advocated an authoritarian social order. In one narrative, this fundamentalist attack is a matter of an antimodernist rebellion by those who lost in the process of modernization.<sup>2</sup> From the mountainous heartlands of Afghanistan and Appalachia, Chechnya and Thuringia, self-styled defenders of the authenticity and purity of the people and its beliefs set out to battle the incursions of modernization. In the minds of these crusaders, global commerce is the conduit for the seed of corrosion that threatens a local morality and way of life. In their view, the city and its archetypical representative, the merchant, bear responsibility for the subjection of the simple farmers and workers to the dictates of the market and the subversion of their ethos by a commercial culture devoid of a higher calling.<sup>3</sup>

The longer we live under these conditions of global strife, however, the clearer it becomes that a fundamentalist critique of Western liberalism is just as attractive to urban professionals as it is to disgruntled provincials. The biographies of recent suicide attackers

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Barber, Benjamin, *Jihad vs. McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism Are Reshaping the World*, New York, 1995. For the term *globalization*, and the debate over its meanings, see Altvater, Elmar, and Birgit Mahnkopf, *Grenzen der Globalisierung: Ökonomie, Ökologie und Politik in der Weltgesellschaft*, Münster, 2007; Altvater, Elmar, ed., *Der Sound des Sachzwangs – Der Globalisierungs-Reader*, Berlin, 2006; O'Rourke, Kevin H., and Jeffrey G. Williamson, *Globalization and History: The Evolution of a Nineteenth-Century Atlantic Economy*, Cambridge, MA, and London, 1999; Osterhammel, Jürgen, and Niels P. Petersson, *Globalization: A Short History*, Princeton, NJ, and Oxford, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> While this term will be used on the pages of this study to describe the political program of actors who perceived a need for their respective societies to “catch up” to the leading industrial and commercial powers, it is treated with caution. Following the argument made by Geoff Eley and David Blackbourn in *The Peculiarities of German History* (Oxford and New York, 1984), we should be aware that democratization, or even a liberal political stance, is not necessarily contained in a “package” of modernization. E.g., Eric Hobsbawm (*Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, Cambridge and New York, 1992) has shown that modernizers’ political and social views varied, in a continuum ranging from a full embrace of “Western freedom” to authoritarianism.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Huntington, Samuel P., *The Clash of Civilizations*, New York, 1996; Buruma, Ian, and Avishai Margalit, *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies*, New York, 2004; and Sardar, Ziauddin, *Postmodernism and the Other: The New Imperialism of Western Culture*, London and Chicago, 1998. The last is an example of the views criticized here.

are replete with university degrees and urban lifestyles. Likewise, a closer look at the presumed backwoodsmen reveals a high degree of participation in global commerce. Whether we consider opiates from Afghanistan or auto parts from Appalachia, we find that even the most remote regions of the world are tied into the world market. There are no authentic places left that have been untouched by the incursions of modernization. Local, particularist traditions that pose as deeply rooted customs are really inventions already suffused with an engagement with the outside world. In either case, global liberalism and fundamentalism appear not as ideologies that respectively promote and oppose modernity, but as ideological poles within modernity.<sup>4</sup>

Since the 1990s, intellectuals in the United States have perceived the newly globalized world as presenting both dangers and opportunities. Transnational history has been one reflex to the epochal changes at the turn of our century. This new branch of historical scholarship has been mining the past for traces of our direct ancestors: men and women who lived through periods of intense changes that affected the entire world, and who went beyond their local origins to craft a worldview from the experiences collected in exchanges with other countries. Transnational historians have discovered a variety of such ancestors, mostly in the Progressive Age at the turn of the twentieth century. Here they found reformers who, knowing that their local intellectual traditions and political institutions inadequately equipped them to respond to rapid industrialization and urbanization, turned abroad to look for better answers. Here they also found conquerors and colonizers who went to foreign shores as rulers, looking to spread their own, local ideas and practices in the guise of a universal civilization, an American Empire.<sup>5</sup>

No matter the intent of those who were driven abroad by local concerns, transnational exchange is always a two-way street. In formulating this insight, transnational historians stand in the tradition of scholarship on the Atlantic World of the eighteenth century. The subculture of sailors and merchants who built the European colonial empires of that era, as well as the novel commodities they introduced into the societies along the Atlantic's shores, remade the everyday life and the worldview of the colonizer and the colonized, even if neither ever left his home.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Hobsbawm, Eric J., and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge and New York, 1983.

