Freemasonry and the Roots of Liberal International Trade
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Free trade first appeared as an international trade policy in the 19th century, and marked the first step towards liberal international trade, which is one of the most important characteristics of Western civilization today. During the 18th century most European countries practiced Mercantilism. In Mercantilism, the government's responsibility was to encourage industry and manufacturing by expanding markets and growing resources while imposing strict regulations on export and import. The 'balance of trade' doctrine, meaning the country would damage its economy if import exceeded export, lay at the heart of Mercantilism, and foreign trade was directed by parliamentary decisions even though the illegal practice of pirating and smuggling always existed.\(^1\) Around the 1820s, a few important trading countries on both sides of the Atlantic, including Britain, France and the United States, replaced Mercantilism with free trade policies, to different extents.\(^2\)

Freemasonry's institutions, structure, connections and individuals in the states mentioned above were a platform to promote free trade, due to a combination of structural, institutional, political and individual perspectives. This article will explain why Freemasonry, which became associated with the guilds system and later with the upper class, became a brotherhood of merchants who were interested in free trade. Secondly, this article will show that Freemasonry's structural and institutional components transformed it into a cosmopolitan economic network, allowing Freemasons to leverage their interests, most importantly free trade.

1. The Class Perspective: Freemasons at the Heart of Class Transformation

Freemasonry, which started in the guild system that embodied the highly governed and regulated economy of that time, became a brotherhood of merchants that were interested in reducing control over markets.\(^3\) This evolution was the outcome of a class based split in Freemasonry, which was both a reflection of the changing world of the 18th century and an event that accelerated and catalyzed that class transformation, within which the middle class was formed, shaped and gained new social and political importance.

1.1 Freemasonry, the Salons and the Changing Urban Elite of the 18th Century

By the 1710's, clubs and salons were a part of urban convivial lives in England. These clubs were a result of the migration of many men from small rural communities to urban clusters. In a rapidly changing world, the clubs were a new resource for order, belonging and authority.\(^4\) According to David Hume the 18th century's "forms of polite association allowed the 'middling rank of men' to become refined in the arts and sciences... was driven by economic progress."\(^5\)

Interestingly, the first members who were not stone masons were almost exclusively noblemen and gentlemen. However, later on, conditions for joining Freemasonry, which were being literate and paying membership fees that were not very high, together with the Enlightenment based discourse of good virtues and "men of merit", that could provide a level of social standing not based on inherited status,
attracted middle class men, many of whom were merchants and artisans, and had much to gain from the brotherhood’s benefits. Even though efforts had been made to ensure that Freemasons would be from educated ‘genteel society’, by allowing merchants and tradesman to participate, Freemasonry brought together different classes, and expanded the definition of the elite class while enlarging the number of people in the upper-middle class. Bringing different classes together "provided social climbing in a dizzying scale from commoner to nobility in an age when class held the same importance as color did before the Civil Rights Movement," according to Fredrick Johnson. However, class differentiation soon led to a class-based clash that changed Freemasonry inherently, between the "Ancient" and "Modern" branches.

1. 2 "Modern" Vs. "Ancients", 1752-1792

Freemasonry’s role in "civilizing the practical and vulgarizing the scientific for the emergent Victorian middle class" was not clean cut. By the 1750’s, the classes that were part of Freemasonry were on the verge of clashing and reshaping the brotherhood. In 1751 in England, a group that called itself "the Ancients" challenged the Grand Lodge’s authority and its followers, who were named "the Moderns". The official reason for the split was a disagreement over interpretation of the Masonic constitutions and ceremonies, but it was actually the result of class-based tensions inside the brotherhood which concerned core questions such as who can be a Freemason and what should Freemasons be involved in.

The Ancients established an alternative Grand Lodge in London and published a new constitution. The Ancients admitted lower social classes into Freemasonry, and enabled them to enjoy the benefits of social and economic mobility. These changes were seen to be problematic by members of the Modern Masons such as Franklin, who wrote to his friend Henry Price, a Grand Master:

"Some false and rebel Brethren here, who are foreigners, being about to set up a distinct lodge in opposition to the old and true Brethren here, pretending to make Masons for a bowl of Punch, and the Craft [Freemasonry] is like to come into disesteem among us, unless the true Brethren are countenanced and distinguished by some such special authority as herein desired…” (Philadelphia, November 28, 1734).

