

8 Conclusion

In August 1745, the Hamburg merchant Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens loaded his business archive in the French harbour of Brest onto one of his ships bound for his hometown Hamburg. The ship never reached its destination, but was captured during its voyage by an English privateer. The business archive subsequently became a piece of evidence in a lawsuit at the British High Court of Admiralty. Following the court case, the archive was not sent to Hamburg, but was transferred to the Court archives. In the last centuries, it was transferred again, first to the Tower of London and then to the National Archives in Kew, London, where I found it in 2012. It was the discovery of this archive that prompted me to write this book.

For the original owner, the merchant Luetkens, losing his mercantile archive was a tragic loss. However, for historians today, the incident has been a stroke of luck. Due to the fortuitous event of its falling victim to an English privateering raid, combined with the special situation leading to its preservation, the archive survived until today as an unspoiled time capsule. When opened, it allows us a unique and deep view, through the activities and correspondence of the merchant Luetkens, into the world of 18th-century trade. Before returning to Hamburg, Luetkens had travelled from 1743 to 1745 in France to establish his business. Thus his archive is a first-hand account of a crucial phase for any merchant: the mercantile establishment phase.

When I first opened the Luetkens archive, it was in fact a kind of raw diamond. It had slumbered untouched and unaltered for 264 years, still with all of its original contents and in its original state of preservation. During my research, the archive's singular state of preservation allowed me to enter the world of this 18th-century merchant in a way that can perhaps only be compared to how ethnographers encounter foreign cultures. Of course, the major difference between my work and an ethnographic study was that I was not observing people in their natural environment, but was reading and analysing letters from the past. These letters, however, produced striking findings about a culture just as foreign to me as those studied by ethnographers. Indeed, the present work is historiography, not ethnography. It is based on historiographic methodologies. Nonetheless, it has been inspired by the ethnographic work of approaching and analysing highly unknown cultural territory.

Based on the Luetkens archive, in this book I have presented a microhistory of the mercantile establishment phase of a wholesale merchant in the mid-18th century, with a special focus on letter practices and business practices. Microhistory is a research approach that deliberately limits its focus to a specific concrete and limited field of observation.¹ While shining a spotlight on a particular part of a past culture, however, it can also provide valuable insights into a bigger picture of the past. Chosen here as my concrete field of observation were the three boxes of the Luetkens archive, especially the information contained therein regarding mercantile correspondence and business practices. The bigger picture to which I contribute is the history of 18th-century merchants and trade in the Atlantic region, including wholesale commerce, and letter and business practices as driving forces of international trade and transnational communication. Since Luetkens was from Hamburg, but travelled France, the book moreover throws light onto the general activities of wholesale merchants from Hamburg and their important economic role in France during the 18th century.

The method chosen for this microhistory and its analyses was praxeological thick descriptions.² Thick description, the detailed account of events, practices, cultural and social relationship patterns and their context, is used in ethnographic research as well. For this book, I developed my own version of the method for analysing past practices tailored to the special needs posed by the Luetkens archive. My focus on past practices stems, in turn, from my strong interest in Historical Praxeology, the study of past practices. A great deal can be learned about the past and how people lived by examining people's practices, practices being defined as patterns of action collectively shared and performed by several people or groups of people, shaping thereby their daily encounters, communication and dealings with one another.³

Practices can be seen as decisive carriers of social life and interaction, which is why they can offer such valuable information about the past. Historical praxeological research is possible because past practices are still identifiable in historical source materials. The practices have perpetuated and imprinted themselves in the material. As I have demonstrated in this book, past practices can be analysed today by examining the crucial elements that created patterns of actions: the materiality, processuality, performativity and historicity of past practices. In my analysis I have approached the Luetkens archive ethnographically, paying tribute to and respecting the special character of the source material – this historical time capsule – whereby I have integrated the praxeological perspective into the microhistorical approach by applying thick description.

To better understand the letter practices and business practices represented in the Luetkens archive, I have contextualised these practices by reconstructing plausible and intelligible frameworks and offering probable explanations for them. This in turn helped

1 See Medick, "Mikro-Historie"; Medick, "Missionaries in the Row Boat?"; Levi, "On Microhistory"; Brewer, "Microhistory"; Magnússon/Szijártó, *What is Microhistory?*

2 See Geertz, "Thick Description"; Darnton, "On Clifford Geertz"; Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre*.

3 See Freist, *Diskurse – Körper – Artefakte*; Haasis/Rieske, *Historische Praxeologie*; Brendecke, *Praktiken*; Füssel, "Praxeologische Perspektiven"; Reichardt, "Praxeologische Geschichtswissenschaft"; Mergel/Reichardt, "Praxeologie in der Geschichtswissenschaft."

me to demonstrate the significance of these practices for people's lives in the 18th century. The Luetkens archive enables this because it contains such an abundance of unaltered, first-hand source material, allowing us to retrace past practices in great detail. The archive still contains nearly all the letters the merchant Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens kept from 1743 to 1745, since after the archive was confiscated, he had no chance to alter it in any way. Luetkens had more than forty active correspondents, who are represented in individual letter bundles stored in the archive. Moreover, the archive holds both the incoming and outgoing mail of Luetkens, in chronological order. I thus was able to reconstruct and analyse this 18th-century correspondence not only from one perspective, but often from two-sided or even four-sided perspectives between several merchants. These letters are the most formative feature of the archive; they shape the character of the investigations in my book as well.

By analysing these letters as polyphonic written conversations conducted between several correspondents over longer periods of time, I was able to reconstruct various practices.⁴ These include not only material practices and textual letter-writing practices, but also performative and negotiation practices, the driving forces behind setting up business: coordination, references, assistance or obstruction. I explicitly include the worldviews, responses and reactions of Luetkens' many correspondents, thus presenting the business activities of a concrete group of people "informally bound together by a shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise."⁵ This joint enterprise was trade in the Atlantic region. On the basis of their letters it is possible to see how they managed and regulated this enterprise through particular practices and networks within their community.

This book is therefore not only about the letter-writing skills of Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens and the steps he took to establish his business, but ultimately it is about international business practices in north-western Europe in the mid-18th century between a large group of people: wholesale merchants, merchant bankers, ship owners, insurance companies, ship captains and their crew members, loaders, clerks, senators and lawyers. Luetkens' network also includes members of his own family and future family. Consequently, we also hear about his future wife and future mother-in-law. Apart from references to his aunt, who played in the lottery with him, and to women living in the house of his uncle, his future wife and her mother are unfortunately the only women featured in Luetkens' letters and thus also in this book.⁶

In total, 2,286 letters have survived in the Luetkens archive. They were not only written by the merchant Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens, but also by more than forty correspondents. While I have used these letters as the basis for this book, I have supplemented them with other mercantile records contained in the archive, such as bills of exchange and accounting books. I have also examined the court records regarding the captured

4 See Trivellato, "Merchants' letters." See Fitzmaurice, "Talking on paper"; Fitzmaurice, *The Familiar Letter*.

5 Wenger/Snyder, "Communities of Practice," 139. Regarding the concept of *communities of practice* see Wenger, *Communities of Practice*. See also Haasis, "Augenblick."