<sup>5</sup> Bender, Thomas, *A Nation among Nations: America's Place in World History*, New York, 2006; Rodgers, Daniel, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age*, Cambridge, MA, and London, 1998; Howe, Daniel W., *American History in an Atlantic Context: An Inaugural Lecture Delivered before the University of Oxford on June 3 1993*, Oxford, 1993; Kramer, Paul, *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States, and the Philippines*, Chapel Hill, NC, 2006; Tyrrell, Ian, "American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History" (1031–55) and "Ian Tyrrell Responds" (1068–72), and McGerr, Michael, "The Price of the 'New Transnational History'" (1056–67) in *American Historical Review* 96, no. 4 (1991).

<sup>6</sup> Bailyn, Bernard, and Patricia L. Denault, eds., *Soundings in Atlantic History: Latent Structures and Intellectual Currents, 1500–1830*, Cambridge, MA, 2009; Rediker, Marcus B., and Peter Linebaugh, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*, Boston, 2000; Gilroy, Paul, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Cambridge, MA, 1993; idem, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*, London, 1987; Bolster, W. Jeffrey, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail*, Cambridge, MA, and London, 1997; Kelly, Robin D. G., "How the West Was One: The African Diaspora and the Re-Mapping of U.S. History," in *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, ed. Thomas Bender, Berkeley, CA, 2002, 123–47; Molineux, Catherine, "The Peripheries Within: Race, Slavery, and

Even nationalism, the political ideology of local particularism, owes its emergence to transnational exchanges. Romantic landscape painting that wanted to demonstrate the rootedness of a people in its natural environment was the application of a visual language forged in the cooperation between painters from different countries who converged on Rome, Munich, or Düsseldorf to become proficient in their art, while the leaders of national liberation movements were schooled in a way of thinking that imagines nations as historical subjects in the universities of Paris, London, or Berlin.<sup>7</sup>

Thanks to Atlantic and transnational history, we know that at the beginning of the modern era, there was a world in which identities were in flux; and that by the end of the nineteenth century it had been replaced by a world of nation-states imagined as self-contained units, albeit one permeated by – friendly and competitive – transnational connections. One hope of transnational history has been to break nation-states' hold on peoples' political imagination. As history is always a narrative that defines the self-image of contemporaries, transnational history has been offering the adequate narrative for an American population that can no longer afford to ignore the rest of the world. It could become an updated national history of America, just as it could become a critique of American imperial ambition, or of globalized markets, now and in the past.

When the term *transnational history* was first coined in the 1990s, its proponents were engaged in a broader debate over the meaning of *globalization*. This contested term was the subject of an intellectual exchange involving not just scholars from different disciplines, but also of the public in general, in a public sphere made truly global by the emergence of the worldwide web. Transnationalists seemed intent on liberating the historical discipline from the epistemological fetters it acquired at the time of its professionalization, when it came into being as national history – not just the history of nations as historical subjects, but also history as a justification and legitimization of particular nations, their claims to power, and the nationalist ideologies that underwrote projects of nation-state-making.<sup>8</sup>

At its outset, transnational history was the adaptation of globalism to the historical profession – not just a methodological innovation or a new approach to complement the business as usual, but a promise to change the terms of historical inquiry. In spite of this ambitious reach, it remained hampered by its enthusiasm for globalism – what Elmar Altvater defined as the complex of attitudes and ideas that embrace a cosmopolitan existence and condition. Invoking images of jet-setting scholars assembling in Italian villas, and American hipsters in Japanese dance clubs ironically

Empire in Early Modern England," PhD diss., Johns Hopkins University, 2005; O'Rourke and Williamson, *Globalization and History*.

<sup>7</sup> Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London and New York, 1983; Andree, Rolf, and Ute Rickel-Immel, *The Hudson and the Rhine. Die amerikanische Malerkolonie in Düsseldorf im 19. Jahrhundert*, Kat. Ausst. [Exhibition Catalog], Düsseldorf, Kunstmuseum, 1976; Buruma and Margalit, *Occidentalism*; Flacke, Monika, ed., *Mythen der Nationen. Ein Europäisches Panorama*, Munich and Berlin, 1998; Groseclose, Barbara S., *Emmanuel Leutze, 1816–1868: Freedom Is the Only King*, Exhibition Catalog, National Collection of Fine Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1976, Washington, DC, 1976.

