

Corey Tazzara, *The Free Port of Livorno and the Transformation of the Mediterranean World, 1574-1790* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 346 pp., ISBN: 9780198791584, £75

In 1591, Ferdinando I, Grand Duke of Tuscany, issued an invitation to the whole of the Mediterranean. ‘Easterners, Westerners, Spanish, Portuguese, Greeks, Germans, Italians, Jews, Turks, Moors, Armenians, Persians, and [merchants] of other states’ were all welcome to settle in his new city of Livorno, constructed entirely from scratch on the banks of the Tyrrhenian sea. There, merchants would enjoy not only hospitality, security, and freedom, but also various fiscal privileges, including the option to warehouse their goods for up to a year without the payment of duties. Thus the world’s first ‘free port’ was born. Corey Tazzara’s history of Livorno charts the development and growth of the city’s institutions, and seeks to connect that history to broader currents of early-modern European development: the proliferation of the ‘free port’, both in actuality and learned discourse; the institutionalization of commercial policy-making; and the rise of economic liberalism.

From Tuscany, free ports spread to the wider Mediterranean, then to the Atlantic world, and finally across the whole globe. As a forum where commercial relations were not predicated on a trader’s religion or nationality (at least in theory), free ports helped to dismantle an *ancien régime* world of privileges and to ‘disembed’ the market from social practice: economic forces would henceforth determine market prices. Tazzara’s history of the first free port thus contributes to broader histories of globalization, modernity, and capitalism. Tazzara adopts a nuanced approach to the concept of the ‘free port’, emphasizing the vague and indiscriminate way that the term was used across time and space. Borrowing a helpful distinction made by Thomas Kirk, he places an emphasis on the difference between freedom of people to settle and trade (free port as ‘emporium’) and freedom of goods to be moved in, out and around the port without restriction or the payment of duties (free port as ‘entrepôt’). In this respect, the year 1676 was a turning

point for Livorno. Before the major reforms of 1676, Tazzara argues, Livorno should be understood as an emporium first and foremost: it was only after 1676 that the abolition of tariffs became central to Livorno's identity and success.

Tazzara's work is strongest in dealing with this pre-1676 period. He demonstrates that it was merchants and officials, not the Grand-ducal administration, who were responsible for the institutional set-up that actually emerged. He highlights the importance of the customs office in policy formation, working in a symbiotic relationship with the merchant communities. The 'supplications' or petitions made to the Grand Duke, which called for a specific measure to be enacted, were ostensibly a testament to princely authority, but in fact concentrated power in the port itself. Supplications were often drafted in consultation between groups of merchants and the customs office, which 'pre-selected' the supplications to be sent on to Florence. Though the Grand Duke remained the ultimate arbiter, it was the customs office which controlled the flow of information. Tazzara also demonstrates the importance of collusion to the making of the free port. The customs office knew that the successful functioning of its bureaucracies depended on the goodwill and continued cooperation of merchants, a fact little understood by the outsiders periodically dispatched to correct abuses.

The 1676 reform took power out of the hands of the customs office and revitalized the traffic of the port by scrapping import and export duties. Simplified procedures reduced transaction costs further. Tazzara argues that such thoroughgoing changes were not possible elsewhere, even in other 'free ports'. In historic port cities, entrenched interests stymied reform: as a new town, Livorno was free from such constraints. In this sense Tazzara's work supports Stephan Epstein's claim that it was the 'excessive and debilitating hold of particular interests' which was the main drag on early-modern economic growth. As to the question of whether reform without

revolution was possible in the world of the *ancien regime*, Livorno provides an answer in the negative, an exception that proves a general rule.

This is a complex book with multiple strands of enquiry and not all its interventions are equally convincing. Tazzara is less successful in his attempt to connect this post-1676 Livorno to the emergence of economic liberalism in intellectual discourse. The spread of Mediterranean free ports was undoubtedly the result of emulation, and latterly of general downward pressure as cities were forced to dismantle tariff structures or perish. In this respect Livorno was certainly an important model. But as Tazzara himself points out, its very singularity prevented it from becoming a harbinger of unrestrained economic liberty: most ‘free ports’ remained only partially so. The connection between free ports and more generalized conceptions of free trade is plausible but not convincingly demonstrated here. Whilst theorists often cited Livorno in passing as an emblem of commercial liberty, Tazzara finds few examples of sustained and detailed engagement with the Livornese model. Tazzara’s attempt to stake out his own unique theoretical standpoint with regards to the ‘science of commerce’ is not clearly articulated and does not ultimately bear much scrutiny. He sets up the Cambridge school as something of a straw man by (falsely) claiming that it has treated political economy as a hermetically-sealed linguistic discourse. Yet the fact that contemporary theorists so often misunderstood or caricatured the Livornese model suggests that this may in fact be quite close to the truth.

Though it became a highly-trafficked port city, Livorno never fulfilled the long-term aspirations of the Grand Dukes: the revitalization of Tuscan industry, the promotion of a native mercantile elite, and direct participation in Levantine and colonial trades. By the mid-eighteenth century the Tuscan elite had turned away from the free port as a means of achieving its policy goals – somewhat ironically, given the traction that ‘free trade’ was gaining elsewhere. The chief criticism of contemporaries was that the free port was a means of foreign domination and exploitation.

Tazzara argues convincingly that the free port was in fact a sensible response to commercial conditions in the Mediterranean, where establishing monopoly trading was expensive, not to say impossible for a state like Tuscany. Yet such a response occasioned similar responses, resulting in a spiral of deregulation. Whilst he may not demonstrate a conclusive link between Livorno and the emergence of liberal economic discourse, Tazzara does show that there was another way to free trade, free trade that was not born in the university or salon but on the dusty floor of the customs house.

Jake Dyble

University of Exeter