6 See letter from Luetkens, Nicolaus Gottlieb to Luetkens, Anthony, October 9, 1744, TNA, HCA 30/232, Letter book I, no. 350. See *Details of lottery purchases*, i.a. Elbinger Lotterie, TNA, HCA 30/232.

ship, and other contemporary sources from the period under investigation: merchant manuals, letter-writing manuals, novels, contemporary encyclopaedias, contemporary biographical dictionaries, maritime legislative texts, peace treaties, trade contracts and agreements, school registers, newspapers, portraits, commemorative medals, and other pieces of material culture, such as pieces of jewellery, furniture and wooden figurines.

The foreign culture I encountered through the Luetkens archive, the culture that was ultimately the focus of my investigations, was the world of 18th-century business correspondence. For the merchants described in this study, correspondence was a major field of activity that significantly shaped their lives. In fact, performing the manifold steps of letter-writing – writing, folding, sealing, sending, receiving and reading letters – made up a considerable part of a wholesale merchant's life during the period under investigation. The Luetkens archive provides an eloquent testimony of this, not only with respect to the sheer quantity of the letters still contained in the archive, but also with respect to the contents of these letters. Almost all areas of business or private undertakings were accompanied by letters. Indeed, most undertakings were strongly dependant or even rested primarily on letter writing. Thus, in many ways 18th-century business practices and even personal affairs can be considered as inseparable from letter-writing practices. In some cases, letters even represented concrete mercantile actions, in commission trade or in business financing, whereby the letter itself was literally equivalent to money.

The various business activities Luetkens undertook through letters represented major proving grounds for him. It was here that he had to show himself worthy and capable of his profession during his establishment phase. Indeed, the interdependence between people's lives and their letters represents a major characteristic and historical specificity of the period under investigation. This was the main feature I capitalised on when analysing the unknown territory presented to me by the Luetkens archive.

Business and letter-writing must thus be seen as two intertwined, interlacing processes, two sides of the same coin, concurrent mainstays of the activities of wholesale merchants in the 18th century. For the merchant Luetkens, letters were used as pivotal tools to pursue his mercantile and personal goals, and to put his plans and enterprises into practice.

Luetkens' life when establishing his business as a wholesale merchant in France was characterised by mobility, commission trade and networking activities. He took many concrete steps to promote his career and move his business plans forward, steps that are clearly visible in the Luetkens archive. Indeed, the archive allows us to reconstruct Luetkens' undertakings in great detail. Through the performative tool of letter-writing, it was above all the power of persuasion that Luetkens used to establish himself as a reputable wholesale merchant. And it was this power of persuasion that became the central storyline of this volume.

A major point in my investigations was how Luetkens and his correspondents used letters to develop their plans and enterprises. What concrete material, textual, rhetorical and performative means did they find to turn letters into effective tools for negotiation and persuasion? How did they use letters to implement business plans and personal undertakings? And how did letter practices and business practices intersect?

As I discovered, the power of persuasion was based on few concrete and practical means of exerting influence, means that were commonly used by 18th-century merchants and letter writers. The fact that persuasion and concrete attempts to exert influence plays such an important role in the correspondence I have analysed can be attributed to two main factors.

On one hand, on a more general level, the phase of establishing a business during a young man's life can be seen as shaped by the clear requirement to be convincing, both in words and actions. Without this, his business was doomed to failure. As a result, when promoting his career and attempting to win over trading partners to his business plans, a young merchant's letters simply had to be credible and persuasive. Otherwise it would have been impossible to put these ideas and plans into practice.

On the other hand – an insight I gained directly from reading the letters in the Luetkens archive – not a single enterprise or personal undertaking initiated or pursued by Luetkens or his correspondents was conducted without the help of others and without recourse to concrete persuasive efforts. Due to this, not only was I able to document various letter practices, I was also able to extrapolate the pragmatic purposes underlying the use of certain practices in certain situations. Thus, I was able to identify several concrete practical principles that shaped and governed the use of certain letter practices and business practices, principles I call practical principles of persuasion. Identifying these principles allowed me to demonstrate the function, logic and significance of certain 18th-century letter practices and business practices, and to reconstruct how these practices specifically helped Luetkens and his correspondents to implement their plans.

I identified nine practical principles of persuasion in total. This is one of the major research outcomes presented in this book. The others are a catalogue of typical letter practices used by wholesale merchants of the 18th century, a detailed case study of the important role played by Hamburg merchants as economic intermediaries and enablers of French trade in the 18th century, and, last but not least, insights into the requirements and events of establishing a mercantile business in the Early Modern Period, an aspect that hitherto has attracted little scholarly attention.⁷

All four outcomes must ultimately be seen as complementary and intertwined with each other, thus forming the general outcome of this book.

The book provides insights into how 18th-century wholesale merchants established their businesses. I have demonstrated above all how this process was decisively shaped by the power of persuasion through letters. To better understand the requirements and challenges of establishing a mercantile business at that time, as well as the concrete situation in 1743–1745 of the merchant Luetkens, I have furthermore provided information

7 There is no comprehensive study, only articles or book chapters, focusing on the establishment phase of an 18th-century wholesale merchant. Initial approaches are for example the chapter "Der Bürger als Kaufmann" in Ruppert, *Bürgerlicher Wandel*, 57–103; in parts Hancock, *Citizens of the World*; the chapter "Starting a Business" in Earle, *Making of the English Middle Class*, 85–111; Jeannin, "Distinction des compétences"; Kansikas, "Career Paths"; in parts Henninger, *Bethmann*; Smith, *Merchants*; Ebert, *Brazilian Sugars*. See Overkamp, Anne Sophie. *Fleiß, Glaube, Bildung. Kaufleute als gebildete Stände im Wuppertal 1760–1840*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020, 207–270.

about mercantile education during this period, as well as detailed information about mercantile travel, the characteristics of and reasons for 18th-century business trips, as well as the specificities of travelling in France in the 18th century. The case of Luetkens also offers a typical biography of an 18th-century wholesale merchant: Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens was the eldest son of a Hamburg minister. He was raised and apprenticed in Hamburg during the Early Enlightenment. Already early in life, he or his family must have decided that he would embark on a career as a merchant, not untypical for a son from a bourgeois family. This decision was also certainly influenced by his two uncles, who were merchants as well.⁸

The various career steps taken by Luetkens before leaving for France are presented in Chapter 2, "Making of a Merchant", which also includes descriptions of the main requirements for the mercantile establishment phase.

The following main part of the book offers five case studies in five analytical chapters on the concrete steps taken by Luetkens to establish his business. Each chapter describes a major field of activity he undertook while in France from 1743 to 1745, activities that in the 18th century represented the cornerstones of establishing a business as a wholesale merchant. More generally, they represent the major fields of activity of wholesale merchants of that period who were involved in Atlantic trade.

Chapter 3 deals with the shipping business, Chapter 4 with the commission trade. Both represent typical business fields utilized by wholesale merchants when establishing their businesses, since they promised relatively stable and secure sources of income, and also served as a good basis for building a good reputation. Later in his life, Luetkens profited from his reputation and contacts, and was able to rest his business on importing goods from the colonies to Hamburg, particularly French sugar.⁹ Chapter 5 discusses high-risk trade, which represented an equally important cornerstone for developing a career, albeit one that presented great uncertainties. Nonetheless, high-risk trade promised additional income, which was helpful or even invaluable in a young merchant's career. Here, Luetkens' investments in hazardous trade routes across the Mediterranean are examined. Chapter 6 and 7 then present the crucial final steps of an Early Modern merchant's career.¹⁰

Chapter 6 describes how Luetkens found a business partner for the merchant house he later opened in Hamburg, and how he found a merchant clerk who would become his agent and merchant factor in France. And finally, chapter 7 deals with Luetkens' marriage preparations, which went hand in hand with his plans to open up a merchant house, since he married the sister of his future business partner. Without exception, all of these career steps rested on the organised exchange of letters.