The new lodges of the Ancients were opened where the benefits of the brotherhood such as social mobility, solidarity between members, networking and so on, were attractive. The Ancients lodges existed primarily in army camps, industrial areas, rural territories and urban commercial quarters. In London for example, the lodges of the Ancients where located in the commercial areas of the city while the Moderns lodges where generally located at the West End, the center of financial activity. The Ancients’ acceptance of members from the lower classes had naturally made them more popular amongst those classes and made the Ancient branch larger and stronger, with a wider spread than the Modern branch.

The gap between class and property between the Ancients and the Moderns was well reflected in tax estimations in Philadelphia in 1756 and in Boston in 1771. The real estate estimation of the Ancient Masons was half that of the Modern Masons. According to the tax ranking in 1756 Philadelphia, only a quarter of the Ancient Masons were graded as high as 90% of the Modern Masons in the same town, and a quarter of the Moderns were graded higher than all the Ancients. The Ancients were also more
radical, with a reformist urge, which is not surprising considering that they had given a new sense of importance to men without social standing.\textsuperscript{xiii}

By admitting the lower classes, the Ancients challenged the elite monopoly on status and social standing within Freemasonry and played a key role in redefining power and class. This process reached its climax when the middle class, who gained new political importance thanks to the decline of the old hierarchies, catalyzed struggles such as the American Revolution.\textsuperscript{xiv} The old social classes were challenged in both 18\textsuperscript{th} century European and American societies, but Freemasonry, a large widespread brotherhood, played an important part in accelerating this process.

The split ended in 1792, when the Modern Masons surrendered and accepted the Ancients' conditions and rejoined them. In 1813, both branches of Freemasonry established the United Grand Lodge of England.\textsuperscript{xv} In America the revolution years damaged the Moderns, who were considered to be more loyal to Britain, and by 1800 almost all the lodges in America defined themselves as Ancients.\textsuperscript{xvi} This internal class struggle made Freemasonry a different brotherhood class wise, and paved the way for Freemasonry, on both sides of the Atlantic, to become a brotherhood of merchants.

In order to understand how merchants and artisans in Freemasonry were able to create a powerful network, which leveraged their trading interests, we will now examine the structure and institutions of Freemasonry.

\section{2. The Structural Perspective: Freemasonry's Cosmopolitan Economic Network}

Freemasonry's institutional, organizational and structural components had made it a cosmopolitan economic network, which primarily served its merchant members. Freemasonry had a combination of both the institutionalized and centrally-governed brotherhood of Freemasonry, and of the diffuse, locally implemented social gatherings of different people in different places. These two contradicting, yet complementary characteristics made Freemasonry both relevant to different local environments and inspired by common motivations. Therefore the network was flexible and resilient, while also being holistic, due to the shared identity and world views that the brotherhood gave its members.

\subsection{2.1 Institutional Characteristics}

Freemasonry's transformation from a collection of lodges to a permanent body is marked by two key events. The first is the establishment of the Grand Lodge in London in 1717, which was meant to be a central supreme authority on Masonic matters,\textsuperscript{xvii} and the second is the acceptance of Anderson's constitutions. The Grand Lodge was established by members of four different lodges with both mason and non-craftsmen and it gained some control over opening new lodges in Europe and the colonies and making decisions on Masonic matters. By the year 1735, one hundred and twenty six lodges were under the Grand Lodge warranty. Other lodges were still individual initiatives which were more influenced by local factors than by the English authority.\textsuperscript{xviii} Some countries opened a new independent Grand Lodge of their own,\textsuperscript{xx} and granted charters for opening new lodges.\textsuperscript{xx} In America, the different states' Grand Lodges were fairly independent since no Grand Lodge had been established.\textsuperscript{xvi}
Anderson’s Constitutions, first published in London in 1723 and in Philadelphia by Benjamin Franklin in 1734, are a group of documents that tell the story of Freemasonry and detail the regulations and practices of the brotherhood. The constitutions codified and standardized the regulations and processes of Freemasonry and were accepted widely by Freemasons in different localities. The structural combination of loose control and the ability to spread and develop new and at least partially autonomous branches, and central institutions such as the Grand Lodges, were a main source of Freemasonry’s resilience and adaptive nature, but also a source for the differentiation and spontaneous nature of Freemasonry’s activities in different locations. The Freemason institutions and the social network together nurtured an international network, thanks to the global span of the brotherhood and its cosmopolitan nature.