<sup>8</sup> Novick, Peter, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*, Cambridge and New York, 1988.

appraising Afro-French trance techno and fusion cuisine, globalism is the restless pursuit of exchange.<sup>9</sup>

As such, it remains oblivious to the dark underbelly of this high-powered world of transcended boundaries – the conditions of production that feed commodified authenticity into a global marketplace, the deprivations these conditions cause, and the discontent they feed. Globalism is the ideology befitting a globalized, capitalist marketplace. To criticize the nation and its accompanying ideas as insufficiently globalized is to insist on the validity of the current mode of capital accumulation against the past one.

In that transnational history shares with globalism a rosy view of a world of exchanges, it is not concerned with the reasons for the nation-state. As far as transnational history is concerned, if the nation-state is an anachronism, today, the reasons for its emergence can never have been compelling. Just as the nature of globalized capitalism does not enter into the project of transnational history, so the nature of nation-states as containers of industrial capitalism engaged in worldwide competition eludes it.

The aggressively disembedded global marketplace that “flattens” the world and the reactionary backlash against cultural homogenization we are witnessing today are not novel. Their mutual dependence on each other follows a long-established pattern, a dialectic of modernization and traditionalism, or universalism and particularism.<sup>10</sup> This study is an investigation of this dialectic. This investigation is conducted in the example of nineteenth-century German merchants who engaged in long-distance trade with the United States.

#### THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF GLOBALIZATION

To understand the role of merchants in the world economy, this study makes use of the work of Karl Marx. In *Capital*, Marx describes “the history of the fall of Holland as the dominant mercantile nation . . . [as] the history of the subsumption of merchant capital under industrial capital.”<sup>11</sup> Sven Beckert uses this concept of the “subsumption of merchant capital under industrial capital” to theorize the *sociological*, *political*, and *cultural* processes that led to the formation of a national bourgeoisie in the United States.<sup>12</sup> Here, we employ Marx’s concept to explain the *economic* changes in world trade that occurred in the nineteenth century.

What, exactly, does this concept of “subsumption” entail? After all, merchants are the economic agents with the longest history, and their role can appear to have

<sup>9</sup> Altwater, Grenzen. In its embrace of a universal, mutual, cultural exchange, this globalist vision is akin to Immanuel Kant’s hope for a “perpetual peace” in a world of republics, whose citizens engage in peaceful exchanges for their mutual betterment. Kant, Immanuel, *Zum ewigen Frieden* (1795), in Akademieausgabe, Werke, vol. 8.

<sup>10</sup> Adorno, Theodor W., and Horkheimer, Max, *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente*, Frankfurt, 1969 (New York, 1944); Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld*; Friedman, Thomas L., *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, New York, 2005; Mensching, Günther, *Das Allgemeine und das Besondere. Der Ursprung des modernen Denkens im Mittelalter*, Stuttgart, 1992.

<sup>11</sup> Marx, Karl, *Capital*, 3 vols. (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Werke, vols. 23–5), vol. 3, Berlin, 1979 [1894], here vol. 3, 346. Translations by the author of this study.

<sup>12</sup> Beckert, *Metropolis*, throughout.



changed little from Renaissance Venice through twentieth-century New York to postmodern Singapore. Marx argues that this appearance is deceiving. He regards modern, industrial capitalism as fundamentally distinct from earlier, commercial capitalism. In *Capital*, he is not concerned with the latter, but analyzes the former.

By capitalism, Marx understands fully developed capitalist relations of production and exchange, where wage labor is the universal form of commodity production. Earlier stages of commercial capitalism, and even early pockets of industrial production, do not satisfy all of these criteria. What distinguishes capitalist modes of production from earlier ones is the universality of the creation of surplus value in commodity production.

For most of its history, merchant capital was capital *par excellence*. With the emergence of industrial capital, it lost this special place. In a fully developed capitalist society, merchant capital is a “distinct sphere of capital investment,” “externally independent” from, yet “internally dependent” on industrial capital. At the heart of this “internal dependence” is the reliance of mercantile profit on surplus value generated in production. The merchant sells his commodities at their value, that is, at the price of production, and buys them from the producer below this price. In this manner, a share of surplus value “devolves on” merchant capital.<sup>13</sup>

The amount of mercantile profit, that is, the difference between the price the merchant pays to the producer and the price he receives from the buyer, is determined by an averaging-out of profits across all capitals in society, whether employed in production or circulation. Hence, on the one hand, the lower the share of merchant capital among all capital in a given society, the higher the average profit on any capital invested. On the other hand, a given productive capital requires for its reproduction a particular minimum of capital engaged in circulation.<sup>14</sup>