Methodologically, the special form of my case studies is that of praxeological thick description and praxeological analysis of practices and letter conversations represented

8 See Van Dülmen, *Kultur und Alltag* (vol. 1), 114-122. See Ruppert, *Bürgerlicher Wandel*, 76-86.

9 Regarding commission trade see Hancock, *Citizens of the World*, 81. Regarding the shipping business, see Davis, *English Shipping Industry*, 99.

10 Regarding the importance of these two steps for a mercantile career see Ruppert, *Bürgerlicher Wandel*, 57-103; Hancock, *Citizens of the World*, 43; Earle, *The Making of the English Middle Class*, 184-194; Grassby, *Business Community*, 303.

in the Luetkens archive. For my analyses, I deliberately chose letter episodes that represented important milestones for Luetkens in his business or his private life. I have also attempted to find episodes representative of Luetkens' general business portfolio, his career planning and his self-making during the years 1743–1745. On the basis of my analytical work, I was able to reconstruct in detail how Luetkens successfully managed to put certain business enterprises and personal endeavours into practice. At the same time, by taking Luetkens and his activities as an example and placing his case into a much broader context, a step typical for microhistorical work, namely, the Atlantic merchant community and its networks, we gain general insights into the world of Atlantic trade in the 18th century.

With regard to 18th-century communication and business practices, it can be shown that Luetkens and his correspondents – trading partners, friends and family members – used various concrete practices in their letter conversations to conduct trade and settle personal matters. In performing these practices, the letter writers deliberately used the properties of the artefact and communication medium of the letter as a basis of negotiation to put their plans into practice.¹¹

This was often done by exerting concrete influence on the course of a letter conversation or negotiation. It was on the basis of such practices that Luetkens planned and implemented his business enterprises and personal undertakings to advance his career as a wholesale merchant. They were his toolkit for positively influencing the outcome of his various enterprises. Since Luetkens used the same practices as his correspondents, my microhistorical analyses are not merely brief snapshots of unrelated events, but offer general insights into the typical practices of merchants in the 18th century.

I present several typical letter practices used in the 18th century in this book. These include the practice of bundling and folding several letters into letter packets in order to approach several correspondents at the same time, the practice of deliberately not sealing certain letters in letter packets but leaving them open to give the correspondents a sense of choice, the practice of writing in different national languages to demonstrate language skills and ensure the benevolence of international correspondents, and the practice of rhetorically skilful argumentation to counter the opinions of other correspondents. When giving orders or making material promises, Luetkens and his correspondents also used formulaic language, fixed terminology and a shared vocabulary in their letters. This shared vocabulary often also involved the practice of using historical speech or performative utterances to serve as concrete orders, confirmations or requests, understood as such by their contemporaries. Moreover, I have analysed the significance of the practice of adding extra sheets of paper to letters. Such inlays in bifolium letters often had texts serving particular purposes, such as special orders or offers. The logic behind this practice was that, if wished, these sheets of paper could easily be removed from the folded letters or destroyed, whereby the orders or offers would vanish into thin air. I have also explained the significance and logic behind the practice of writing personal postscripts, and of adding copies of letters to letter packets, either copied directly into the text of other letters or enclosed as extra sheets in letter packets.

11 Regarding the “properties and effects” of historical artefacts see Hicks, “Material-Cultural Turn,” 74.

Moreover, I have analysed the practices of using indirect speech and of mutual letter citation, which was used to refer to similar arguments. For example, references to the biblical trope of bread-winning were used in mercantile letters in various ways. These practices all served the purpose of involving and integrating more participants into a letter conversation, often making a decisive impact on the course of that conversation. Last but not least, I present the significance of the practice of writing “particular” letters, letters meant solely for the eyes of a single direct correspondent, as well as the practice of hand-to-hand delivery of letters. These both served a purpose quite the opposite of the practices mentioned above: They ensured secrecy and the maintenance of a close circle of acquaintances and insiders while doing business.

As a decisive element in its own right, but also as a discursive practice influencing several of the practices presented above, I have also reconstructed how Luetkens and his correspondents mobilised various contemporary language registers in their letters when approaching different correspondents for different purposes, in different situations, and at different times.¹² I present the language register of family affairs related to the conversations shaping family correspondence, the language register of business and trade in business letters, the language register of patronage in sea business, which created a basis for trust and loyalty in the shipping business, the gallant language register of flattery used in recruitment negotiations for mercantile staff, and the language register of love mobilised during Luetkens’ marriage preparations.

Analysing these registers also included identifying and presenting different letter types and styles typical for 18th-century correspondence: business letters, family and personal letters, love letters, letters of friendship, ship captain letters, as well as letters of complaint, indignation or warnings, used to lead correspondents who had caused problems back on the right track. As part of the praxeological thick descriptions of these practices, language registers and letter types, I have also examined the historical events and phenomena that shaped them, as well as how they, in turn, shaped these events. Of course, historical events and contexts also had a concrete bearing on the life, letters and career of the merchant Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens. Examples include maritime neutrality, the rise of the private merchant firm and the joint partner company as business models, the Protestant International, the “Turkish threat”, the Early Modern patronage system, Early Modern marriage patterns, and the new ideal of love that gained ground during the 18th century. All of these had tangible effects on mercantile self-perception in general, and the self-making of the merchant Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens in particular.¹³

To conclude, various business practices have been presented: the shipping business, commission trade, banking and insurance businesses, financing practices, including bill transactions and credit business, high-risk trade, insider dealings, and negotiation practices in marriage preparations.

12 Regarding the analysis of language registers see the *Introduction*. See in general Biber/Conrad, *Register, Genre and Style*, 4, 6.

13 “Turkish Threat”, “Türkengefahr” in German, was a historical source term. See the chapter on *High-Risk Trade* for a critical assessment and comments on the usage of this term. See Ressel, *Sklavenkassen*, 17–31.

As these lists show, this book not only presents the career steps of 18th-century mercantile business or various letter practices, but demonstrates how these elements came together to form a complex interplay of concrete letters, contexts, material and social events, and practical principles of persuasion. These mechanisms were used over the course of individual letter episodes, contributing either to the amicable resolution of particular enterprises or private affairs, or to their termination.

Presented are not only findings about how certain letter practices were used in particular letter episodes, but also the concrete ways they functioned, their effect in individual situations, the contemporary resources mobilised during their performance, and the practical logic and purpose behind their usage. These aspects enabled particular mechanisms and unwritten principles to be extrapolated, also supporting the idea that letters were used as effective tools of mercantile self-making during the 18th century. These mechanisms were generally practical in nature, not merely rhetorical, which is why I call them the practical principles of persuasion. Discussions of these nine principles are distributed over five analytical chapters, in which letters written by Luetkens as well as letters from his correspondents are analysed. The principles are the following: demands for loyalty, the sledgehammer method, persuasion by showing efficiency, making firm promises and providing material assurances, meeting as equals, keeping a low profile, insider dealings, which is connected to the principle of giving correspondents preferential treatment by creating the feeling of exclusivity, and, finally, the practical principle of mollification.