2.2 Cross-Border Network

The Freemason network was anchored in the cosmopolitan character of the brotherhood, and was strengthened by the secrecy that accompanied the brotherhood from its inception. The Freemason network was also strengthened by communication, visitation systems and extra-organizational connections. The network was described by a Freemason named William F. Brainard as one that "comprises men of rank, wealth, office and talent... almost every place where power is of importance". Those men are "united together... so as to have the force to concert through the civilized world," because they have the "means of knowing one another, and the means of keeping secret, and the mean of cooperating; in the desk, in legislative hall, on the bench, in any gathering of men of business, in every party of pleasure, in every enterprise of government." Hence Freemasonry was described as "So powerful indeed is it at this time."

The Freemason network was in some ways very inclusive since it favored Cosmopolitanism. The universality of Freemasonry, formulated in Freemason’s own words as "the universal Mason, citizen of the entire world is not a foreigner in any land," was mentioned in the minute books and almanacs of the lodges, to show members that they were part of a universal society, which transcends different languages and religions by the brotherly love. This is symbolized at the end of the Masonic rituals, when the Freemasons cherish their fellow brothers across the sea in their prayers.

Nevertheless, Freemasonry was also very exclusive since secrecy was a key tenant. Secrecy was both a necessity due to occasional persecutions by church and state and a tactic to preserve the brotherhood’s prestige and valuable secret knowledge, a practice already in place from the era of the stonemasons’ guild, when masons guarded professional secrets such as geometrical instruments from competitors. The secrecy created freedom of expression amongst the fraternity, and a sense of uniqueness and exclusiveness amongst members. Nevertheless, secrecy was a source for conspiracies which held Freemasons responsible for the 18th century Revolutions and even today associate Freemasonry with Zionism. Secrecy was a component in all stages of Freemasonry: from initiation to membership, and it was taken very seriously by members, who were not allowed to disclose any information on lodges to the outside world.
Under the veil of secrecy and cosmopolitanism, all forms of communication and networking with foreign "brothers" were encouraged. Freemason communities used to exchange letters with brothers across the sea, most Grand Lodges maintained direct links to each other through their extensive correspondence and system of reporting, that grew bigger as years passed. That "distinct republic of letters, with brothers sharing rhetoric, organization and imagery," had fostered the cosmopolitan sphere of Freemasonry and its shared identity. The letters, for instance, between the lodges of l'Amenite in Philadelphia with Choix des Vrais Amis lodge in Marseille, France, and the correspondence of the Grand Lodge of South Carolina Ancient York Masons, with several of the Grand Lodges of the United States, show the same discourse, organizational structure and symbols.

Visits between lodges created personal relationships between members. By the 1770s lodges were hosting Freemasons from other countries. These visits were documented by lodges; for example, the guestbook of the Lodge of Amsterdam indicate that until 1750 members from Antwerp, Genève, Stockholm, Bordeaux, Bern, Hamburg, Leipzig, London and Dutch colonies were all hosted at the lodge. It is left to us to wonder what a Freemason from Philadelphia in the year of 1780, would have discussed with the members of the Lodge of The Hague, who hosted him.

In order to facilitate these visits and ensure that a Freemason would be welcomed in every lodge in the world, members owned signed certificates from their home-lodges, much like passports, and presented them to host-lodges in order to receive guidance and accommodation. In this way "the Grand Lodge certificate of one Mason country of origin served as a passport to the global Masonic network." In fact, Freemasonry itself was quite a door-opener at the time. In Franklin's words: "They [the Freemasons] speak a universal language... Act as a passport to the attention and support the initiated in all parts of the world."

