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**Review of Haasis, L. (2022) The power of persuasion:  
becoming a merchant in the 18th century**

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1660–1860 will become an important reference work for scholars working on the economic and maritime early modern history of this region.

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Lucas Haasis, *The Power of Persuasion: Becoming a Merchant in the 18th Century*. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2022. 660 pp., notes, figures, references, sources, bibliography. ISBN 978-3-8376-5652-7, €60 (hbk).

It is not every day that one finds a complete and intact business archive. Most such archives – for example, the famous archives of the fourteenth-century Prato merchant Francesco di Marco Datini – were found long ago and have been studied at length by historians. Lucas Haasis, a postdoctoral researcher at the Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg and coordinator of the UK-German Prize Papers project at the same university, has nonetheless stumbled across such a gold mine: the 1744–1745 business archive of Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens, a wholesale merchant originally from Hamburg based in France at the time. In 1745, Luetkens put his business archive on a ship in Brest to sail to Hamburg to continue his business career there and marry into the city's wealthy elite; however, it was captured by British privateers and became part of the Prize Papers, which is how Haasis encountered the archive (20). After almost 10 years of research, the result is *The Power of Persuasion*, a voluminous and excellent book offering a detailed microhistory based on extensive study of the archive.

The book is essentially divided into two unequal parts. The first two chapters deal at length with the book's methodology and Luetkens' background; they are followed by five chapters that offer case studies of what Haasis calls the 'establishment phase' (16) of merchants in the early modern period. These five chapters deal with various aspects of early modern mercantile life: shipping business, commission trade, high-risk trade, finding a business partner and, finally, marriage into a wealthy family. The archive offers a unique and detailed insight into mercantile life in the mid eighteenth century, at a time when the War of the Austrian Succession made it difficult for merchants to trade safely. Haasis, in his introduction, claims that he wants to look not only at success, but also at episodes of failure and periods of challenge for young merchants during the period. This is, indeed, a structural problem that plagues most business histories of the early modern period, since most surviving archives are those of successful merchants and firms. Haasis does a remarkable job of teasing out details about the 'mercantile establishment phase' of Luetkens by what he calls a 'thick description' of letter-reading. Rather than looking at the eventual success that Luetkens had, Haasis stays close to his sources and manages to unearth the quotidian problems, successes and failures that merchants encountered, both large and small.

Haasis's book is published as part of the series *Practices of Subjectivation*, which takes a distinctly postmodernist approach to historical scholarship. This may not be to everyone's liking, but Haasis goes to great lengths in his introduction to convince the reader of

his approach. His goal is to write a 'praxeological microhistory' (61) – in other words, a microhistory of everyday thinking and practices. Haasis does this by a close reading not only of letters written by Luetkens, but also of letters that were sent to Luetkens. Moreover, Haasis often provides extensive contextualization on various issues, such as Hamburg's maritime neutrality (Chapter 3) or the plight of captive European seamen in the Northern African states due to corsairs roaming the Mediterranean Sea (Chapter 5). Haasis does a good job of sketching out the context in these chapters, although some historiographical discussion would have been welcome to situate the author's contribution within various debates (for example, in the case of maritime neutrality or the role of the Mediterranean corsairs). Moreover, Haasis does not really tackle the question of how *representative* the Luetkens case is. This, to an extent, logically follows from his approach, but perhaps those interested in macrohistorical maritime history will criticize this. Nonetheless, the excellent archival work and the depth of the description are of a level rarely seen, offering plenty of interesting stories for maritime historians of the eighteenth century. Moreover, Haasis presents a highly convincing case for the importance of the city of Hamburg for eighteenth-century maritime trade, which is all too often overlooked by historians in the Anglophone.

For maritime historians, the chapters on shipping business (Chapter 3) and high-risk trade (Chapter 5) are of particular interest, with Chapter 4, on commission trade, also containing some interesting observations on maritime trade. Chapter 3 provides evidence of how ship-ownership was structured in a time of war, when Luetkens, as a Hamburg merchant, still wanted to make a profit out of French colonial trade, particularly sugar. In Luetkens' case, he devised complex co-ownership structures with his brother, although Haasis also shows that it was not necessarily easy to persuade his brother. Moreover, in 1744, his ship *La Domenniene* was captured by British privateers, culminating in a case before the High Court of Admiralty and a lengthy insurance claim. Haasis shows how Luetkens always walked a very fine line between legal and illegal trade under the guise of Hamburg's maritime neutrality. Rather than high-minded debates on the legal concept of maritime neutrality that too often occupy legal historians, here we have a truly excellent view of how this worked out in legal practice, and how merchants at the same time worked within and outside the established legal frameworks. Furthermore, following the recent burst of interest in the social and legal position of seamen (such as in Maria Fusaro's European Research Council-funded project *Sailing into Modernity*), the fifth chapter offers a very detailed view of the complex principal-agent problems that a merchant like Luetkens encountered when having to deal with high-risk trade in an area where buccaneering was a daily occurrence. Haasis clearly shows how Luetkens, in cooperation with his chosen shipmasters, was able to convince crews to make the journey and, in case of capture, was able to ransom crew members.

*The Power of Persuasion* is thus a remarkable addition to business, economic and maritime history. Although not everyone will be convinced by its distinctive approach, the archival work provides a unique window into the world of an eighteenth-century wholesale merchant. Rather than relying on theoretical debates, Haasis eloquently shows the dilemmas, failures and successes encountered by a merchant.

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