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### Lessons in global commerce (from an early East India Company employee)

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## Dramatic trade-offs: Lessons in global commerce from an early East India Company employee

Emily Soon, King's College London

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International trade hurts local communities. It causes economic hardship at home and destroys the environment, while the culture of consumerism it fuels is destroying our values and way of life.

Similar sentiments to these recur across the media today: this so-called [backlash against globalisation](#) is said to have contributed to Brexit and the rise of Trump, and to have transformed the shape of political movements across the world. This pent-up frustration seems to be quintessentially twenty-first century, the disillusioned rant of a world no longer charmed by the siren song of free trade and borderless commerce.

And yet, the sentiments I began with are taken not from a present-day party political, but from a play written almost four hundred years ago. While William Mountford's amateur dramatic effort, *The Launching of the Mary: Or the Seaman's Honest Wife* (ca. 1632-3), may not be able to rival the plays of William Shakespeare or Ben Jonson – for a start, we do not know if the single inky manuscript held in the British Library archives was ever performed – it does encapsulate, poignantly, the profound anxieties that have long attended the idea of international trade.

For despite the enthusiasm of Tudor adventurers such as Sebastian Cabot, Martin Frobisher and Walter Raleigh, as well as of the founding members of the East India Company, the idea of England becoming involved in global commerce was initially a highly controversial one. When the East India Company's profits started to dwindle in the 1620s, two decades after the Company first began trading, public discomfort with the practice of investing astronomical sums of money on risky voyages to bring home spices, silks and other luxuries from Persia, India and Southeast Asia intensified. As the opponents of the so-called 'East Indian trade' in Mountford's play put it, England feared that international exchange would lead to '*Dearth. Death. Destruction: Beggerie*' – and all for the sake of importing goods that many felt London would be materially and morally better off without.

Although the specific details of the complaints against international exchange then and now naturally differ, the essence of many of the concerns debated in seventeenth-century England remain highly relevant today: resentment that the government appeared to be privileging the rights of the 'haves' over the 'have-nots' by passing legislation that sanctioned the monopolistic behaviour of the East India Company; frustration at how much-needed resources were being diverted away from the domestic economy to service the putative investment needs of the moneyed elite; and, ultimately, rage at the injustices endured by the working-classes who formed the rank and file of East India Company employees. For the families of Company sailors, it was a constant financial struggle to make ends meet during the eighteen or so months that the ships, or 'East Indiamen', were away – and given the high mortality rate on Company ships and in Company settlements, the return of the vessels that did make it home was not always a happy one.

As with any modern multi-national, the East India Company launched a slick public relations campaign to defend its practices, commissioning a series of propaganda pamphlets and perhaps even sponsoring the writing of Mountford's play. Indeed, William Mountford was an employee of the East India Company, and while *The Launching of the Mary* raises damning criticisms about Anglo-Asian trade, it does so in order to refute them, leading the play's first editor, John Henry Walter, to conclude that the play was probably produced in the service of the Company.

Hence, in response to the list of 'grumbling rumour[s]' trotted out against overseas exchange within *The Launching of the Mary*, the play's East India Company officials reel off statistic after statistic to demonstrate that their trade is both necessary and beneficial to England. The Company, it alleges, not only generates employment opportunities and looks after its employees' families, but also enhances living conditions in

local communities by contributing to various charitable causes – all arguments that continue to feature in the PR-speak of many a multi-national today.

Like many present-day corporate videos and political addresses, Mountford's play supplements its phalanx of purported facts with the affecting case study of a single individual – in this case, the life-experiences of Dorothea Constance, the titular seaman's 'Honest Wife'. However, unlike so much of the corporate or political spin circulating nowadays, the play does not turn straightforwardly enlist the audience's sympathy for the individual in question in order to drum up support for its main message. Rather, Mountford uses the tale of Dorothea to complicate, even subvert, the play's glib defence of the East India trade: the Company's claim that it provides for the families of its employees is undermined by Dorothea's testimony that she, and 'thousands more' like her, struggle from the 'want of means' during their husbands' absence at sea. Despite Dorothea's defiant insistence that she is 'Happy' with her life, the audience cannot help but join the sympathetic Captain Fitz]ohn in 'wish[ing] [...] more' could be done to alleviate her suffering.

While, artistically speaking, *The Launching of the Mary* may not have that much to offer aspiring writers hoping to learn the art of writing compelling drama – it is difficult to imagine any audience being enthralled by its lengthy litanies of spice prices, for instance – it does, however unwittingly and unexpectedly, offer a pertinent lesson for policy makers today. By interweaving scenes featuring the Company's supporters dogmatically defending their trade with those highlighting the more complex experiences of Dorothea Constance, the play highlights the very real tension that exists between the long-term, macro-level economic benefits many believe international commerce can deliver, and the immediate, local costs such pursuits often involve. Quite simply, the play, as a work of literature, reminds us that there are no easy ways of reconciling the competing demands of the local and the global.

All too often, today's politicians and policy makers present the public with a series of carefully curated statistics and case-studies calculated to convince their audience that their proposal is the one true solution to the subject at hand. This selective approach perpetuates the fantasy that it is possible to find the perfect panacea for any given social woe, and intensifies public disillusionment when the vaunted solution fails to deliver. Rather than perpetuate this vicious cycle, perhaps it is time to openly acknowledge and earnestly interrogate the trade-offs that global trade inevitably generates. William Mountford, for one, would approve.