Freemasonry as a cosmopolitan passport is illustrated in the story of Stephen Clubb, an American Freemason who was helped by French Freemasons while he was in France. Another example can be found in a column in the Freemasons Quarterly Review, that tells a story of a British Freemason named W, who met Freemasons around Europe who assisted him, which made W become aware of the privileges to which Freemasons are entitled, which were unknown to the public.

The network fostered and facilitated social and economic lineage inside the British Empire and outside of it. Freemasonry had the ability to bind together strangers from different parts of the world. By allowing members of different countries to meet each other in a familial environment, and exchange membership benefits and knowledge across national borders, Freemasonry's cosmopolitan character had grown stronger, and enabled the involvement of Freemasons in different countries.

Thomas De Quincey answered accusations that Freemasonry was the cause for the French revolution in an ironic manner, saying that "man that did not know each other, nay, often had not even heard of each other, nor speak the same language" cannot be partied of the same treason. Nevertheless, Freemasonry "had the capacity to create strong networking systems within small coherent communities and to extend those networks across great distances nationally and internationally." This meant Freemasonry could create cooperation between "men that did not know each other", by providing these strangers common
beliefs, language, institutions and authority. This network, when combined with the members' material interests, became an economic network, which enabled Freemasons to promote free trade.

3. Freemasonry as an Economic Network

The global network which offered fellowship, conviviality and financial support, had made the membership a "valuable agency for the promotion of their political programs and commercial enterprises." In fact, 18th century Freemasonry functioned as an economic interest group, leveraging the interests of the emerging middle class on both sides of the Atlantic.

Tradesmen, artisans and merchants were the majority amongst the Freemasonry since, among other benefits; Freemasonry gave them an opportunity to leverage their participation for economic ends. For merchants, the network was extremely beneficial since relations between remote members helped to establish trade relations between merchants of different countries and supplied the groundwork needed to establish remote trade infrastructure, such as building roads and canals. This network was so attractive that, according to some researchers, people joined the brotherhood primarily in order to be a part of the network, hence networking was central to Freemasonry's metropolitan success. The components of favor exchanges of this network were charity, mutual trade preferences amongst members and an enormous amount of merchant activity under the framework of the brotherhood.

3.1 Charity and Credit

The brotherhood provided its members and their families with financial support in cases of need, such as death or the head of the family losing the ability to work, which worked similarly to an insurance mechanism. In order to preserve the insurance mechanism ability to support members, the brotherhood created entry barriers and tested the financial credibility of candidates. That charity system excluded classes lower than the financially able middle class from Freemasonry. By that it provided the members with a basis for a network of information, introductions, and reliable acquaintances in the financial world.

Information can easily be transformed into capital; financial information was proven useful in research by Fabio Braggion, who uses the data of 410 British companies registered in the London stock exchange from 1895-1902, to claim that Freemason business managers had greater access to credit in small and young companies. These are companies where trust is the most influential factor in getting access to credit. The results of the research show that Freemason business managers had higher leverage ratios, and a proxy for access to credit. Braggion claims that the brotherhood’s network helped bring together two factors: asymmetric knowledge and contract enforceability. Roger Burt explains that the greatest effect of Freemasonry was the reduction of uncertainty, the limitation of transaction costs, and the facilitation of an efficient allocation of resources in the business world, by providing information and sound trust relationships. This network was valuable in times of political and economic transformations, such as at the end of the 18th century.
Credit in those days was especially important for trade. Robert Morris – a supporter of free trade who designed a free trade strategy for the United States called "the Model Treaty" in 1776 – announced at the opening of the Bank of North America, 1782 that credit will increase the internal and external commerce, and will be "useful to all the traders of every state in the Union." This explains why merchant members benefited most from the financial security that Freemasonry provided for its members.

3.2 Economic Preferences

The economic network was strengthened by Freemasons who favored other Freemasons in professional vocations. The Freemasons' constitutions commanded a Freemason to relieve other Freemasons in need by employing him or recommend him to be employed. The fact that Freemasons believed that a "brother" was worthy of special treatment is expressed in many of their writings, and explained by the "spirit of Masonry which incites us to greater fidelity," which constitute any member as a friend and "entitle him to privileges and honor of which none else can know the value or extant." This made Freemasonry lodges an entry point into a group with exclusive access to social privileges, and often a professional network within which individuals could promote private economic interests by cooperating.