On the basis of these practical principles of persuasion in the performance of letter practices, Luetkens and his correspondents – his trading partners and his family members – were able to put their plans and enterprises into practice. This helped pave the way for Luetkens establishing himself as a wholesale merchant in the Atlantic trading community, as well as his later career as one of the most successful Hamburg merchants of the 18th century. And for me, identifying these practical principles of persuasion as the cornerstones of Luetkens success gave me the inspiration for the title of this book. It was the Power of Persuasion that was the key to becoming a merchant in the 18th century.

Final Remarks

To conclude, I would like to comment on the three quotes found at the beginning of this book. There is a simple and quite practical reason for discussing these quotes here at the end. I chose them because they aptly encapsulate the three major points I wanted to make with this book, and thus, this is the best place to explain why.

While only one of the quotes stems from a letter of Luetkens, nevertheless, when I encountered the other two while studying the Luetkens archive, they also seemed pertinent for illustrating the archival work I was doing, as well as the ideas being generated thereby. Connecting the beginning of this book to its end gives it a frame. And furthermore, here at the end I can best comment on several additional questions that arose during the process of writing this book. These final remarks therefore offer a wrap-up, present a few unanswered questions, and introduce some further ideas that I hoped to trigger with the book.

“What is a letter? If not simply a piece of paper that one can tear into pieces or crumple together, but that one can also keep as a treasure and make it yellow and weather.”¹⁴

Studying past practices

The first quote was written by the poet Ludwig Heinrich Christoph Hölty (1748–1776), a contemporary of the merchant Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens. Both men lived during the period that the famous historian Georg Steinhausen, a pioneer of letter research, called “the age of letters”.¹⁵ Hölty knew well the special quality and importance of letters for the lives of people in the 18th century.¹⁶ He must also have known that, in the end, it is people themselves who ultimately confer significance, power and meaning to their letters, whereby they turn simple pieces of paper into objects of value. In its essence, the Luetkens archive encapsulates this characteristic feature of early modern letters. It also represents both ways of dealing with letters described by Hölty. The Luetkens archive represents without a doubt a weathered treasure trove. At the same time, the archive’s contents also show how people once treated paper in more ordinary ways: crumpling it, folding it, tucking it, filing it, storing it. In this regard, Hölty’s statement aptly points to the importance we must give to the material nature, the materiality, of historical sources.

The informative value of the materiality of letters has played a crucial role in this book. It represents my entry point as well as my basis for analysing the letter practices and business practices of the past. With the historical time capsule of the Luetkens archive, I was able to reconstruct how wholesale merchants of the past handled correspondence and business. The special material nature of this archive in its pristine con-

14 “Was ist ein Brief – ein Stück Papier, das man zerreit, zerknittert, aber auch als Schatz bewahrt, vergilbt schon und verwittert.” Ludwig Christoph Heinrich Hölty. *Sämtlich hinterlaene Gedichte: nebst einiger Nachricht aus des Dichters Leben*, edited by Adam Friedrich Geisler, vol. 1, Halle: Hendel, 1782.

15 Steinhausen, *Geschichte des deutschen Briefes* (vol. 2, 1891), 302.

16 On Hölty see Elschenbroich, Adalbert. “Art. Hölty, Ludwig.” *Neue Deutsche Biographie* 9 (1972): 336–337.

dition gave a special quality to my reconstructions of the letter conversations between correspondents using letters to discuss, negotiate, argue, cope with and influence each other. The praxeological approach as part of microhistory and the method of praxeological thick descriptions of the material events in the Luetkens archive allowed me from a methodological point of view to make sense of the archival observations and findings I got from working on the Luetkens archive.¹⁷ Through the praxeological perspective of my historiographic work, I hope to stimulate further historical praxeological studies, or at least hope I was able to demonstrate the potential of this approach for historical research. My praxeological work was based on the conviction that it is possible to learn about human action and conduct from the immediacy of material and textual traces left in archival records, indeed, precisely the kinds of traces referred to by Hölty. In combination with microhistory, praxeological work in archives can bring deep historical insights.

This approach depends strongly on archival practices that ensure the preservation and conservation of the original materiality of source materials. For example, it needs archival policies ensuring that paper does not undergo conservation measures that exceed what is necessary to prevent damage, such as flattening or cleaning processes. This is the approach we are following in *The Prize Papers Project*.¹⁸ In the course of this project, the Luetkens archive has been digitised. My focus on practices necessitated making choices: which practices, which episodes, which letters. As a microhistory, the aim was to provide a compressed yet comprehensive picture of the life and letters of Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens. A part of this was examining his and his correspondents' culture of correspondence. Nonetheless, I was clearly not able to cover all aspects of Luetkens' life and letters, all his fields of business and activities, or all his ways of conducting business and writing letters. My work has been unavoidably but legitimately "intrinsically incomplete", as Clifford Geertz once aptly put it.¹⁹ This is inherent to the method of thick description. Deciding to focus on a particular letter episode or aspect in the archive forced me to neglect many other episodes and aspects that could have been investigated.

Thus, the Luetkens archive surely still holds many more things to discover. In this book, the focus has been on the letters that constitute the majority of the archive's surviving documents. But other research opportunities exist, most notably with regard to the many business records in the archive, such as bills of exchanges, lists of commodity prices, newspapers and bills of lading. While I have used some of these as complementary source material in my analyses, they surely invite further research, particularly in the area of economic history. I sincerely hope my study will stimulate more study of the treasure trove of crumpled papers in the Luetkens archive.

17 See Haasis/Rieske, "Historische Praxeologie," 7-54, particularly 27-32. See Freist, "Historische Praxeologie als Mikro-Historie." See Daybell, *The Material Letter*; Wiggins, *Bess of Hardwick's Letters*.

18 See Bevan/Cock, "Prize Papers"; Freist, "Prize Papers." See www.prizepapers.de, accessed December 2, 2021.

19 Geertz, "Thick Description," 29.

“But letter writing is now a mere tossing of omelettes to me.”²⁰

Studying practical principles of persuasion

The second quote on the first page of this book is from the 20th-century writer and feminist Virginia Woolf (1882–1941), whom I highly admire. Her statement refers to a rather mundane, everyday experience. It also surely represents a quite marginal note within her overall oeuvre of literary works. Nevertheless, for this book and the research focus behind it, the statement provides an apt metaphor and thematic anchor. Written in 1934, in one of her own letters, Woolf’s “tossing of omelettes” means that a letter writer can never know the effect her or his letter will have.²¹ A letter always represents a step into the unknown.

The attempt behind writing a letter is to have a certain effect or impact on the addressee, and therefore on the future. But regardless of the effort put into writing a letter, its author will never know which side the figurative omelette will land. In the worst case, it might not land in the pan at all, but on the floor. The unique opportunity that the Luetkens archive provides is the insight it allows into both sides: the persuasive efforts of the letter writer on one hand, and the results and consequences of those letters on the other. This is because the archive contains both incoming and outgoing mail written over a relatively long period of time. Thus we are able to see how certain types of practices were crowned with success or failure, as well as how the letter writers adapted their approaches to new situations.