This requirement is a source of the “external independence” of modern merchant capital. The circulation of productive capital is never complete without realizing the surplus value embodied in the commodity produced. The realization of surplus value depends on circulation, the transformation into money of the commodity that exits the process of production ( $C' \rightarrow M'$ ), and the subsequent transformation of money back into commodities, namely, labor and means of production, for another cycle of production ( $M \rightarrow C(MP/L)$ ).<sup>15</sup>

The individual industrial capitalist will often have an interest in not concerning himself with the sale of the commodities produced by him. The turnover time of capital equals the time of production plus the time of circulation. While the merchant is not concerned with the former, his service may shorten the latter on a social scale, or reduce it to zero for the individual capitalist, if he buys his finished product straight from the factory, and pays him in cash. In the latter case, for the individual industrial capitalist, the valorization of his capital is complete, and he can immediately replace his means of production (e.g., buy supplies and hire laborers).<sup>16</sup>

There is, however, no systematic necessity for the producer to rely on a merchant for the sale of his product. The producer could market it. In this sense, too, the

<sup>13</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, 316.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., vol. 3, 290–303.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, 161–70, vol. 2, 151–3, and vol. 3, 335–49.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., vol. 2, 124–35 and vol. 3, 283–306.

merchant is “internally dependent” on the producer. Yet, the benefits of specialization have often enabled (externally) independent merchants to undertake the distribution of commodities more efficiently. Only at a large scale of production, can the producer dispose of the merchant and organize distribution in a model of the “vertical integration” of production and distribution stretching from raw materials to retail trade. This was the case with the American oil industry since the 1890s, when Standard Oil enjoyed a near monopoly on petroleum.<sup>17</sup>

What, then, was the role of merchant capital in its heyday, before industrial commodity production became the universal norm? In these former times – say, in Renaissance Venice – mercantile profit was based on selling commodities above their value and, more often than not, buying them below their value. Merchants could do this because their trade linked societies not yet, or not fully, capitalist.<sup>18</sup>

Merchant capital inaugurated the simple form of capital circulation, “buying in order to sell” (M–C–M’). Mercantile profit *then* – that is, *before* industrial capital became the dominant form – sprang from differences in price between different locations. The merchant “bought cheap, and sold dear.” He bought goods that constituted a surplus for economies not yet capitalist in nature, and turned them into commodities.<sup>19</sup>

The existence of merchant capital was a necessary, but not sufficient, precondition for the emergence of capitalist production for five reasons. First, the accumulation of capital necessary for investment in industrial production took place in the hands of merchants. Second, trade is presupposed for capitalist production. It is by definition production for exchange, rather than use, and requires at least a regional market for its output. Third, the mercantile view of the product as a commodity encourages producers to transform production into commodity production. Fourth, by establishing continuous trading links, merchant capital first engendered the formation of an average rate of profit, albeit one that averaged-out merely mercantile profits, not yet capitalist profits across the board. Fifth, in a dialectic move, merchant capital, though operating on the basis of an exchange that is not the exchange of equivalents, established a measure of commensurability in the form of the price, and thus helped bring about a general exchange of equivalents.<sup>20</sup>

Although in many ways merchant capital paved the way for modern capitalism, its former role differed decisively from its modern one. Yet, Marx observed, the notion that capital as such lived off fraud and plunder – nonequivalent exchange – had survived into modern times. This notion he wished to dispel, mainly by emphasizing that modern, industrial capitalism relies on the exchange of equivalents at all stages of circulation and production.<sup>21</sup>

For the purpose of exploring the relation between industrial and merchant capital, Bremen is a suitable example, because here we find merchant capital as a distinct and self-conscious class, firmly in power in a city-state, taking issue with the larger political and economic development in the emerging “nation” and in the

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Chandler, Alfred D., Jr., *Strategy and Structure: Chapters in the History of the American Industrial Enterprise*, Cambridge, MA, 1962.