The Freemason reciprocal help benefited merchants who migrated, and helped to create a network of trade between distant lodges. Jacob claims that trade connections were important reasons for people to join the brotherhood. Harland-Jacobs claim that Freemasonry functioned as a global patronage network that helped men find employment and secure professional promotion, and in the British Empire, the transmission of material resources had become a major concern of Freemasonry.

Freemasons were "business friendly" because they encouraged personal connections through which an exchange in knowledge, transferring capital and job seeking took place. The network was present both in and outside of lodges, and was used for different causes, such as helping members to adapt to the economic change that followed the American Revolution. Burt gives an example of the business network of six tin and copper mining lodges in West Britain that were composed of roughly fifty percent middle class professionals, many of whom were roaming members, including merchants. Men joined those lodges in order to get access to the network and be helped to achieve key positions in society.

Another example that is given by D. L. L. Parry, describes the end of the 18th century in Orleans, France, where Freemasons played a crucial role in political and economic favoritism. Members could find work in the lodges, since Freemasons preferred to use professional services of fellow Freemasons, and merchants preferred to deal with one another on preferential terms. This business support drew many other individuals, such as travelling salesmen for example, to join Freemasonry. This leads us to an understanding of Freemasonry as a network of merchants.

3.3 A Network of Merchants

Research on Freemasonry in Sierra Leone claims that due to its secrecy, once Freemasonry had a majority from one strong interest group, or a number of related interest groups, it tended to become an exclusive vehicle for promoting the interests of that group. In the second half of the 18th century,
merchants enjoyed the benefits of the brotherhood most prominently, especially those with businesses that crossed borders. This was due to a combination of networking and reciprocal help, which created mutual trust between strangers, and made businesses much simpler, together with the growing numbers and importance of merchants. This subchapter will explain how Freemasonry became a network of merchants, and what that network meant to the promotion of free trade.

Freemasons described cooperation over joint goals as broader than simple trade partnerships and also valid in times of misfortune. This was an incentive for many merchants, professionals and artisans to join the brotherhood. The collective interests of merchants, both private and institutional, were also promoted through the brotherhood’s benefits; one example is in Norfolk, Virginia, where Freemasons played a key role in establishing the Chamber of Commerce on May 2, 1801. At least eleven out of forty-seven members of the chamber were Freemasons, mostly from Norfolk lodge No. 1. Most importantly, merchants needed infrastructure to increase trade, for example, building roads, canals, and so on. Freemason merchants used the connections between lodges to build trade infrastructure, which in turn facilitated international trade relations.

The network of merchants that Freemasonry created was also nurtured by business connections with fellow merchants who were not bound to one locality. In an investigation on Freemasonry, a shipmaster named Bateman Munro from Portsmouth, Newport, testifies that "through Masonry, always derived great benefit to my owners and myself, in foreign countries", not only by getting "information what the markets were, what I could do, and what I could not" but also by being "favored by Port Officers on account of my being a Mason, and have been aided and assisted in smuggling goods by making myself known as a Mason".

The network of merchants was also strengthened by the fact that it was not purely spontaneous, but rather, a conscious attempt to strengthen the network was made by members. "The Universal Masonic Record", for instance, was an attempt to collect and catalogue the branches of the network in America and Europe, in order to benefit members in all localities and be "advantageous to the business of every one, both at home and abroad, whatever his pursuits in life may be, and also serve as a certificate and evidence of honorable standing in the community".

Due to its centrality within Freemasonry, the "reciprocal negotiations of interest" was extremely important in the admission process. This is shown by the fact that although Freemasonry rarely admitted native members, when business interests were at stake, native members were admitted. In colonial India, Freemasons accepted Indian merchants because they viewed them as business partners. This engagement between Indian and British Freemasons helped foster the global capitalist system which was then emerging.