On the basis of this, I was able to reconstruct various practical persuasive mechanisms shaping and governing these letter conversations of the past from the perspective of both the writers and receivers, as well as their respective responses or courses of action. In other words, I was able to see how the omelettes of Virginia Woolf turned out in the end. Described in analytical terms, from these letter conversations I was able to extrapolate practical principles that shaped the letter practices and business practices of the 18th century.

The inspiration to search for principles of this kind as an analytical tool came from the book *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* by Robert Cialdini.²² In his book, which deals primarily with modern day sales negotiations, Cialdini identifies six principles of persuasion, six ways that people today try to exert influence on others to prompt them to say “yes”. These principles are consistency, reciprocity, social proof, authority, liking, and scarcity.²³ While I did not search for Cialdini’s particular principles, I did use his general idea as a starting point for identifying principles used in the 18th century for exerting influence. The principles I found thus differ from those of Cialdini.

The 18th-century practical principles of persuasion included demanding loyalty, the sledgehammer method, persuading through efficiency, making firm promises and providing material assurances, meeting as equals, keeping a low profile, insider dealings, preferential treatment to create feelings of exclusivity, and mollification. The differences

20 Letter from Woolf, Virginia to Brenan, Gerald, December 1, 1923. In *Virginia Woolf: The Complete Collection*. Eugene: Oregon Publishing, 2017, Letter 1433.

21 Ibid.

22 Cialdini, *Influence*.

23 Ibid., xiii and 1–16.

between my list and Cialdini's are due primarily to three reasons. First, I was not dealing with modern-day selling strategies, but with early modern business practices serving, above all, the purpose of winning other people's support for one's ideas and plans, and for implementing them together in enterprises. The aim was to work together, rather than convincing someone to buy something. Secondly, I was not investigating an oral culture, such as verbal advertising, but historical artefacts, letters used as a medium for written conversations. Since these letter conversations followed their own contemporary rules and procedures, this called for historiographic research methods. Thirdly, and most importantly, my aim was not to compare modern procedures to past procedures and phenomena, but rather to find and highlight historical specificities, the ways in the past that influence was exerted in letter and business practices. Indeed, Cialdini's research was helpful for developing an understanding of the otherness of that past, for focussing on its foreignness. The culture of correspondence in that world had its own explicit and implicit rules of conduct. It was a world with different life challenges and situations, it was shaped by historical phenomena that no longer exist, it had its own forms of knowledge and mentalities, and last but not least, the people living then had their own practical ways of dealing with each other. Their relationships rested heavily on concepts of loyalty, trust, codes of conduct, and mutual understandings of appropriate social behaviour. Some of this was based on definitions of friendship, gallant courtesy, love and mutual appreciation that were particular to that world. All of these aspects are reflected in the above principles of persuasion.

Researching practices is therefore helpful to gain insight into the worldviews and everyday skills of people living in the past. Nevertheless, Cialdini's principles contain certain similarities to the principles I present. For instance, his principle of reciprocity surely shows parallels to the principle of demanding loyalty. His concept of authority can be seen as mirroring the principle of providing material assurances; mutual liking shows similarities to persuasion through mollification; and the motivation behind creating scarcity is similar to the principle of creating feelings of exclusivity. However, I have identified more principles than those of Cialdini, and have added the adjective 'practical', since these principles rested on practices. There are other reasons why I have refrained from drawing comparisons and have developed my own terminology. The general nature and characteristics of these principles of the past, their historical context, their properties and effects, the actual performances they required differ decidedly from those of Cialdini. And so I focussed on these historical specificities rather than trying to force them into a predefined mould. My intention was not to write a genealogy of principles of persuasion, but to understand how a merchant of the 18th century turned his plans into practice and established an international mercantile enterprise. This book is thus not about philosophical traditions or concepts of persuasion, but rather about the practical ways people convinced each other in the 18th century to follow their lead. It is not only about rhetoric, but what 18th-century contemporaries defined as practical eloquence, practical concepts of action.

It would certainly be a worthwhile undertaking to investigate principles of persuasion both past and present from a genealogical point of view. Research of this kind is

already being conducted at the Oldenburg Research Centre “Genealogy of Today”.²⁴ But to return to Woolf’s quote, the aim of this study has been to show how Luetkens became a competent maker of omelettes, or in other words, how he shaped his own destiny by becoming a string puller through the writing of letters.

“We see from your letter, dear friend, that love on the one hand and the pursuit of profit on the other fight a battle in your heart. [...] But we very much wished for E.E., and for our interests, that the dear child will grant E.E. a bit more time to fill the bag with ducats, for which E.E. has the best opportunity at the moment.”²⁵

Studying an Early Modern mercantile establishment phase

The final quote on the first page is from a letter dated March 1745 written by Luetkens’ closest trading partners and friends, Jobst Henning Hertzer and Christopher von Bobartt. The context of these lines is described in detail in the chapter on Luetkens’ marriage preparations. It relates directly to Luetkens’ plan, which he later turned into a decision, to postpone his marriage until the end of 1745 and to prolong his stay in France for several more months in order to continue his business matters. Hertzer & van Bobartt’s opinion regarding this matter is clearly apparent from their letter. As members of a Hamburg merchant house that was undertaking a number of projects together with Luetkens, they endorsed his decision fully. Moreover, in their letter they refer to one of the most crucial requirements of an early modern mercantile establishment phase: filling bags with ducats. Only so was it possible to stand on one’s own two feet as a wholesale merchant.

In the chapters of this book, I have tried my best to refrain from passing moral judgement on Luetkens’ behaviour. Not only were his times different than ours, the moral standards of his day were different.²⁶ It would thus be modernistic and hostile to judge him based on today’s concepts of morality. At most, I have expressly distanced myself from his actions. In this book I have thus chosen a style of narrative that documents his behaviour embedded in contemporary historical contexts, to show how Luetkens, in his historically specific situation, coped with the challenges of his day and

24 <https://uol.de/wizegg>, accessed December 3, 2019. See Alkemeyer, Thomas, Nikolaus Buschmann, and Thomas Etzemüller, eds. *Gegenwartsdiagnosen. Kulturelle Formen gesellschaftlicher Selbstproblematik in der Moderne*. Bielefeld: transcript, 2019.

25 “Wir ersehen ferner lieb wehrter Freund auß dero Schreiben, daß die Liebe und Gewinsucht in dero Gemüthe einen Streit erwegen[...] Unterdeßen wünschen umb E.E. und unsere Intresse willen, daß daß liebe Kind, E.E. noch etwas Zeit gönnen möge umb den Beutel mit Ducaten rechtvoll zu sammeln, worzu E.E. anitzo die schönste Gelegenheit haben.” Letter from Hertzer & von Bobartt to Luetkens, Nicolaus Gottlieb, March 5, 1745, TNA, HCA 30/234.