<sup>18</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, 336–42.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 282–7.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 3, 339–43.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 161–78.

larger world. We can understand this continuing independent role of German merchant capital as an expression of the otherwise underdeveloped state of the German economies, because “the independent development of merchant capital stands in reverse relation to the general economic development of society.”<sup>22</sup>

## THE POLITICS OF GLOBALIZATION

So far, the historical period that most resembled our own, and in which the persistent dichotomies of our own era were first fully formed, has evaded close attention from transnational historians. The decades between the Congress of Vienna and the Paris Commune were the formative years for the world we know. They saw the rise of industry outside of Britain and the acceleration of global communication by steam power and telegraphs on land and across oceans. By 1871, these processes had resulted in the creation of a modern, industrial world market, and of the strengthened, increasingly unitary, territorial states that based their legitimacy on nationality and their fiscal and military might on industry and that mediated competition and cooperation on the world market.

The new ease of communication, and the opportunities and disruptions caused by industrialization, set in motion an unprecedented number of migrants. Never before had such a high percentage of the world’s population had the chance to form an image of foreign countries from firsthand experience. For those who lacked this chance, the proliferation of print media exploded the amount of information about the world available even in its farthest provincial corners. At the same time as they acquainted them with foreign events, newspapers made citizens into armchair participants in a bloody game of geopolitics whose logic culminated in World War I. The smaller and the more interdependent the world became, the more people’s habits of perception were shaped by categories like nation and race.

Our world, with its dialectic of world market and nation-state, cosmopolitanism and parochialism, universalism and particularism, liberalism and fundamentalism, technological progress and barbarian regression, has its roots in the nineteenth century. It is for this reason that Marx’s and Engels’s account of globalization and creative destruction in the *Communist Manifesto* rings so contemporary to our ears:

The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world-market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. All old-established national industries . . . are dislodged by new industries whose introduction becomes a life and death question for all civilized nations; . . . industries whose products are consumed, not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe. . . . In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations.<sup>23</sup>

Yet, the Communists’ hope that “national one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible” has not borne out. From the outset, this ever-shrinking, ever-accelerating, ever-changing world has bred a wish to recapture the

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., vol. 3, 340.

<sup>23</sup> Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker, New York and London, 1978, 473–500, here p. 476.

“feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations” Marx and Engels had hoped were forever lost to it. Modernity has been constantly shadowed by its dark sibling, reactionary antimodernism. More often than not, its rejection of the political and philosophical foundations of modernity has been accompanied by an enthusiasm for its material blessings. Bin Laden would have been impossible to conceive without his satellite phone.<sup>24</sup>

In the shadow of recent events, the deep historical roots of the dialectic of modern world-society, and America’s entanglement with this dialectic, are more clearly visible than in the spotlight of national history. In America, and not just among its enemies, the march of technological progress and the course of empire were from the beginning accompanied by a wish to hold back the clock of democracy, liberalism, and individual rights. Between America and Europe, some of the most active promoters of a capitalist world market were among those most skeptical toward its purported companion, the liberal-democratic society.

#### PIONEERS OF GLOBALIZATION

The German merchants who dominated trade between the United States and Germany through much of the nineteenth century shared the sense that the boundaries between land and ocean were being blurred by modern commerce. America and the ocean appeared as metaphors for commodity exchange in the words of Johann Georg Kohl, a merchant from Bremen:

Poseidon is, most of all, a shaker of the Earth. . . . Like mighty springs, America and the Ocean drive and spur the whole great machinery of our modern life. America grows abundantly in all our gardens and fields; and the Ocean pushes with its currents and tides into the most secluded channels of the hinterland.<sup>25</sup>

As a cosmopolitan community equally rooted on both sides of the ocean, and equally engaged in the political and economic life of multiple societies, Bremen’s merchants allow us to place the antebellum United States in its international context. Their history illuminates the essential contribution to the making of an industrial-capitalist world market, and of American participation in it, of men and women deeply committed to tradition and fiercely opposed to liberalism and democracy.

Acknowledging the importance of these cosmopolitan conservatives and their American collaborators for bringing the United States into the world market, means to question the account of America as the undisputed domain of liberalism. Trading with America, these German merchants found in the New World like-minded men and women whose qualms about the dangers of unfettered market relations matched their own, yet with whom they also shared a wish to “improve” the world through the blessings of global communication and commerce.

Together, these German merchants and their American friends represent, not an alternative path to capitalism, but its mainstream. If their exertions resulted in a world increasingly characterized by liberal-democratic nation-states, it was not what they had envisioned or desired when they had set out to improve the older world they knew.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 475, 477.

<sup>25</sup> Cited by Engelsing, Rolf, “England und die USA in der bremischen Sicht des 19. Jahrhunderts,” in *Jahrbuch der Wittheit zu Bremen*, vol. 1, 1957, 33–65, here pp. 55–6 (1861).