

GEHN Conference
A Global History of Cotton Textiles, 1200-1850

University of Padua, Italy
17-19 November 2005

MISSION STATEMENT

The cotton industry has long been a central attraction for economic historians interested in explaining the dynamics of economic development and technological change. Their emphasis has, however, been upon the periods immediately before, during and after the Industrial Revolution. Much less has been written on the cotton industry in medieval and early modern times. Historians have also paid much more attention to woollen, linens and silks and hardly mention fustians – a cloth fabricated with linen warps and cotton wefts – within specific regions of Europe. Histories of commerce and connexions between the producers and consumers of cotton textiles in Asia, Africa, the Americas and Europe remain underresearched even for Britain and the evolving relationships between cottons and other textiles are not fully understood.

Our conference on ‘Cotton Textiles as a Global Industry’ will address world connexions across the industry by gathering together scholars with expertise on the long run histories of industries located in Europe, the Middle East, India, China and Japan. Although the secondary literature on some countries (e.g. Britain and India) is rich, much less is known about the production, trade and consumption of cotton textiles in the Ottoman Empire, China, West Africa, the Americas and the West Indies.

We seek to elicit papers that will contribute to an understanding of when, how and why the evolution of cotton industries in several areas of the world contributed to the long-run development of a paradigmatic global industry. Presentations are expected to address major global history questions by elaborating upon interconnections across space and by analysing the paths and patterns of development in several regions around the world.

On a historical level, the conference will provide the occasion to compare different trajectories for economic development by focusing on the organisation, capital, technology and markets for the industry. On a historiographical level, different national histories and approaches to the construction of history will be integrated and repositioned within a global framework. On a methodological level, the conference addresses and implicitly advocates a new agenda for economic history by reconfiguring knowledge on a global scale. Contrasts in cultural, environmental, social as well as economic factors will thereby be exposed and highlighted

Four main strands have been identified:

1. Models and Theories

The aim of this strand will be to clarify the role of cotton in pre-modern economies and to explore its relationships to models of proto-industrialisation, regional specialisation, the interplay of regional and national economies, divisions of labour and the integration of markets. In many regions cotton spinning and

weaving were highly significant activities involving most members of households who increasingly produced for the market. What were the main incentives or restraints on cotton manufacturing? Which type of regions were most likely to develop a proto-industry? How did the agrarian, demographic and family structures affect production?

2. 'Industrialisation' and 'De-industrialisation'

We welcome papers considering cotton (as a raw material and yarn or in final forms as textiles and clothing) that propose to locate cotton manufacturing within strategies ranging from the cultivation of fibres to the commercialisation of cotton goods. The eighteenth-century decline of the industry in the Ottoman Empire was followed a century later by India, after centuries of growth. What were the causes of decline? And how was European development in cotton production connected to major changes in other world areas? This session will serve to revise concepts of 'industrialisation' and 'de-industrialisation' within a global framework.

3. Cotton as a Global Commodity

Recent scholarship in material culture, fashion and trade has considered historical patterns of demand and consumption on global scale. Historians have constructed the early history of cotton in Europe by elaborating on the interconnection between Asian 'exotic' cottons, such as chintzes and calicos, and the so-called 'consumer revolution' of the late seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries. The very notion that cotton goods became the object of a 'calico craze' in the late seventeenth century has been heavily criticised. It has recently been shown how calicos became popular in Europe as a result of a very careful marketing campaign planned by East Indian Companies. The English East India Company led this campaign. But how much cotton entered Europe in the two centuries preceding the industrial revolution? Did cotton simply satisfy or create new consumer needs? Are historians correct when they suggest a clear connection between the importance of Asian cotton imports and the attempts to manufacture it in Britain and Europe?

4. Cultivation, Mechanisation and Manufacturing

Papers are sought to re-address a series of questions as part of the economic history agenda of the period classically defined as 'The Industrial Revolution'. The narrow concentration on Britain will be avoided by presenting issues of manufacturing, technological innovation and mechanisation in a European, Asian and North American context. This session draws on the recent debate over a possible 'great divergence' between Europe and East Asia in the eighteenth century. While the economic structures, trajectories and growth of the two extremities of the Eurasian continent remained similar for centuries, their paths dramatically diverged at the end of the early modern period. Cotton is, of course, central in the construction of the 'Industrial Revolution' as the Eurocentric narrative of such a divergence. This session seeks to explain the mechanisation of the cotton industry as part of a 'divergence' between East and West.

Organisation:

The conference can not hope to cover all these strands and themes. We expect to be able to include 17 papers in a three-day conference. The programme is also based on substantial contributions from commentators and other participants. Two round tables at the beginning and end of the meeting will provide additional space for formal and informal discussions. Each paper should be presented c. 20 minutes long and will be followed by 10 minutes of questions from a commentator and 20 minutes of questions from other participants. All papers will be pre-circulated a month before the conference.

The conference is scheduled for the 17-19 November 2005 (arriving on Wednesday 16 and leaving on Sunday 20 November) and will be hosted by the University of Padua. Padua is 20 miles from Venice and can be easily accessed through Venice Marco Polo Airport, Venice-Treviso Airport and Bologna Airport.

The programme will include two full days and a final half day meeting. The costs of accommodation, meals and visits during the stay in Padua will be paid by GEHN. We are not in a position to cover the cost of travel, and we encourage participants to apply for funds from their institutions.

The conference is associated with the GEHN proposed session on 'Cotton Textiles as a Global Industry' that we are planning to hold at the XIV International Economic History Congress in Helsinki on the 21-25 August 2006. We expect that a majority of the November conference participants will also attend the Helsinki Conference.

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