26 See Grassby, *Business Community*, 293. See Jacob, Margaret C., and Catherine Secretan. “Introduction.” In *The Self-Perception of Early Modern Capitalists*, edited by Margaret C. Jacob and Catherine Secretan, 1-16. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. See also Hoock, Jochen. “Professional Ethics and Commercial Rationality at the Beginning of the Modern Era.” In *The Self-Perception of Early Modern Capitalists*, edited by Margaret C. Jacob and Catherine Secretan, 147-160. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. For France see Fontaine, *L’économie morale*. Regarding the changing concepts of bourgeois virtues in the course of time, written in a rather essayistic style, see McCloskey, Deirdre N. *The Bourgeois Virtues, Ethics for an Age of Commerce*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

age. With regard to this third quote, I have shown how he was able to convince his future wife, Ilsabe Engelhardt, and her family that prolonging his stay in France was necessary.

Here, in this conclusion, however, I might be allowed to at least mention my standpoint on these matters. This will also help justify the narrative I chose for this book. Luetkens' decision to prolong his stay in France offers a good opportunity for this. His step can be considered from two angles, depending on how his behaviour is explained. Either we see it, as a part of a historical case study, as the reaction to contemporary circumstances, as what was needed for Luetkens to finalise the establishment phase of his business. Or we can see Luetkens' behaviour as illustrating an early form of capitalistic spirit, an entrepreneurial attitude that put the pursuit and maximisation of profit above all else. Indeed, the truth possibly lies somewhere in between. As is the nature of historiography, we will never know Luetkens' precise motivation. We can only offer probable explanations for his decision based on his letters.

Choosing the second explanation for this situation would mean opening the door to famous *grand narratives* regarding capitalistic behaviour in the past, narratives suggesting that this was the type of behaviour that led to modern capitalism. They range from Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* to works of classical economics, works that created the basis for the concept of the so-called *homo economicus*, the "economic man" as a rational, self-interested subject driven by the desire to maximise profits. This concept is often seen as leading to neoclassical economics and even current works on capitalism, as for instance *The New Spirit of Capitalism* by Ève Chiapello and Luc Boltanski.²⁷ Drawing on Weber, Luetkens' behaviour could be explained by the idea that, in the end, "man is dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate purpose of his life. Economic acquisition is no longer subordinated to man

27 Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (translated by Talcott Parsons and with an introduction by Anthony Giddens). London/New York: Routledge, 2001 (first published in Germany in 1904/1905), 18. For a German version with a good introduction see Weber, Max. *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus. Vollständige Ausgabe*, edited by Dirk Kaesler. Munich: Beck, 2010. For a good overview and concise introduction to classical and neoclassical economics with a comprehensive bibliography see Hausman, Daniel M. "Philosophy of Economics." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2018 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta, Online-Edition: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/economics>, accessed December 6, 2019. See also Morgan, Jamie, ed. *What is Neoclassical Economics? Debating the Origins, Meaning and Significance*. London: Routledge, 2016. Regarding the *homo economicus* with its strong emphasis on rationality and self-interest relating to the Early Modern Period see Engel, Alexander. "Homo oeconomicus trifft ehrbaren Kaufmann. Theoretische Dimensionen und historische Spezifität kaufmännischen Handelns." In *Praktiken des Handels. Geschäfte und soziale Beziehungen europäischer Kaufleute in Mittelalter und Neuzeit*, edited by Mark Häberlein and Christof Jeggli, 145–172. Konstanz: UVK, 2010. See Witthaus, Jan-Henrik. "The Homo Oeconomicus, Merchant Ethos, and Liberalism in Spain under Enlightened Absolutism." In *The Honorable Merchant – Between Modesty and Risk-Taking: Intercultural and Literary Aspects*, edited by Christoph Lütge and Christoph Strosetzki, 143–162. Cham: Springer, 2019. In general, see Kirchgässner, Gebhard. *Homo Oeconomicus: Das ökonomische Modell individuellen Verhaltens und seine Anwendung in den Wirtschafts- und Sozialwissenschaften*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013. See Boltanski, Luc, and Ève Chiapello: *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London/New York: Verso, 2007. For a good example of such an approach see Greif, *Path to the Modern Economy*.

as the means for the satisfaction of his material needs.”²⁸ If I had based my study on the concept of *homo economicus*, I might have been misled by Luetkens’ activities into assuming that behind his behaviour stood a merchant capitalist acting only in his self-interests, greedy and unscrupulous in his words and actions, and whose aim was nothing more than accumulating capital.²⁹ This could have also served as an explanation for the fact that, in addition to postponing his marriage, when conducting his business affairs, Luetkens, as has been shown in various chapters of this book, often acted in grey areas, areas governed by a kind of legal limbo. He undertook insider dealings, employed dissimulating tactics, and withheld information from his correspondents, often walking a tightrope with regard to justifying his actions. We could attribute this to a desire to accumulate wealth, come what may. Taking this perspective and using the above explanatory models is one way to approach the Luetkens case and archive. And without a doubt it might be a worthwhile undertaking to elaborate further on these considerations. Nevertheless, in this book I decided to follow another road and narrative. I refrained from drawing on grand narratives as the basis for my research, because they did not strike me as particularly accurate or beneficial.

It is true that many of Luetkens’ undertakings were done out of a certain self-interest, and it is beyond question that his actions were often close to the borderline of what was legal at the time. Nevertheless, in this book I have held a different view of his behaviour, not attributing it merely to greed, capitalistic self-interest or a capitalistic spirit. In my opinion, seeing his actions and enterprises only as the pursuit of profit would fall short as an explanation for his efforts, the practical and pragmatic ways he handled his affairs during this particular stage of his life. This is particularly apparent in his having prolonged his stay in France. Assuredly, the merchant Luetkens wanted to make more money during several additional months spent in France, to *fill his bags with ducats*. In my opinion, however, the central motivation behind his behaviour and his interest to raise capital was to create better conditions for the two important challenges awaiting him back in Hamburg: opening a merchant house of his own, and marrying a daughter from another merchant family, both important steppingstones for completing the mercantile establishment phase. Both required him to have settled his undertakings in France before returning to Hamburg. The self-interest obvious in Luetkens’ behaviour with regard to all his undertakings is primarily related to efforts to do whatever was needed to obtain a reasonable livelihood. This, in fact, presents us with a man who sought pragmatic solutions for the challenges in his life, not a man who was driven by mere desire for profit and wealth.

In this book I have chosen a narrative that gives preference to this explanation for Luetkens’ behaviour: the pragmatic self-interest of gaining a livelihood. I see no reason to relate his behaviour to long-term historical developments, or to search for parallels in

28 Weber, *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 18.

29 See Engel, “Homo oeconomicus,” 145–148. See Witthaus, “Homo Oeconomicus.” Regarding this discussion, see also Jacob/Secretan, “Introduction.” See Reinert, Sophus A., and Robert Fredona, “Merchants and the Origins of Capitalism.” In *The Routledge Companion to the Makers of Global Business*, edited by Teresa da Silva Lopes, Christina Lubinski, and Heidi J.S. Tworek, 171–188. Abingdon/New York, 2020.

modern forms of capitalism. My perspective emphasises the historical specificities and distinctive features of the the hazardous field of trade in the 18th century, and the prevailing conditions, circumstances and practices that shaped people's lives at that time. My narrative refrains from following grand narratives. It searches rather for an answer to the question: What were the particular challenges that Luetkens and his correspondents faced and how did they cope with them? It pays tribute to the situations Luetkens actually faced and experienced. It puts, as it is referred to today, the "veto of the sources" first, not theory.³⁰ Today, this type of narrative is usually associated with the microhistorical approach. In contrast to grand narratives, the microhistorical approach is often seen as a means for gaining detailed, differentiated or contrasting views of the past. This holds true also with regard to the present book.³¹

The main reason for not relying on narratives about capitalism was that in my research I rarely had the impression that Luetkens was in fact an incarnation of the *homo economicus*.³² To the contrary, Luetkens lived precisely at the moment in time "before the triumph of [the] homo economicus: seen as selfish, materialistic, and always imagined in modern and classical economic theory as governed by self-interest."³³ Rather, he was a typical Early Modern merchant, as postulated for instance by Margaret C. Jacob and Catherine Secretan, a merchant whose self-perception and actions rested primarily on the "human disposition to cooperate with others and to punish those who fail[ed] to promote that societal goal", an attitude linked to "self-discipline, politeness, and respectability."³⁴ This assessment also explains why this book does not present the story of a self-made man, but rather of a person who depended greatly on the goodwill, help and support of others.

