

‘Businessmen of the World, Unite!’ The International Chamber of Commerce and the Rise of Global Capitalism in the Twentieth Century

1. Summary of the research plan

“The International Chamber of Commerce [ICC] has helped me more than anything else I ever did. It has enabled me to make acquaintances and friendships in the interests of our business that will help our men in every corner of this world”. This quotation from Thomas J. Watson, IBM chairman and ICC president at the end of the 1930s, underscores how useful the Chamber, founded in 1920, had been for the global development of his firm. It also suggests that the ICC may have played an important role in the development of global economic exchanges during the 20th century. However, in spite of renewed interest from researchers in recent years, we still know extremely little about the ICC.

This project aims to uncover the contributions of this unique non-governmental international organization to the rise of global capitalism in the 20th century. In doing so, it contributes to closing the research gaps in knowledge of the ICC and in the way that leading business people meet internationally to promote their interests. The project is structured around two sets of research questions.

First, I will investigate ICC activities in favor of a global capitalist order, i.e., to the promotion of an economy based on decentralization, accumulation and commodification. The Chamber is best known as an outspoken advocate of free trade. But what were its concrete contributions to the development of international trade? Who were the persons who chose to invest time and resources for the Chamber? What were ICC’s relations to other international organizations such as the League of Nations and the United Nations, and how influential was the Chamber?

Second, I will investigate the articulation of national and international interests in the ICC. Each country affiliated to the Chamber is organized in a national committee. These committees define strategies and designate delegates to the ICC Council. In a century dominated by nation-states, how important were national interests in the work of the ICC? Was the Chamber an arena in which competing national interests engaged in power struggles, or was it the crucible of a transnational capitalist class, emancipated from its national origins?

Answering those questions requires a careful examination of multi-sited archives: at the seat of the ICC in Paris, in ICC’s national committees in Europe and the USA, in business archives and in personal papers. Furthermore, I will focus on an actor-based methodology inspired by prosopography – a collective biography of a social group – in order to investigate ICC’s members and provide a sound sociological basis for my project.

This historical investigation, starting around 1900 and ending up around 1990, will cover ICC activities in very different contexts, in phases of increasing (the 1920s, 1970-1990), decreasing (1930-1950) or relatively low but steadily increasing international economic exchanges (1950-1970).

The expected results are twofold. First, the various publications prepared in the context of this project will set a new standard in the debates on the historical formation of a transnational capitalist class and will significantly contribute to our understanding of the rise of global capitalism. Second, a database linked to the Metagrid (www.metagrid.ch) project will provide extensive biographical information on the men (and the few women) active in the ICC and will be useful for research on economic elites in various countries.