There are many examples of merchants who were Freemasons, who exemplify the cluster of Freemasonry, trade and even politics. Four prominent examples are Moses Michael Hays, Isaac Sears, Paul Revere and Moses Seixas. Moses Michael Hays (1739-1805), a Portuguese Sephardic Jew, was one of the founders of the New England Masonic movement and a Grand Master with Paul Revere as his deputy. Hays was an American banker who founded the Massachusetts Bank, and merchant who established his own transatlantic trade in Rhode Island and Boston. He was among the first merchants
there to underwrite shipbuilding, trade and insurance to newly opened Far Eastern markets. Isaac Sears (1729-1786) was a revolutionary patriot in "The Sons of Liberty" and a Freemason from New York City who was engaged in West Indian and European trade. Paul Revere, a well-known Freemason from St. Andrew's Lodge in Boston, and a hero of the revolution, was a silversmith and business man who established the first American copper rolling mill. Moses Seixas was a merchant in Newport, Rhode Island, and one of the founders of the Newport Bank of Rhode Island. He succeeded Brother Moses M. Hays as Worshipful Master of King David's Lodge and even corresponded with President Washington on Masonic matters.

Freemasonry's cross-border network acted as a basis for merchants, such as those who were mentioned here, to promote their individual and collective economic aims. This network created trade between individual strangers, and not between two opponent states as in Mercantilism. The ability to acknowledge unfamiliar people as potential brothers, could easily transform them into potential trade partners, who were trustworthy and easily accessible. In this way, the network of merchants became the pioneers of transatlantic free trade.

4. Conclusions

This article had focused on the reasons for why and how Freemasonry took a part in promoting free international trade. The processes mentioned above took part mostly in the second half of the 18th century. Once Freemasonry became an economic network of merchants interested in free trade, Freemasonry's institutions naturally became a platform for free trade promotion, which eventually happened in the international arena at the beginning of the 19th century. Today governments and institutions try to encourage free trade by bringing together people from different locations through business trips. Freemasons did not need business trips as they were already in an environment supportive of international trade.
Endnotes


10 Charles T. MacLenachen, *History of the Most Ancient and Honorable Fraternity of Free and Accepted Masons in New York from the Earliest Date* (Printed by the Grand Lodge: New York, 1888), pp. 82.


12 Ibid., 93.


17 Ibid., 15.


Walgren, *Freemasonry, Anti-Freemasonry and Illuminism*, xlix.


William F. Brainard (a Freemason with the degree of Royal Arch) in a lecture before Union Lodge in New London, Connecticut, 1834.

Walgren, *Freemasonry, Anti-Freemasonry and Illuminism*, pp.lvii.


See also *Freemason’s Monitor or Illustrations of Masonry* on Universality: http://internetloge.de/masmon/masmon01.htm [accessed: February 14, 2013].


According to the Hamas Covenant, Freemasonry is an organization that serves Zionist goals.


More about secrecy from the perspective of the Freemasons can be found in the "Freemason's Monitor or Illustrations of Masonry" by Thomas Smith Webb, a book which had a significant impact on the development of Masonic ritual in America. An online edition: http://internetloge.de/masmon/masmon03.htm [accessed: February 14, 2013].

Networks within Freemasonry were revealed in the international Masonic congresses in the 1890s and 1900s, the Bureau international de relations maçonniques (1903–1921) and the Association maçonnique internationale (1921–1950). Individuals, representing eighty-three European Grand Lodges took part in sixteen international congresses between 1855 and 1932 and had the opportunity to establish personal relationships with other delegates.


Elliott and Daniels, "The 'School of True, Useful and Universal Science'?...," 227-228.

Walgren, Freemasonry, Anti-Freemasonry and Illuminism, 112-154.

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Beaurepaire, "The Universal Republic of the Freemasons…," 421-431.


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ix Burt, "Freemasonry and Business Networking during the Victorian Period," 678-681.

x Money, "The Masonic Moment…," 384-387.


xii Anderson, *The Constitutions of the Free-Masons 1734*.


xx Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood*, 201.

xxi Burt, "Freemasonry and Business Networking during the Victorian Period," 660-678.


Weisberger, Speculative Freemasonry and the Enlightenment, 159-60.

Harris, Discourses, Delivered on Public Occasions, 29.

Bullock, Revolutionary Brotherhood, 184-219.


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Ghosh and Kennedy, Britain, India and the Transcolonial World, 105-113.


William R. Denslow, 10,000 Famous Freemasons From A to Z (Kessinger Publishing: Whitefish, Montana, 1959), 'Isaac sears'.