Looking at Luetkens' case from a modernistic perspective and assessing him as greedy, only self-interested or unscrupulous would thus be a premature conclusion. Indeed, the grey area practices of Luetkens rarely harmed anyone directly; he did not cause the ruin of another firm. They more often served the purpose of overcoming and dealing with structural obstacles. If anything, he only undermined the contemporary

30 Koselleck, Reinhart. "Standortbindung und Zeitlichkeit. Ein Beitrag zur historiographischen Erschließung der geschichtlichen Welt." In *Objektivität und Parteilichkeit*, edited by Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Jörn Rüsen, 17-46. Munich: dtv, 1977, 45. See Jordan, Stefan. "Vetorecht der Quellen" (Version: 1.0). *Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte* (11.02.2010), http://docupedia.de/zg/jordan_vetorecht_que llen_v1_de_2010, accessed March 14, 2019.

31 "The unifying principle of all microhistorical research is the belief that microscopic observation will reveal factors previously unobserved [...] phenomena previously considered to be sufficiently described and understood assume completely new meanings by altering the scale of observation. It is then possible to use these results to draw far wider generalizations although the initial observations were made within relatively narrow dimensions and as experiments rather than examples". Levi, "On Microhistory," 97-98. See Brewer, "Microhistory," 8. See Freist, "Historische Praxeologie als Mikro-Historie."

32 The concept was introduced after Luetkens' lifetime. See Tietz, Manfred. "The Honest Merchant Before Adam Smith. The Genesis and Rise of a Literary Prototype in Britain." In *The Honorable Merchant – Between Modesty and Risk-Taking: Intercultural and Literary Aspects*, edited by Christoph Lütge and Christoph Strosetzki, 77-94. Cham: Springer, 2019.

33 Jacob/Secretan. "Introduction," 2.

34 Ibid.

mercantilist economic policies of France. When solving challenges, as my analyses have shown, Luetkens never acted alone, but pursued the strategy of joining forces with others, cooperating, partnering up, fraternising or even conspiring with other merchants or family members. This should be seen as a basic characteristic of Early Modern trading systems, and standard practice in 18th-century trading communities.

When asked today about Luetkens' behaviour, I thus try to characterise him not as a capitalist, but as an early modern string-puller overcoming challenges and obstacles. Luetkens ultimately did, as it has been expressed by Konstantin Dierks, whatever was "in his power" to get things done.³⁵ Decidedly, this should not excuse his behaviour from a modern-day perspective. Indeed, through his undertakings, particularly the import of colonial goods such as sugar, he actively supported the colonial system of France. Nonetheless, this is an explanation for why he used grey area practices, in both business and private matters. As David Hancock argues when commenting on the morality of the merchants he has investigated, including slave traders, today we "cannot justify the [merchants'] participation in the slave trade; and it would be repulsive to admire someone who acted as they did in our century – an age that is more self-conscious about race and social and economic freedom. We can, however, recognise that these merchants' failure to comprehend the immorality of slavery stems from the same habits of minds that led to their achievements elsewhere."³⁶

Every major step Luetkens took to establish his business involved challenges, difficulties and risks. His activities and efforts often represented a constant fight against obstacles. In many ways it was also a game of chance. Through letters, this 18th-century negotiator convinced people to help him and work together with him. He dealt with the obstacles and found coping mechanisms and solutions with the help of his correspondents and trading partners. This assessment, in my opinion, is a more accurate version of 18th-century self-making than concepts such as *homo economicus* or the self-made man.

The microhistorical descriptions in this book also provide information on large scale developments. Luetkens lived in a period when trade, trading practices, flows of goods, information and communication were becoming internationalised and even globalised. Commission trade and the business model of the private firm were becoming more important, the banking and financing sectors were growing. International laws of the sea were introduced, as were economically driven policies such as French mercantilism and the neutral politics of Hamburg. Shared commercial languages and networks gained in significance. Today all of these phenomena and developments are seen as having paved the way for modern day capitalism.³⁷ In this book, however, these topics have primarily served the purpose of better understanding the activities of Luetkens, above all by

35 See Dierks, *In my Power*.

36 Hancock, *Citizens of the World*, 17. The merchant Luetkens was not involved in the slave trade, although by trading in French sugar coming from the colonies, he nevertheless supported the colonial system behind it with his actions. See already Stein, *French Sugar Business*.

37 See Jacob/Secretan. "Introduction." See Reinert/Fredona. "Merchants and the Origins of Capitalism".

providing the necessary framework for reconstructing and making sense of his correspondence.

Letters were a major tool for Luetkens. He used them to react to challenges, handle business matters, overcome obstacles and take advantage of favourable circumstances. He used letters to draw on middlemen, letters helped him profit from his status, such as to gain privileges as a foreign merchant. His letter-writing enabled him to make a living, to establish his business, to put his plans and enterprises into action. As a string puller he used practical letter-writing and correspondence skills to win over other people to support and assist him in his undertakings. The nearly gapless Luetkens archive allows a clear view of the many ways he exerted influence on others by means of letters.

Some of his dealings might appear to us today as quite dubious, from his plan to transfer his ships to his youngest brother, his plan to entice a merchant away from another firm, to his habit of sending gifts to his future wife to mollify her about his long absence. From a contemporary perspective, however, Luetkens' actions usually remained within the realm of what was legally permissible. As I hope to have shown, not only were these plans and undertakings – as well as the principles of persuasion accompanying them – typical of merchants of the time, they fulfilled particular practical purposes.

Above all, they were the means for Luetkens to reach his ultimate goal: to establish himself as a wholesale merchant in the merchant community. Luetkens' particular way of handling his businesses and private affairs proved rewarding and, in the end, they were highly beneficial. When he returned to Hamburg in September 1745, he was a man of note, merit and reputation, well respected in the merchant community and appreciated by his future wife and her family. Thus, despite or rather precisely because of how he had handled things and gotten things done, his establishment phase had the desired effect. At the end of the year 1745, when settling down in Hamburg, he was set for a life as an established man of trade.

A portrait of Luetkens hangs today in the *Kleines Zimmer* of the City Hall of Hamburg. Hamburg is proud of its mercantile tradition and history, as well as of the city's merchant forefathers, who in the past made Hamburg a wealthy city. The special role and position held by Hamburg today on the world markets, as well as the good reputation Hamburg merchants enjoyed in the past and still enjoy today, is mainly attributed to a guiding principle, a "*Leitbild*", a code of economic conduct that Hamburg merchants have been associated with, according to tradition, ever since 1517: the ideal of the *Ehrbarer Kaufmann*, the Honourable Merchant.³⁸

It was in 1517 that the business association of the "Gemeene Kopman" was founded in Hamburg, an institutionalised representation of the merchants of the city. During the 18th century the association was renamed: it became the association of "Ehrbarer Kaufmann".³⁹ It was founded to ensure mercantile self-governance in Hamburg and to maintain Hamburg free trade. The members of the *Ehrbare Kaufmann* association complied with its general mission and code of conduct for economic behaviour. The intention was to create a basis for the good reputation around the world of the city

38 See Handelskammer Hamburg, *Handelskammer Hamburg*, in general 208–242, here 215–217.

39 See *ibid.*, 21–24.

of Hamburg and its merchants. As the name suggests, the Hamburg merchants nailed their colours to the mast: they followed the principle of respectability and the values of integrity, cooperation, honesty, reliability, loyalty, trustworthiness and durability.

In certain ways, this represents a counter-project to the concept of *homo economicus*, which is why the guiding model of the honourable merchant, the *Ehrbare Kaufmann*, is today still widely discussed, even in mainstream economics well beyond the dominion of Hamburg. When facing today's challenges of international cooperation, it is seen as a concept for responsible conduct and management in international trade.⁴⁰ This represents another reason why Hamburg merchants today are proud of their tradition.

The association of Hamburg merchants still exists, today under the name "Versammlung eines Ehrbaren Kaufmanns zu Hamburg e.V.". The association's charter still refers to the guiding model of the Hamburg tradition of the honourable merchant.⁴¹ In 2017, the association celebrated its 500-year jubilee, during which its code of conduct was reconfirmed and presented as the unique selling point of Hamburg trade today. The association's self-description still mentions the characteristics of loyalty, cooperativeness, reliability, fairness and trustworthiness. A cosmopolitan attitude is often also added, and moreover, we encounter a strong sense of community.⁴² As is often emphasized by Hamburg merchants, even today the spoken word alone of a Hamburg merchant is binding and regarded as an obligation; in the same breath they still refer to the practice of settling trade deals with a handshake.⁴³ These practices and the special values of Hamburg merchants evolved historically. They can be traced back to men like Luetkens, who once represented Hamburg in the world and contributed through his actions and enterprises to the success of Hamburg trade.

It is fitting that Luetkens' portrait today hangs in the City Hall of Hamburg. Indeed, I believe that in many ways Luetkens fits the guiding model of the Hamburg merchant

40 Regarding the significance of the concept of the *Ehrbare Kaufmann* for concepts of *Corporate Social Responsibility* today see Klink, Daniel. "Der Ehrbare Kaufmann – Das ursprüngliche Leitbild der Betriebswirtschaftslehre und individuelle Grundlage für die CSR-Forschung." In *Corporate Social Responsibility (Zeitschrift für Betriebswirtschaft / Journal of Business Economics Special Issue 3)*, edited by Joachim Schwalbach, 57–79. Wiesbaden: Gabler, 2008. See Lütge, Christoph. "The Honorable Merchant and the Corporate Social Responsibility Movement." In *The Honorable Merchant. Between Modesty and Risk-Taking: Intercultural and Literary Aspects*, edited by Christoph Lütge and Christoph Strosetzki, 19–28. Cham: Springer, 2019. See also Graf, Christian, and Rolf Stober, eds. *Der Ehrbare Kaufmann und Compliance. Zur Aktivierung eines klassischen Leitbilds für die Compliancediskussion*. Hamburg: Kovač, 2010. Regarding the significance of this guiding model or *Leitbild* for entrepreneurial behaviour today see also Engel, "Homo oeconomicus," 156.

41 Versammlung Eines Ehrbaren Kaufmanns zu Hamburg e.V. (VEEK). *Satzung*. <https://veek-hamburg.de/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/Neue-Satzung-2017.pdf>, accessed December 6, 2019.

42 See <https://veek-hamburg.de>, accessed December 6, 2019. See Versammlung Eines Ehrbaren Kaufmanns zu Hamburg e.V. (VEEK). *Vision und Mission der Versammlung Eines Ehrbaren Kaufmanns*. Hamburg: VEEK, 2017. See Versammlung Eines Ehrbaren Kaufmanns zu Hamburg e.V. (VEEK). *Leitbild des Ehrbaren Kaufmanns im Verständnis der Versammlung Eines Ehrbaren Kaufmanns zu Hamburg e.V.* Hamburg: VEEK, 2014.

43 See <https://veek-hamburg.de/veek500>, accessed December 6, 2019. Versammlung Eines Ehrbaren Kaufmanns zu Hamburg e.V. "Hier sind die 'ehrbaren' Werte zu Hause!". Imagefilm VEEK zum 500. Jubiläum, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RGPsXtJBwps>, accessed December 6, 2019.

that has been upheld since his time. I hope to have shown that, above all, he was loyal to his trading partners, he promoted and relied on cooperation, he was a cosmopolite. His kept his word and he paid his debts. Whether his handshake was strong, we will never know. However, we have seen that his letters carried weight and that he used them, in the same way as a handshake, to settle his deals. Luetkens is therefore without a doubt an exemplary representative of the Hamburg merchant of the past. Nevertheless, as I have also shown in this book, Luetkens did not always have a clean slate. He had rough edges and sometimes had to use grey areas and interpret margins of legality and discretion broadly. As the historian Richard Grassby once brilliantly summarised the situation of Early Modern merchants in this regard, in the “competitive and often merciless world [of Early Modern trade], businessmen had to look out for themselves and could not afford to be too squeamish or forthright.”⁴⁴

I have, in this book, added four more crucial character traits of 18th-century merchants to the catalogue of virtues presented above. In order to bring his establishment phase to a satisfactory end, drawing on the words of 18th-century merchant writer Christian Garve, Luetkens needed business “acumen and organisational talent”.⁴⁵ While this certainly did not mean ruthlessness, he nonetheless did use a certain amount of pragmatic determination to achieve his goals, elements that his contemporaries also regarded as crucial for success. Last but not least, I hope to have shown in this book that to establish his business in the hazardous world of trade of the 18th century, Luetkens had to assert himself in his enterprises and undertakings, and thus made heavy use of the power of persuasion through letters. It was this power of persuasion that was certainly the foundation upon which Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens built his career as a Hamburg wholesale merchant of the 18th century.

When considering the achievements and codes of conduct of the merchants of the past as the basis for Hamburg’s reputation today, this second side of the coin of mercantile success in the past should not be forgotten or, to put it more figuratively, not be swept under the carpet. To have an accurate picture of these men’s history, we need the whole story of mercantile life in the past. That is why microhistorical work such as that undertaken in this book constitutes such an important contribution to the historical reappraisal of the past, not only of Hamburg’s history but also the history of merchants in general. This was another justification for studying the merchant Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens; it was also my final goal. Thus, I am not only convinced that Luetkens deserves to have his portrait hanging in the City Hall of Hamburg, I believe it is equally appropriate that another original portrait of this man hangs in the entrance hall of my family home in Bad Zwischenahn today.

44 Grassby, *Business Community*, 293.

45 Quoted in Ruppert, *Bürgerlicher Wandel*, 69.

